

God's Present of "His Presence"

"Emmanuel"—God is *with* us!

"**The mystery** which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations . . . has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of **this mystery** among the Gentiles, **which is Christ in you**, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:26-27, NASB)

Among evangelicals there's a lot of chatter and publicity about "getting intimate" with or "seeking the manifest Presence" of God. Often spelled with an upper case "P," the new Christian spiritualists hope to experience God's "Presence" by means other than just praying to and reading about Him in the Bible. One means employed to invoke the "manifest presence" is called *Soaking Prayer*. Preparatory measures to bring down this prayer "presence"—though soaking prayer's practitioners deny there is a precise formula for it—involves steps such as getting alone with God (solitude and silence; *contra* Matthew 18:20), repenting of sin(s), speaking in tongues, presenting one's self to God, remembering God's past workings, telling the Lord, "I want more of your presence," and then waiting in silence for His manifest presence to come. When it arrives, the presence manifests itself with miracles—in spectacular supernatural revelations, dreams, visions, trances, out-of-the-body experiences and angelic visitations; or in more subdued impressions, quiet whispers and nudges. Sometimes "the manifesting" doesn't happen, but advocates of soaking prayer say the effect can be cumulative, that during times of solitude and silence "deposits" of the presence are being made in the lives of those who soak, and eventually "the savings" will burst forth in what soakers call a life of miracles. [1]

Then there are worship leaders, musicians and singers who boldly advertise that their music can escort listeners "through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God." [2] Christian worshippers are classified as "inner court, outer court, or holy of holies Christians, each one needing a certain period of time to come into the manifest presence of God." [3] So it becomes incumbent upon the worship team to lead congregants into the divine dimension. In this regard, there are even congregations who name themselves *Church of the Presence*.

Other evangelicals are passionate about "practicing the presence," perhaps like Soaking Prayer, cultivating solitude and silence, employing mood music or practicing other spiritual disciplines to facilitate experiencing the Presence. In his newly published book, *"Another Jesus" Calling: How False Christs Are Entering the Church Through Contemplative Prayer*, [4] Warren Smith points out that, in her best-selling evangelical book *Jesus Calling* (Thomas Nelson, 2004), [5] Sarah Young uses "The word 'Presence' . . . more than 365 times . . ." He notes further that, "the term [presence] is also commonly used in New Age/New Spirituality." [6]

In light of all the talk going on about contemplating or experiencing a divine presence, biblical Christians ought to know something of what Scripture teaches about God's presence so that His Word can inform us whether experiences of it ought to be embraced or shunned, whether

they are authentic or synthetic, or worse, demonic.

The Bible and the Presence

The subject of the presence of God in heaven with people on earth is the storyline of the Bible from Genesis thru Revelation. The holy, transcendent and infinite God of the universe desires to become known by and to fellowship with finite and sinful people on earth. As recorded in Scripture, the first mention of His stated presence commences with Adam and Eve in the first book of the Bible, when after they had sinned and heard God walking in the garden, they “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8), and consummates in the last book when a voice declares: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them” (Revelation 21:3). So in defining God’s presence, the Bible must be our guide.

God’s Presence—He is Far and Near

In knowing about God’s presence, both His transcendence and immanence must be understood with both of the divine attributes being held in tension with each other. The tension, like a rubber band, can be stretched but it must not break. By God’s transcendence it is meant that **He is distant**, “that God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity.” [7] In other words, He is not present. By God’s immanence it is meant that He is near, that God is present and active “within nature, human nature, and history.” [8] In other words, **He is present**.

In his dedicatory prayer for the Temple, Solomon exclaimed, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27) In his prayer Solomon pleads with God from earth that He “would hear in heaven” (1 Kings 8:30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49). In heaven, God is transcendent. Yet, upon that prayer’s completion, the cloud of the glory of the Lord’s presence came to fill the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1-3; Compare 1 Kings 8:11.). As the occasion of Solomon’s dedicatory prayer indicates, God’s farness and nearness were balanced. Yet some would break the band.

For example, exaggeration of God’s farness ends in deism, the view of God which distances Him so far from history that there arises the perception that He doesn’t care about what happens on earth, that He may not be good and loving. On earth, we’re left to go it alone. Amidst life’s trials, conflicts, pain and vicissitudes, we can expect no help from heaven. God is too far removed to care, let alone help. *God is an outsider*. He’s not a prayer away! A deistic God reminds me of the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley (1849-1902) which in part reads,

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul. [9]

Yet in the opposite direction, exaggeration of the nearness of God ends in pantheism, the view of God which places Him so within the structure of time, matter and space that He becomes subject to those dimensions. While this God is everything, He controls nothing. Because He is part of the very process of nature (i.e., process theology and open theism), He is not sovereign. This thinking envisions God to be finite, like one of us. He's as much a victim of life's circumstances as we are. He is so infused into the world that He can no longer control it. As the lyrics of one song ask, "What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us . . ." [10] Pantheism answers, "He is!" *God is an insider*—inside of us and everything else. In other words, when we refuel our vehicles, we put part of god in the tank, and when we drive we burn part of god up.

In the deistic worldview and for reason of His farness, *God won't help*. In the pantheistic worldview and for reason of His nearness, *God can't help*. Because God is everything, He controls nothing.

