

God's New Centre: the New Testament Temple rediscovered. AA Dec 2022

When Queen Elizabeth II died in 2022, millions were instantly hooked to the news reports as this information began to circulate around the world. For a time, this was all people talked about; it was the centre of pretty much everyone's attention. Humans are naturally drawn to significant and important matters, until something else comes along and gradually the centre of our attention shifts. Yet, even more than occasional attractors of attention, we all have main things we tend to focus on - our personal and ingrained core priorities.

We all have inherited ways of thinking, and these ways automatically govern how we tend to operate socially and spiritually. If I see a Liverpool F.C. scarf in a shop, I am transported back to my childhood, watching Kenny Dalglish scoring goals on Match of the Day. It takes me back to when I lived for football. When I hear the ITV theme tune for the 10pm news, it reminds me of my childhood bedtime. I was raised a Roman Catholic, so from childhood I was taught about Sunday as a 'holy day of obligation'. Along with special Saint's days, Christmas services, Easter services and other festivals, it was completely normal for me to feel a rightness about being in a church service on a Sunday, and a deep wrongness if I wasn't there. So consequently, with my parents and siblings I was always in church services every Sunday without fail: the ingrained culture shaped me profoundly. We all have grown up with an inherited sense of what is important and central, and what isn't. But what is God's view? What would he regard as the centre of things?

As we as a local church reconsider our ways of being and doing church, we may need to analyse scripture again along with our inherited experiences, to see if we truly have a good sense of where the centre of our life and church life is. It may turn out to be different to what we imagine. Can I encourage the reader to hold in your head the dramatic image of Jesus Christ overturning the tables in the temple courts. This was Jesus at his most disruptive. If God is reforming how we think of church in our day, we need to consider what needs to be changed, and we need to be open to the possibility of King Jesus clearing the decks in our minds.

As a bit of a clue, this document is will be an example of 'Temple theology' - looking at the bible story through this important 'temple' lens. Such a view may open up our understandings in fresh ways. I'll include running questions to help you reflect:

Q: Have you ever studied the role and place of the Jerusalem Temple before?

Eden Temple, Jerusalem Temple; the place of God's literal presence

The people of Israel had very clear teachings about where the centre of their faith and community resided: Jerusalem and especially the temple. Temple theology governed the sweep of the the Old Testament narrative; beginning with the description of Eden as a Temple-like garden where God's image-bearers (Adam and Eve) could know the tangible presence of God. A temple, in ancient thinking (across all religious groups) was a particular place where humans could encounter a divine being. Unlike the pagan nations who had statues of their gods, the Israelite temple in Jerusalem had no image: Humans were the authentic image-bearers of the true invisible God. The Jerusalem temple was designed to mimic aspects of the Eden garden, as a pointer to God's plan to restore all things back to his original model: the lamp stand was like the tree of life, and the ark of the covenant was like the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The recovery of an Eden-like relationship was always God's goal.

In the West we struggle to think of 'God in one place', but that is how his special and particular presence with Israel is described in scripture. Though Almighty God is of course everywhere, he manifested his 'felt' presence in the Jerusalem Temple. He chose to make himself known and literally close to this one chosen people-group. This localised presence of the living God was the source of life, meaning and purpose for Israel. Without God's presence they would have been just another lost nation (Exodus 33), but with God, they were the chosen representatives of the Almighty. Yet to be 'with God' required Israel to follow a complex series of behaviours and actions, so they could survive his actual proximity. To have this red hot spiritual centre required very careful arrangements.

Necessary Sacrifice

When God rescued Israel from Egypt, he chose to place his tangible presence with them in the wilderness, in the carefully constructed tabernacle; a mobile venue. He made visible his leading presence in a pillar of fire and cloud, acting as guide and protection, but his holy presence required sacrifices from the people. The detailed Levitical laws were designed to carefully reveal God's purity and the people's sinfulness. To use an image of explanation, like the sun would naturally incinerate everything that gets too close to it, so Almighty God's tangible presence would destroy sinful humans. Originally this wasn't so; Adam and Eve walked freely with God in the garden without cause for fear, but after their rebellion, they had to leave his holy presence. In the wilderness with Israel, God found a way through sacrifice to be with fallen humans. The ritual sacrifices performed by levitical priests showed that sin led to inevitable death and exile from God, and the death of the chosen animals symbolically enacted this. This system gave Israel safe access to God. As an example of the reality of God's fatal holiness, in 2 Sam.6:7 a man called Uzzah rashly tried to steady the ark of God during transportation, and was immediately killed by his presence. With this kind of experience the people naturally feared the presence of the Lord. Though God gave them love, meaning and purpose, his very-present holiness also literally threatened their mortal lives.

By the time of Solomon, a permanent place for God's presence was built, with the Holy of Holies at its centre, hidden behind a vast and thick curtain. It was accessed only once a year, by the acting High Priest (Lev. 23:27-28), who would offer sacrifice for the sin of the whole people. This moment, at this central moment, was the high point of the Israelite year. It underlined God's loving and forgiving covenant with the people, and emphasised the essential need of sacrifice for sin.

