

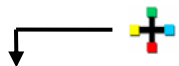


Will God Dwell Upon Earth?

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*National Christian Council Review*, 79 (1959): 99-102.

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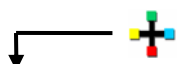


• *This is the text of a sermon preached by the Bishop in Madura, Church of S. India, at the dedication of a chapel in a Christian College. It deals with two questions: the theological meaning of a Church dedication and the position of a Christian Chapel in a college whose students are predominantly non-Christians.*

*'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built'. (1 Kings 8:27).*

Will God dwell upon earth? There have been and there still are those who would answer, 'Yes; if not what is the point of building a church and dedicating it?' There have been those, perhaps there still are, who believe that you could really enclose God within four walls and put a roof over His head. But that is certainly not the religion of the Bible. 'Behold the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain thee'. Why, then, build a church? Can we not find Him everywhere? Can we not find Him, for instance, in nature? NO, says the Bible. Nature is God's handiwork, but if you try to find your God in nature you will end in fearful corruption - the kind of corruption He speaks about in the Epistle to Romans when he speaks of those who 'changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.' Can you then find God by looking into your own hearts? NO, says the Bible. The heart of man is desperately wicked. It is the seat of all kinds of iniquity. You will not find God by looking into your heart.

Where then shall we find God - we who dwell upon earth and not in heaven? Does the Bible have nothing to tell us except that God is above the highest heavens, beyond the farthest star? And if so, again, why build a church and dedicate it? No, the Bible has more to say than this. The Bible in the end answers the question, 'Will God dwell upon earth?' with a ringing affirmative. It answers with the word 'Immanuel, God with us.' The heart of its answer can be found in John 2:13-22. Jesus is standing in the courtyard of that magnificent temple which

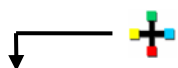


Herod had built on the very rock where Solomon had stood 900 years before and dedicated his temple with the prayer found in 1 Kings 8:22-30. Jesus had entered the courts of that great temple and had carried out a revolutionary reform, clearing out all the traders who by long usage had, had their business in its precincts, and thereby challenging powerful vested interests, both ecclesiastical and commercial. Indignant authorities come to Him and demand to know what right He has to do these things. He answers, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'. A profoundly mysterious saying. Obviously its meaning does not lie on the surface. His enemies took that saying, twisted it a little and used it to secure a death sentence against Him for blasphemy. His friends did not know what it meant - not then. But St John is careful to tell us that they understood afterwards that He meant the temple of His Body.

### **The Temple of His Body**

Remember what a temple is. It is a place where God dwells. But does God dwell upon earth? Yes - yes indeed, cried the apostles with one voice. Yes, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. God the creator of heaven and earth was made man and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory. That is the testimony of the Apostles. That and only that is the Temple of God. There and there alone all the fulness of Godhead was set forth bodily as a fact of human history and human experience. 'No man has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son has declared Him. Yes, but that was 2,000 years ago. Where is the temple now? He has already given the answer. 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'. The dwelling place of God upon earth did not end with the crucifixion. Out of that defeat, He fashioned a new temple, the Body of Christ, the household of God, the congregation of the faithful, redeemed and consecrated by the offering of Christ upon the cross. Listen again to St Paul describing that temple:

'So then ye are no more strangers and sojourners, but ye are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, being built upon the foundation of, the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in



the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit'.  
(Ephesians 2:19-22).

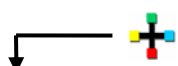
You are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. That is the true temple of God - the new community redeemed, cleansed, consecrated and sealed for God's possession through Jesus Christ. That is the temple of God, a body of men and women, the body of Christ. The ultimate truth about God's dwelling on earth is expressed in one sentence fully and finally by our Lord Himself in the words, 'Where two or three of you are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of you.' That is the dwelling place of God upon earth. That is the temple of God.

### **The Bible's Answer**

So we are ready now to give the Bible's answer to the Bible's question: 'Will God dwell upon earth?' His dwelling place is His people. Remember that the word, 'church' means first of all, a people, and only secondarily a building. In the languages which have been shaped through the centuries by Christianity we do not have two separate words for these things. The one word means first the people and second the building. In languages which have been shaped by non-Christian thought we have two separate words and they mean two quite separate things. But for Christian thought, there is no building which is a dwelling place of God in itself. There is no

temple that sense. What we call a church is simply the house of the Christian fellowship. Let me put it very bluntly so that there may be no doubt about it: A Christian church is a congregational meeting house. There can be a Christian congregation without a church and there are many; but there cannot be a Christian church without a congregation. The presence of Christ is not promised to a building, it is promised to a fellowship - to those who meet in His name. It is given to His believing people through the twin media of word and sacrament, in the reading and preaching of His word, in baptism into His death and resurrection, in participating in His holy supper whereby we are made truly sharers in His Body and Blood.

This puts upon you, my friends, a tremendous responsibility - and here I am addressing now the Christian staff and students of this college. You are the body of Christ, the family of God in this place. This beautiful chapel, built out of the loving gifts of so many friends, is given to all of you today as a place where



you may gather in Christ's name, where you may hear His word, and where you may be made one with Him in Holy communion and offer up to Him your prayers and praises. If there is among you no real faith in God, no real love for our Lord Jesus Christ, no real fellowship in the Holy Spirit, then this building will be but an empty shell, reminding you of God's presence but not bringing you into His presence. I am confident that it is not so and will not be so, I am confident that you will love and honour and cherish this building as Christ loved, honoured and cherished the temple, and that it will be for you a real house of prayer.

### **A House of Prayer for All Nations**

But, of course, not for you only. It was said even of that temple, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'. Much more is it true of the Christian church, the household of God, that its doors are wide open to all the children of men. The Christian church has betrayed its trust if it becomes an exclusive society as - God forgive us - has so often happened. When it is true to God's calling the Christian church is truly the household of God, the home, that is to say, to which every son and daughter of man may come and say, 'This is home.' And so I say to you, my friends, who at present stand outside the Christian church, to you also this chapel stands open; this is your father's house, and in the fellowship of its prayer and praise you will find that you are truly at home.

The invitation of Christ is to all men: 'Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest unto your souls'.

That is His invitation to all men, and this beautiful chapel standing in the midst of the college compound, and surmounted by its great plain cross, is the visible embodiment of that invitation to you and to all who pass through this college in generations to come. God grant to you, and to all who shall come after you, that you may find here the very presence of God whom the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain, that you may find here the forgiveness of your sins which none but Christ alone can win for you, that you may find here the true home where, whoever you may be, you may look up to the God of heaven and earth and say, 'Our Father'.

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