Yet God's disclosure of Himself in Holy Scripture is that He is at the same time both near and far, both present and "un-present." You may argue with the antinomy, but that is how God's Word describes God. The Bible informs us that as the holy creator of the universe, God is distantly transcendent. Yet the distant One also brought Himself near as a series of redemptive events within human history indicate, events which climaxed in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. So when thinking about God's immanence, we are really acknowledging there's a sense in which He was and is present.

The Biblical Meaning of Presence

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for "face" (*panîm*) and in the New Testament the Greek words translated "before" (*prosopon* or *enopion*) define the meaning of being in God's presence [11]; as for example, when Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence (*panîm*) of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:8), of Jesus Christ who now is "in the presence (*prosopon*) of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24; See Hebrews 10:19-22.), and of the angel who told Zacharias, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence (*enopion*) of God" (Luke 1:19, NASB). In the Bible, being in God's presence implies personal interaction with Him. As the English word's occurrence in the Bible indicates, the condition of being in God's presence finds greater mention in the Old Testament than in the New, and that, as shall be explained later, for good reason. But to discover what it meant to experience God's presence, whether as individuals or a group, we begin with the beginning. But in doing so, let it be stated that the study of God's manifest presence is profound. So we begin with the profoundest sense of it.

God's Omnipresence

Of course, any consideration of "the presence" of God must begin with understanding His omnipresence—"the divine attribute that God is everywhere present and with His whole being at all times." [12] As the Psalmist asked, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Psalm 139:7) In our reality, there's no where to run and no place to hide from God. Likewise, there's no place to run to God. In this New Covenant era and for reason of His omnipresence, there are, according to Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman, *no sacred places and spaces* (Except the realm of in spirit/truth, John 4:21-24.). So in a sense, *there's no*

need for believers to seek a presence that's already here!

Yet the hallmark of rebellious and wicked people (like Jonah, Jonah 1:3, 10; like those described by Isaiah, Isaiah 29:15) is their desire to flee and hide from God's presence. They think there is a dimension of reality, a dark place somewhere, where somehow God will be incognizant of them. But Scripture reminds us that is what hell will be like. In addition to other discomforts, hell will be a sphere of existence, another dimension, in which unrepentant and unbelieving persons will "be punished with everlasting destruction from **the presence** [Greek, *prosopon*] **of the Lord**, and from the glory of his power" (Emphasis added, 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Of hell, God will self-limit both His omnipresence and omnipotence. He will not be able to help people in hell because He will not be there. This will be the end for all who captained their own souls.

This statement by the Apostle Paul ends the discussion regarding the derisive question scorners of the Christian faith often ask: Do you think God is in hell? According to the apostle, He isn't. God, by an act of His own will limits Himself from being there, and the restriction is just. The wicked did not want God's presence in this life (they tried to hide from Him), so why should they want God's presence in life to come? Thus God gives them over to what they want. Forever He removes His presence from them! So don't look for God to be in hell. He won't be there. He's not in Hades (the jail) now and He won't be in hell (the prison) then.

God's Presence—in Particular

But there's another sense to the word presence in Scripture; that there is a "particular and personal presence" of God. By stating this, I am not suggesting that God's omnipresence is not personal. It is. For if His presence is not distinctly personal, then it's impersonal thereby inferencing that His presence not only permeates space, but also matter and time. But Scripture does not teach that God omni-permeates everything. God is not in matter because He created it separate from Himself (See Genesis 1:1; Romans 1:19-23.). As Creator, He is Holy. **[13]**

God's Presence—In Paradise

The storyline of God making His presence known in the world begins with the description of His creation of it and its inhabitants (Genesis 1:1ff.), and then of how God communed with Adam and Eve. They lived in God's presence. But what they lived they lost. They disobeyed God and consequently, attempted to hide themselves from His presence of God, from their personal fellowship with Him. They experienced "alienation and conflict" first with God, and then with each other as they "covered" themselves and argued as to who was to blame for the lost bliss (Genesis 3:8-13). The point: sin hinders anyone from experiencing God's presence (See Isaiah 6:1-6.). When we sin our natural instinct is to hide from God. So how can people who are alienated from God by their sin (that's all of us) experience His presence, both in this life and life to come? (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9.). The whole Bible is the historical record of and commentary on God manifesting His presence to humanity, both as to the barrier of it and the way to overcome the barrier.

God's Presence—Patriarchs and Kings

Can we experience God's presence by means of mystic contemplation, our initiative, our spiritual disciplines, or the self-conditioning of our soul to commune with His? Or do we enter

God's presence via the Cross, God's initiative, His grace, as the Holy Spirit links us to Him? For true believers, the answer is obvious. As illustrated by Adam and Eve, the "presence" of God becomes a game of "hide and seek." We hide and God seeks! The whole of Scripture provides commentary to this point; that God initiates the experience of His presence (via the Word and the witness of the Holy Spirit), and either we respond to Him or we do not. After Adam and Eve, the storyline of God's presence continues. He banished Cain from His presence (he went out from the presence of the Lord, Genesis 4:16). He was present with Enoch (Genesis 3:22, 24), with Noah (Genesis 6:9), with Abraham (Genesis 21:22), with Jacob (Genesis 28:15), with Joseph (Genesis 39:2) with Moses (Exodus 3:12), with Joshua (Joshua 1:5), with Gideon (Judges 6:12), with David (1 Samuel 18:14), with Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:7), and more. In all of these instances, God was present by providence. His presence was manifested, even mediated, but it was not meditated.