Some of us Moderns may read this narrative as a strange and superstitious misunderstanding of God, but the authors of the Old Testament described the arrangement in repeating detail. Unlike pagan nations who served their gods out of fear of their capricious and unpredictable natures - never truly knowing if their gods would help or destroy - the Israelites knew exactly how the relationship with God worked. He had it all written down for them. With Abraham (Gen.15) God committed himself in a covenant with his descendants. This was an unconditional agreement, where God swore by himself to be their Lord forever. Under Moses, with the giving of the Law, God described in clarity how they were to live as his people; The Mosaic Covenant was conditional - with blessings if they obeyed, and curses if they didn't. Obedience to the Law would lead the people into a good and rich knowledge of God, and would provide a framework for a loving community, with boundaries and sanctions to shape the people in their behaviours and attitudes. The natural outcome of disobedience (as with Adam and Eve) would involve exile; a removal from God's blessing, removed from the promised land, and from his favour.

In the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant, The clear focus on God himself; the invitation to draw near to him, to know him (as the Psalmists repeatedly sang), inevitably drew Israel to focus on the Temple in Jerusalem. The Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) exemplify this pilgrimage to seek and find God. Likewise, through the seven annual festivals the people would go up the hill to the great city; to worship and sacrifice. The sense of knowing God was indelibly and deliberately based in this geographic place - because God was actually there. This was the real red hot spiritual centre.

Q: How do you feel about the idea of God being particularly located somewhere?

Losing God's presence

Later in Israel's history, after a sequence of periods of disobedience, the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of God depart from the temple (Ezek. 10). God could no longer reside as he had done with the people because of their repeating sin and rebellion; and finally He moved away from the city. The remaining temple was still operative, but many in Israel wondered whether God would return or not. From this point on many of the people set their hopes on a rescuing Messiah who might restore the honour of God's name and presence. They waited for a long time...

Replacing the existing Temple

In John 1:14 the author describes the coming of the Messiah; “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...” The English phrase, ‘made his dwelling’ is a translation of the original Greek (skēnoō), which literally means ‘to pitch a tent’. John is using tabernacle language to describe the arrival of God’s Son. The coming of this ‘Word’ was the coming of God’s presence, like in days of old in the wilderness.

In John 2 we are introduced to this Word making a stir in a wedding at Cana. He socialises with family and friends, and brings miraculous provision to make it a joyous occasion. Verse 11 describes this as the first of his signs, revealing his glory. The term ‘glory’ is again a reference to the tangible presence of God manifested in the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 8:11).

After Cana Jesus stayed in Capernaum briefly, but then went to Jerusalem for Passover (Jn. 2:13). John places Jesus’ disruptive actions at the temple early on in Jesus ministry (perhaps he disrupted things twice?- including this time and later during his last visit? cf. Matthew, Mark, Luke). The symbolic importance of effectively pausing the sacrificial system is huge. Jesus’ actions made a break with the steady flow of animal sacrifices for sin. As proof of his authority to enact this protest, Jesus famously prophesied, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (v19). Here we have his first explicit claim of being a replacement temple: “But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.” (v21). Linking ‘the body of Jesus’ to his future death and resurrection, John saw even at this early stage the Messiah as a new sacrifice and a new replacement temple. This is affirmed explicitly by Jesus in Matt. 12:6, “I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.”

Q: What do you think about the idea of Jesus being ‘the new place to meet God’?

Fulfilling the old symbols and stories

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he made claims that displaced and fulfilled the symbols and stories of the old covenant. He went into the wilderness for forty days and nights, becoming himself a new Israel, who passed the test instead of failing the test. He said that he could forgive sins (Mk.2:5-12), which disturbed the listening religious leaders. They knew that only God could forgive sins, and He did that through sacrifice at the temple. Jesus’ healing of the paralysed man explicitly confirmed his authority to forgive. He superseded the Law with his teaching (Matt. 5-7, Sermon on the Mount, “But I say to you” - speaking from a higher place than Moses). He formed a group of Twelve around him, in effect becoming the ‘God’ of a new representative Israel (Twelve Tribes). Each of the seven core festivals were eventually redefined in the light of his death and resurrection. His whole ministry, teaching and practice fulfilled all the features of Israel’s ways, so that God’s big story was now centered on him. Jesus was the newly revealed red hot centre.

The old system condemned publicly

There were some religious people and practices he sharply critiqued, but Jesus saved his most blistering words for the Jerusalem Temple. In the accounts of his temple cleansing, he quoted Jeremiah 7:11, “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord”. The reader is meant to understand the whole of Jeremiah 7 to fully grasp what Jesus was saying.