God's Presence—Israel

"With" Israel

Having begun with Abraham and continued with patriarchs, kings and others, God made His presence known to Israel for reason of His choice of that nation (Deuteronomy 7:6). God was with Moses and at the Exodus His presence led Israel out of Egypt and during her wilderness journeys, with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22). To make His presence further known, God instructed the nation through Moses to build a Tabernacle for the habitation of His glory, in the Holy of Holies, on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant beneath and between the covering Cherubim (Exodus 25:8-9; Numbers 7:89). During Israel's wilderness journey, God also provided His people with daily food thereby manifesting His presence (Psalm 78:23-24). God led Israel to the Promised Land, to that particular geographical location on this planet known by the prophets as His land ("My Land," Jeremiah 2:7).

In that place and to those people, God would further make Himself known. He chose Jerusalem as His city and Zion as His holy mount upon which His Temple was to be built (Deuteronomy 12:5; Zechariah 8:1-3). [14] That Temple, built by Solomon, the Lord filled with His presence (2 Chronicles 5:13b-14). The *Shekinah* glory (*Shekinah* derives from the Hebrew word "dwell"—*shakan*—and thus refers to God's dwelling presence.), signifying the divine presence, dwelt there 24/7. Yahweh dwelt amidst Israel in the Holy of Holies into which only Israel's high priest was allowed to enter once a year to offer a goat's blood for the sins of the nation before the cloud of His presence (Leviticus 16:1-34). (The cloud kept the dwelling glory on the ark from blinding the high priest.) The access into the Holy of Holies was extremely limited to remind the nation that though Yahweh was with them (immanence), He was separate from them (transcendence).

"From" Israel

But it came about that the people of Israel did not adore the holiness of the Lord and His presence. By their sinful, behavior they profaned His name (Ezekiel 20:13-14). As Isaiah records, "For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deed are against the Lord, *defying his glorious presence*" (Emphasis added, Isaiah 3:8, ESV). So the Lord's judgment upon the defiant people could take one of two courses. Either He could remove His presence from them, or remove them from His presence. He chose both. For seventy years He sent Judah back to Babylon, to the very idolatrous place from which He had

extracted Abraham fifteen centuries before, and He withdrew His glorious presence from the Solomon's Temple (Ezekiel 1:28; 10:4, 18; 11:23). Of the contrast between Ezekiel's visions in chapters one and ten, Stuart comments that, "It links indisputably the departure of the glory from the temple . . . so that no reader can miss the point that as part of His judgment God Himself is actually now abandoning the place where He was once worshipped." [15]

But having withdrawn His glory from Israel, the day would come when, in the person of His dear Son, He would offer it to the Jews again. But before we come to that offering of the divine presence, first offered in the person of Jesus Christ and then in the Holy Spirit, I am compelled to say something about "meditating-down" the presence God.

God's Presence—the Silence

After removing His presence from the Temple (Ezekiel 1:28; 10:4, 18; 11:23) and with the death of Malachi (*circa* 5th Century BC), the Lord no longer personally spoke to Israel. So in that void (they couldn't stand the silence), Jews like Saul, may have "inquired of the Lord, [but] the Lord did not answer [them] either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6, NASB). [16] In short, they no longer had any sense of the divine presence with them. From the time of Ezekiel and with the death of Malachi, that had been lost. So what would they do? They chose to compensate for the loss by attempting to conjure-up divine presences (it's called *divination*), even as they had attempted to do while the Lord's glory dwelt in the Temple (Isaiah 2:6).

One of the means they employed was mystical meditation, a primitive type of spirituality called *Merkabah* (*circa* 100 BCE—1000 CE), the progenitor of the later Jewish mysticism called *Kabbalah* (literal Hebrew meaning, "receiving tradition") which began to stream into Judaism during the 12th -13th centuries. Leaving aside the whole subject of *Kabbalah*, which has many adherents, both within and without Judaism, we need to note the rise of its predecessor, *Merkabah* (literally known as "chariot mysticism").

Sometime during the Intertestamental Period, the four centuries of prophetic silence between Malachi's death and John the Baptist's birth, "Chariot Mysticism" (*Merkabah*) arose, perhaps owing its name to Ezekiel's experience of the heavenly vision (Ezekiel 1:1-28) combined with the record of Elijah being taken to heaven by chariots (2 Kings 2:11-12). So if Jews wanted to experience the divine presence, they like Ezekiel could meditate themselves into a visionary state and like Elijah get a "chariot ride" to heaven. The point: *Merkabah* arose at a dark time in the history of the Jews when the nation lived only in the shadows of the glorious presence which had been removed from the national life of that people. Israel hungered after some sense of the divine presence because in judgment God had withdrawn it from them. So with that absence, Judea became a wasteland of spiritual seekers after a word from God. Occult activity—paranormal, psychological and mystical—thrives when the Word of God is ignored or lost and as a consequence, the sense of God's presence dies. But God who is ever faithful would return the light of His presence to the Jews. Enter Messiah, Christ Jesus the Lord! As Isaiah prophesied, "The people that walked in darkness [would see] a great light" (Isaiah 9:26; Compare Matthew 4:11).

God's Presence—Among Us

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [Greek, *skenoo*, i.e., “tabernacled”] among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, KJV)

Of this verse, Carson comments:

[T]he Word pitched his tabernacle, or lived in his tent, amongst us . . . the tabernacle where God met with Israel before the temple was built . . . God has chosen to dwell amongst his people in yet a more personal way, in the Word-become-flesh. [17]

Need anything more be said about the meaning of Christmas—“Emmanuel,” God with us? (Isaiah 7:14) In the person of the Lord Jesus, the greatest present of Christmas is His presence. As Charles Wesley wrote a Christmas hymn: “Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.” [18]

But the Jews rejected that divine presence too. John tersely records that, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:11). But before the rejection of His crucifixion, The-Word-Made-Flesh (Philippians 2:6-9) prayed for and made a promise to His disciples.

God’s Presence—Jesus’ Prayers

At this juncture of the biblical history of God’s presence, we are introduced to the subject of the Lord’s permanent presence in and with Christian believers, to the spiritual union they have with Him and the Father through the Spirit. This relationship is one that believers not only share in Christ but also with each other in His body, the church. Individual believers are one in Jesus and His Father. This condition of being “unionized” with the Lord is one of the profoundest spiritual conditions we could ever contemplate (in a good way) during this life, yet it mainly goes unnoticed by many if not most of the Lord’s people. And furthermore, it’s a union which is appropriated by faith. (Confession: To my shame, my union in Christ by grace through faith was unknown to me during the formative years of my Christian life. I do not remember hearing about it, but if I did, I was, because of my own carnality, insensitive to the teaching of it.) But Jesus both prayed for and predicted our spiritual union with Him through the Holy Spirit. The divine presence of being in union with Yahweh was unknown to believers living under the Old Covenant, but it should be known to us. We can observe it when listening in on Jesus’ prayers:

“I will **pray** the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for *he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you*” (Emphasis added, John 14:16-17).

“Neither **pray** I for these alone [His followers then], but for them also which shall believe on me through their word [His followers now—that’s us]; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, *that they also may be one in us* And the glory [His participation in our lives] which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: *I in them*, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in

one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. . . ." (Emphasis added, John 17:20-23)

God's Presence—Jesus' Promise

Jesus promised that He would not leave His disciples to be orphans in the world after He departed. He would not abandon them. He promised to send to them another Comforter to be as equally present with them as He had been; the marvelous difference being that while Jesus had been present with the disciples, the Spirit of Christ would be present in them! The time of the Spirit's indwelling presence however, would not come before Jesus' glorification—that is, until after His resurrection and ascension into heaven. Then Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter or Paraclete, to be His proxy presence. Through the Holy Spirit who proceeded from Him and the Father (John 15:26, "whom I will send unto you from the Father"), [19] the Lord Jesus Christ would abundantly infuse His presence into the lives of those who by faith belonged to Him, both individually and collectively. As Jesus stated and John interpreted:

"In the last day, that great day of the feast [The Feast of Tabernacles], Jesus stood and cried, saying, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.' (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)" (John 7:37-39).

That coming of His presence Jesus did not compare to a well, a creek or a stream, but to "rivers of living water" (plural), the supply of which might be compared to the Mississippi River and all its tributaries. But unlike the Mississippi, His divine presence would not be polluted, but pure—it would be *living water*.

Questions: Why are Christians seeking a divine presence that Jesus promised would abundantly flow in them? What is it that some Christians are seeking after that the Spirit of Christ does not already supply? Why do they need another voice, another visitation, or another vision? Why are some people unthankfully desirous of "something more" than what in Christ has already given to us? Why is it that some Christians, in the depth of their souls, are not seemingly at rest? (See Hebrews 4:9-10.)

God's Presence—Pentecost

To return to God's abundant supply, Acts records that in fulfillment of John the Baptist's prediction (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33) and Jesus' promise (Acts 1:5), the Holy Spirit descended upon the Pentecost crowd to dwell with them and in them. Even though a mixed mob of people, Jew and Gentile, had rejected and crucified the Lord of Glory, in His goodness the Lord offered to them His presence again as He came to dwell not just with them, but in them, both individually (as saints) and corporately (as the church). As such, the divine presence with people would no longer be associated, as during the Old Testament Era, with a place (i.e., a land, a city, a mount, and a building), but in a collective group of people, the Church, which would be spread over the whole planet (John 4:21-24; Acts 2:1-4; 11:16; 1

Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). And this indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ will never be withdrawn from those who approach God by repenting of their sin(s), placing their faith in Jesus' atonement for their sin(s) and believing His resurrection from the dead (John 3:16; Romans 10:9-10).

The point: Under God's Old Covenant administration over Israel (originally, it was a theocracy, but by popular demand with Saul, became a monarchy), His personal presence was *provisionally with Israel*, but with the establishment and commencement of Jesus' New Covenant (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23), His presence is *permanently in believers* who constitute His Body, the Church.

This constitutional presence however, does not include the institutional church which supposes that via the administration of sacraments, invocations, baptisms, altar calls, music, smells and bells and other rites and ceremonies, the divine presence can be manipulated down from heaven to infuse the church and its congregants. The common elements of the Eucharistic bread and cup do not become a divinized presence of Christ (transubstantiation). In an alchemical way, the materiality of the bread and cup do not morph to become divine, which divinity is then distributed to the Eucharistic participants. Neither in an exceptional way does Christ's presence hang around the communion elements (consubstantiation). The Lord's Supper memorializes and remembers Christ's death for our sins, and that is all, though observance of the rite is serious for the spiritual life of any congregation. Believers, not the Eucharistic bread and cup, are the "hosts" of Christ's presence. That is how the New Testament states it to be. The Spirit of Christ lives in people. Above all else, Christians are the people of Christ's presence.

This presence is real and abiding. Christ dwells in believers. This is "the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). In Christ, the Holy Spirit, who "is the earnest [down payment] of our inheritance," has "sealed" [stamped] us "until the redemption of the purchased possession [Our whole persons, body too!]" (Ephesians 1:13-14). Our eternal destiny involves His presence until the completion of our redemption. As Jesus told His disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). Although Jesus would no longer be physically present with His faithful followers, the Spirit, whom He would send to take His place, would, and by faith we realize that presence NOW! . . . WOW! The Spirit of Christ is both with us and in us! (Romans 8:9b) Hebrews tells the people of this promise, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

Question: Of this pledged-permanent presence, I would ask, "How can we meditate or contemplate ourselves into it?" The answer is, "We can't!" By faith God gives it (Galatians 3:2). For this reason, I never pray for the Lord to be "with" me. He already is!

God's Presence—The *Parousia*

But even as personal as His spiritual presence is to us now, Jesus' physical presence will be manifested in the future. This presence will be revealed not only at the time of His Second Coming, but before that, to believers when they are translated to be with Him.

"For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming [parousia] of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the

Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and *so shall we ever be with the Lord*' (Emphasis added, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

The “coming” of the Lord Jesus is to be understood as “His presence” again. In the New Testament three nouns describe Jesus’ return—“coming (*parousia*) . . . appearing (*epiphaneia*) . . . and revelation (*apokalupsis*).” [20] The first word, *parousia*, means “presence . . . Jesus’ personal presence on earth again.” Jesus’ coming again to this earth, as with His birth, will be in glory (Compare Luke 2:9; Matthew 24:29-30.). We’ll call it His shining, the *Shekinah* of His Second Coming, the visage of which, except for instances at His birth (Luke 2:9) and transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), was veiled from the sight of those who saw Jesus in His humility. Oh, and by the way, when He comes in His *Shekinah*, believers shall shine with Him! (See Colossians 3:4.)

Two witnesses in white told the disciples at the time of His ascension, “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Just as Emmanuel was present at the first Christmas, so shall Emmanuel be present when He comes again, a demonstrable and invasive presence which, in history at the end of this age, no man will be able to deny, control or manipulate. *Maranatha!* O Lord, come! (1 Corinthians 16:22) The time of His coming physical presence has been set by the Father (Acts 1:7), and we believers shall not experience it (though now we live, move about and have our being in His spiritual presence) until body, soul and spirit we are “caught up” to Him (i.e., translated or raptured, 1 Thessalonians 4:17), or die, temporarily leaving our bodies until we are reunited with a resurrected version of them (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

God’s Presence—at the Believer’s Death

“We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be *present with the Lord*’ (Emphasis added, 2 Corinthians 5:8).

For believers, “to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain” (Philippians 1:23). As is noticeable in the text just cited, the equating verbs are italicized (meaning they’re not in the Greek text, but rather supplied) and present tense. Paul’s picture of our life and death (absent the verb *is*) is that the life of Christ and the lives of believers are so coalesced so as to be almost synonymous. I say almost, because Christ remains Christ even as we remain human. [21] Nevertheless, the Christian has no identity crisis. We are in Christ, and He is in us.

The resurrection life all true believers possess from the point of regeneration (John 3:7) to glorification resides in continuum in this life, through death and into eternity (Romans 8:29-30). So in facing our end, we must realize that because life *is* Christ, death just means more of Him, more of His presence. As John Gamble (1711-1771) poetically stated:

And when I'm to die,
"Receive me," I'll cry,
For Jesus hath loved me, I cannot say why.
But this I do find,
We two are so joined,
He'll not live in glory and leave me behind. [22]

Applications: Christ's Presence

By way of review and summary, allow these applications regarding the presence of Christ to be made.

His Promised Presence

We can bank on Jesus' presence. He guaranteed its continuation to His disciples throughout this evil age until He physically returns to this earth again. After His resurrection He told His disciples, "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). He would extend His presence with His followers until "the end of the age" (NASB). Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus set the sequence of two ages. First, the present evil age began with the fall of man in Eden and will end when Messiah reigns on earth, which is the age to come (See Matthew 12:32.). In other words, Jesus promised His disciples His spiritual presence for the duration the present time period before the "age to come" commences. As his disciple-apostles knew and wrote about, The Parousia, when He physically comes to earth again, will mark the end of this age, and parousia is a Greek word which means "presence" (Matthew 24:3b). At that time people will no more need to seek His physical then than they have to seek His spiritual presence now because Jesus Christ dwells in/with every believer.

The only persons He is not spiritually in/with during his present evil age are unbelievers. As Paul wrote the Romans, "But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Romans 8:9b). According to His promise, His presence is present in/with them already, that is, if they're believers. *So why are some Christians so intent on seeking a divine presence that's already present?*

His Proactive Presence

Jesus' presence arrives to and arises in our hearts for reason of God's pro-action for us and in us, by His grace. His presence is by His choice and according to His conditions. Before the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son to reside in us, there is not, as new spiritualists commonly believe, a dormant Christ or Buddha spirit that perennially resides in everybody, merely awaiting an awakening unto divinization. For example, Eckhart Tolle, a bestselling author whose writings Oprah Winfrey highly recommends, teaches that all humanity is indwelt by an immanent Christ-spirit. He has stated: "Jesus speaks of the innermost I am, the essence identity of every man and woman . . . Some Christian mystics have called it the Christ within". [23] The Christian union with Christ is not like that. It's neither universal nor perennial.

As the High Priest could only enter the presence of the Lord in the Holy of Holies once a year through the blood of the sacrificed goat (Leviticus 16:1ff.), so the Spirit of Christ comes to be present in individuals who trust that the blood of God's sacrificed Lamb Jesus will make them fit for divine habitation (1 John 2:2). Only through the blood of Jesus Christ do persons become fit

hosts for His presence. The error of the new spirituality is that it assumes that God's presence can be ginned-up via the exercise of human passion. But Scougal reminds that this union with the Lord "is not a sudden start or passion of the mind, even if it should rise to the height of a rapture and seem to transport a man to extraordinary performances." [24]

Rather, Jesus' presence in us depends upon our acceptance of His propitiation for us—that He died for our sins to make us fit vessels to be in (Romans 6:3-11). Christ graces sinners with His presence when by faith they receive the cleansing that can only come through His blood and new birth from above (John 3:3, 7). The divine presence descends to us (John 3:13). Unlike mystic spirituality, we do not ascend to it. Jesus illustrated that the presence of the Spirit may be compared to a wind which blows upon the human soul (John 3:8), and we can no more control the presence of the Spirit than we can control the wind or the weather. As such, union with Christ cannot be activated or initiated by mystic disciplines or rituals, but only cultivated. Union with Christ is reactive and interactive. God initiates, we respond. As to this important distinction, A.J. Gordon (1836-1895) wrote that,

The method of grace is precisely the reverse of the method of legalism. The latter is holiness in order to union with God; the former, union with God in order to holiness. [25]

We do not get at this union via the legalism of our own works, by engaging in rituals called "spiritual disciplines." This union with Christ comes to all believers for reason of Holy Spirit baptism whereby they are "union-ed" with Christ and with one another (1 Corinthians 12:13). In the aftermath of the Spirit's baptism, communion with the indwelling Spirit of Christ can be facilitated via our Bible reading (the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit do testify concerning Christ, John 5:39; 15:26), meditation on Scripture, prayer, witnessing, singing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" in our hearts and to each other, being thankful, submitting to one another, corporate worship, observing the Lord's Table, and so forth (Acts 13:48-52; Ephesians 5:18-21).

His Personal Presence

Employed hundreds of times by the Apostle Paul in his epistles, no phrase bespeaks the infusion of divine life into a human soul more than the little phrase "in Christ." "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17a). The uniting of our soul to Christ is personal and intimate. The little prepositional phrase communicates both our union and communion in Christ. To again cite Henry Scougal (1650-1678):

True religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation in the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul. In the apostle's words, it is 'Christ formed in you'. [26]

His Protective Presence

Christ protects us. When musing, in a good way meditating, on that little prepositional phrase "in Christ," our tendency might be to compare our standing/state to a circle inside of which we are in/with Him. As such, the circle, much as "the city limits" might define those who are

citizens a certain municipality, defines those who are in Christ's presence. But A.T. Pierson (1837-1911) suggested "in Christ" might better picture a sphere than a circle; that the believer's protection in God is impenetrably around, above and below. Literally, through death and until the resurrection of the body, the believer's being is cocooned in Christ. Pierson explained:

A circle surrounds us, but only on one plane; but a sphere encompasses, envelopes us, surrounding us in every direction and on every plane . . . Moreover, the sphere that surrounds you also separates you from whatever is outside of it. Again, in proportion as such a sphere is strong it also protects whatever is within it from all that is without—from all external foes or perils. **[27]**

His Permanent Presence

Once we're sealed into this union, it's effective for the rest of this life, through death, with the resurrection of the body, by our appearing with Him in the glory of His second coming, and into eternity. We are "sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:13b-14, NASB). "For [we] have died and [our] life is hidden with Christ in God [and] When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then [we] also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:3-4). We are identified with Christ ("baptized into Christ") in His death (Romans 6:3b, 5a), His burial (Romans 6:4a), His resurrection (Romans 6:4b, 5b), His ascension (Ephesians 2:6b) and coming glorification before this world (1 John 3:2). As Holloman writes, "The identification of believers with Christ and Christ with believers through the Holy Spirit in a dynamic, permanent spiritual relationship." **[28]** These poetic words, written by Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), portray what it means to be in God's presence for reason of our being "in Christ."

A Mind at Perfect Peace
So near, so very near to God,
I cannot nearer be;
For in the person of His Son,
I am as near as He.

Conclusion

We began this writing by citing evangelical Christians who are in the mood of trying to experience the divine presence. Seemingly, they want to "feel" their way into it. Yet, the Bible teaches that the experience of God's presence in our lives depends upon His initiating His work both for us and in us. We can no more experience God's presence that we can resurrect ourselves from the dead or seat ourselves with Him in heaven (Ephesians 2:1-10). This wonderful union can only be appropriated by objective faith, not by subjective feelings.

Yet pervasive throughout our erotic and pantheistic culture—and even creeping into the evangelical church—there resides the existential notion that, as Oprah Winfrey put it, "God is a feeling-experience, not a believing-experience!" **[29]** This idea of "God-as-feeling" results from believing that God exists more immanently below than transcendently above. As such, belief in divine immanence eclipses belief in His divine transcendence, or as Francis Schaeffer put it,

“nature eats up grace.” That being the case, then the only request that can be made of a God like this—we might call him *his immanence*—is not “Help me!” but “Thrill me!” [30] *God is* no longer sovereign, but *sensational* as the spiritual life comes to rely upon human passions rather than divine providence. Is “the faith” (Jude 3) now being thrown into an existential dump by many Christians? I think that, if the culture and church give any indication (Wag the dog!), this is the case.

Think of how often in association with experiencing God's *presence* or *purpose* the attendant buzz words *passion* or *passionate* are uttered. It's as if the realization of His presence and purpose depends upon passions we arouse in and among ourselves. If so, then maybe Pentecost was just a “passion conference.” But then Pentecost could neither be *worked down* from above to below or *worked up* from below to above. The inauguration of the Church came not for reason of the passions of people, but for reason of the promise and providence of Almighty God through the baptism/filling of the Holy Spirit, which baptism was promised by John (Matthew 3:11) and proceeded from the ascended Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 1:8; John 1:33; Acts 2:4). **Oh, Praise His Holy Name!**

A major seminary hosted a conference last fall (2013) dealing with God's presence. The website that advertised the conference contains this statement by Gary Pratico.

The theology of divine presence is profoundly simple and yet it is simply profound. It is a topic of inquiry at the highest level of scholarship but, more importantly, it is a promise for everyday life and living. The reality of God's redemptive, sustaining presence in our lives is our source of hope, consolation and joy amidst the victories and trials of life. We don't have to 'go it' alone; he is with us. He is our Emmanuel. [31]

Though biblical in so far as it goes, Pratico's statement is deficient in one major aspect. Not only is God “**with**” us, but under terms of the New Covenant, He's “**in**” us! He's present in/with us at all times and through all the experiences of life, death and eternity. That is why the Lord Jesus described His gift to believers as “eternal life” (John 3:15, 16, 36; 6:40; 10:28; 17:2-3). In continuum, the Lord's presence resides with/in believers from now into eternity, and His presence we cultivate through faith in God's Word, not through ascetical practices or devotional invocations.

Christ Liveth In Me

by Daniel Whittle (1840-1901)

As lives the flower within the seed, As in the cone the tree,
 So, praise the God of truth and grace, His Spirit dwelleth in me.
 Christ liveth in me, Christ liveth in me;
 Oh, what a salvation this, That Christ liveth in me. [32]

“Emmanuel”—Christ **in** us, the hope of glory!

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the **presence** [Greek, *katenopion*] of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (Jude 24-25, NASB)

ENDNOTES

[1] This opening paragraph summarizes Soaking Prayer as described by Gary Oates, “Soaking: The Key to Intimacy with God,” January 9, 2012, The Elijah List (http://www.elijahlist.com/words/display_word.html?ID=10620).

[2] Emphasis added. Mary Alessi. (www.maryalessi.com/music.htm).

[3] Kevin Reeves, *The Other Side of the River* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007): 159.

[4] Warren B. Smith, “Chapter 12— Practicing *What Presence?*” in *“Another Jesus” Calling: How False Christs Are Entering the Church Though Contemplative Prayer* (Eureka, MT: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2013): 88.

[5] Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004). We should note the word *presence* in the book’s subtitle.

[6] Smith, “Another Jesus”, 89. As the titles of the books Smith cites in addition to *Jesus Calling—Practicing the Presence* by Joel Goldsmith (circa 1950s); *God Calling* by Two Listeners, Edited by A.J. Russell (circa 1930s); Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (circa 1660s)—seeking to enter “the Presence”, whether by Medieval monks, New Age spiritualists, or contemporary mystics, evangelical or secular is not a novel phenomenon, but has a longstanding history from ancient thru medieval to modern times. One New Age website of defines “divine presence” as follows:

“The **Divine Presence** is also known as the **I Am Presence**, the **Higher Presence**, the monad, the soul’s soul, the Christ Self, the God or Goddess Self, or the Buddha within, among other names. It is the part of us that exists in the realms of Spirit, the part that is closest to the Divine.”

Emphases added, see “What is Divine Presence?” (<http://www.soulevolution.org/divine.htm>).

We might add that Quakers also speak of the divine presence. To the Religious Society of Friends the inner light “is understood as the presence of God which provides illumination and guidance to the individual and through individuals to the group.” See

“Continuing Revelation,” *Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (<http://www.pym.org/introducing-pym-quakers/quaker-faith/continuing-revelation/>)

[7] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books,

1998): 338.

[8] Ibid., 329.

[9] William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," *PoemHunter.com*

(<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/invictus/>). I realize that Henley's assertion may be atheistic, but in the end, the practical difference between deism and atheism, in the living of life really doesn't matter. In the former, *God doesn't care* while in the latter *God doesn't exist*. So as the poet put it, we're left to go it alone.

[10] Eric Bazilian, "What If God Was One of

Us" (<http://www.metrolyrics.com/what-if-god-was-one-of-us-lyrics-alanis-morissette.html>). In all fairness to the lyrics' writer, he does speak of God's transcendence in the song.

[11] A verb *endemeo* plus the preposition *pros* also denote arriving in God's presence after death (2 Corinthians 5:8).

[12] Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999): 46.

[13] The word "holy" (Hebrew, *qodesh*, and Greek *hagios*) means "separateness." With the exception of the incarnation of the Lord of Glory (John 1:14; etc.), God does not incarnate Himself in matter. If God did/does, the resultant worldview would be panentheistic (the divine Soul dwells in matter) or pantheistic (the divine Soul is matter). Yet to this point, many Bible versions and theologies are either hazy or heretical (See NCV's rendition of Ephesians 4:6, "There is one God and Father of everything . . . He is everywhere [i.e., **omni-present—okay**] and in everything [i.e., **omni-permeant—NOT okay**], or most other versions' translation of Colossians 1:17, "**in** Him [Christ] all things hold together." **Comment:** If "all things were created **by** Christ" (Colossians 1:16, KJV) then consistent use of the same following Greek preposition *ev* demands that "**by** Him all things hold together" also (Colossians 1:17, KJV). Yet it amazes me how many versions avoid the translational consistency of the KJV in that context, even suggesting that as all things were created "**in**" Christ as they also hold together "**in**" Him. Though all things were created "**through**" (*dia*) the agency of Christ (John 1:3, 10; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2), they were not created "**in**" Him. To believe that Christ is **in** "all things" or that "all things" are **in** Christ, suggests a "christing" of the universe, that nature is infused/permeated/saturated with a quantum *I-am-ness*, which is the essence of idolatry, whether the idols be material, conceptual or verbal (I realize that energy and space also occupy a place in the universe's dimensions.). **Conclusion:** while *the Lord is omni-present, He is not omni-permeant*. Because God is holy, His essential being is separate from matter, before time, and beyond space (contra process theology and open theism, which view God to be "in" all three dimensions). As regards the universe, God's presence perhaps can be best explained by *His providence over nature from outside nature*. By His common grace, God watches over the details of the reality in which we live, without which providence life would not carry on. "He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist . . ." (Acts 17:27b-28a, NASB).

[14] "**The Shekinah**, which filled the Temple when it was first constructed (1 Kings 8.11), was regarded as a bright, cloud-like object which **represented the personal presence of God.**" Emphasis added, see *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, Editors, Second Edition (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989):175, No. 14.49. That Tabernacle of the Lord's habitation was to be built according to the exact specifications which He gave through Moses to Israel. "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle,

and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it.” (Exodus 25:8-9) If they would not have precisely built the tabernacle according to revealed orders, then, we might assume that in judgment for the sin of not having built the structure *His way*, He would not have inhabited it. The whole building project tested the faith of Israel.

[15] Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel: The Communicator's Commentary*, Lloyd J. Ogilvie, General Editor (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1989): 96-97.

[16] I use the instance of Saul to show what might have been the spiritual mood of Israel in that day, indeed, as exposed by the prophets, was the case.

[17] D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991): 127.

[18] “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” *The Celebration Hymnal*, Tom Fettke, Senior Editor (Word Music / Integrity Music, 1997): 277.

[19] Did the Spirit “proceed” from the Son, the Father, or both? The controversy played out in church history. Did the Father send the Spirit apart from the Son? Here Jesus states “I will send from the Father” indicating that both He and the Father were involved. Subordination has not to do with any inferiority amongst and between the persons of the Tri-unity of the Godhead, but merely to the timing of the Spirit’s coming to testify in the future of the Lord Jesus Christ. *The Spirit has proceeded to publicize Jesus!*

[20] Verbs used in the New Testament to designate Jesus’ return include various forms of “come” (*erchomai*, Matthew 24:42; Revelation 22:20) and “appear” (*phaino*, Matthew 24:30; Titus 2:13).

[21] See Larry DeBruyn, “On Theosis, or Divinization: What does it mean to be ‘partakers of the divine nature?’” *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, January 11, 2012 (<http://guardinghisflock.com/2012/01/11/on-theosis-or-divination/#more-1989>).

[22] John Gambold, “Poems and Hymns—O Tell Me No More of This World’s Vain Store,” *The Works of the Rev. John Gambold, A.M.* (Glasgow, Scotland: Chalmers and Collins, 1823): 200.

[23] Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005): 71.

[24] Henry Scougal, *The Works of Henry Scougal: containing The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002): 3.

[25] A.J. Gordon, *In Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.): 11.

[26] Scougal, *Works*, 3.

[27] Arthur T. Pierson, *In Christ Jesus—the Sphere of the Believers Life* (Amazon Kindle): 48-51).

[28] Emphasis added, Henry W. Holloman, “Union with Christ,” *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2005): 560.

[29] Then too, there’s the picture of an attractive young girl on an Internet advertisement for Mormonism which reads: “When I read *The Book of Mormon*, I feel closer to Jesus Christ.”

Warning: A faith that becomes culturized easily becomes cauterized; that is, like the branding of skin, insensitive to the genuine things of the Spirit of God.

[30] I can only note the pervasive emphasis on pleasure and passion amongst evangelical Christians these days—passion conferences, books on pleasuring or being pleased by God, etc. Is this emphasis because God’s transcendence has been sacrificed upon the altar of His immanence? The trend is evident in a spectrum which, including liberals, extends from Charismatics to Neo-Calvinists.

[31] “God with Us: the Theme of Divine Presence in Scripture,” Gordon Conwell Theological

Seminary, October 17-18, 2013.

(<http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/Divine-Presence.cfm>). With notable speakers, the seminary held a two-day conference regarding the subject of God's presence.

[32] Daniel W. Whittle, "Christ Liveth in Me," *Hymns of the Christian Life* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1978): 500.