Jeremiah was speaking against those who falsely put their trust in the temple. The people were being rebuked for wicked lives, while presuming that temple sacrifice was easily accessible and God’s sin-demands straightforwardly met. Jeremiah reminded the people of what happened at Shiloh - an earlier place for the Ark of the Covenant. God disregarded that place, and would do the same to the temple too. The temple (though God’s true provision) was clearly not an effective cure for Israel’s deeply sinful nature. For Jesus to reference Jeremiah, he was publicly condemning the temple as inadequate and redundant.

In Mark 13, Jesus plainly prophesied the literal destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. This is repeated in Matt. 24, with great detail about the horrors to come. In Mark 11 he combined the cursing of the fig tree with the cleansing of the temple, indicating that ‘this mountain’ (signifying

the temple v23) would be thrown into the sea. Like an unfruitful fig tree the old sacrificial system would be withered to its roots.

The two repeating predictive prophecies of Jesus concerned his own resurrection (three times predicted) and the destruction of Jerusalem and temple. These predictions were given to validate his claim to be the true new centre of God's plan. He predicted that the destruction would happen before that generation passed away (Mk. 13v30). History shows us in appalling colour that Jerusalem fell in AD70; during the lives of the generation that literally heard Jesus speak.

At the point of Jesus' death, with the curtain torn in two, the old temple ceased to function spiritually forever. The hidden presence of God was now made available through Jesus in a new way. By Jesus' sacrifice God unilaterally brought the old sacrificial system to an end. From that point on, in God's view, there would be no recognised sacrifice for sin, except that of Jesus Christ. It is nevertheless important to note that after Christ's death and resurrection, the Jewish nation continued to offer sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple for a further forty years, until the terrible slaughter under Titus. During these forty years of ineffective temple sacrifice, God graciously gave the nation of Israel exposure to many followers of the Messiah; Christians witnessing faithfully to the chosen nation. It is well documented in the New Testament that much persecution of Christians initially came from resistant Jews. Several were imprisoned, dispossessed or even killed. They did to Christians what they did to Christ. Thankfully, a number of Jews came to a vibrant faith in Jesus, but the mission of God began to move away from Jerusalem and Israel; as receptive people across the world responded to the good news of Jesus. During the forty years after Christ's death, in Jerusalem, increasing political turmoil and rebellion against the Roman occupiers eventually provoked the great siege and destruction of the city, with thousands crucified along the roadsides. The temple was burned and looted, with its precious artefacts carried off to Rome in triumph. God closed those forty years of witness with an emphatic bloody end to the old temple and old system of sacrifice.

Q: What is your gut response to the destruction of the Temple?

The New Place for God's Presence

So we can now look at aspects of Christ's ministry, to discover what God's new and true temple is like. We need to see how Jesus is like the old temple, but also different.

1. Jesus Christ's death on the cross

Without a doubt all the New Testament scriptures point to the death of Jesus as a the spiritual high point, with his resurrection as a remarkable vindication. The letter to the Hebrews in particular explicitly spells out how the death of Christ was the true fulfilment of all the old temple sacrifices.

Heb.9:11-15

"But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant."

The gospels concur with this, describing the incredible fact of the temple curtain (which was three feet thick) being torn in two from top to bottom at the point of Christ's death (Mk. 15:38). Christ's death became the true and effective means by which humans could be forgiven of sin, so that they could finally draw near to God as Christ was near to God. Jesus on the cross became the

one gateway, the single place where humans can access heaven. The blood red centre of God's activity.

2. Jesus Christ with people

As suggested earlier, Jesus interrupted the sacrificial system near the start of his public ministry (John's account), and then he lived a life as the new point of contact for God. So by inference his whole three year ministry acted as an alternate centre to the temple, even before his death. In fact, the Jerusalem Temple turned out to be an inadequate signpost, yet ultimately pointing to the reality of Jesus Christ. All he said and did was what God's literal presence had always wanted to say and do with human beings. No longer hidden in the Holy of Holies, Jesus was the visible physical presence of Almighty God. John's first letter emphasises this,

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete." (1 John 1-4).

The disciples literally walked around with the presence and word of God, in the form and nature of a man. Mobile like the wilderness tabernacle.

The I Am statements of Jesus

Another large clue to this reality is found in the specific declarations of Jesus in John's gospel; the famous seven 'I am' statements. The 'I am's' of John's gospel look back to Moses and the burning bush, which was a precursor of God's presence in the tabernacle and temple. It was in this encounter with Moses that the God of Israel physically manifested his felt presence to Israel's exiled new representative. (Exodus 3). The passage describes a fire that didn't consume the bush, an audible voice that spoke revelation, and the call to Moses to take his sandals off; because it was now holy ground. God gave Moses his revealed name, 'I am who I am' - from which we derive the name of God - Yhwh. This was the literal presence of God on earth in a specific location. Many hundreds of years later, we hear Jesus adopting God's name in seven specific descriptions of himself. It was clear to his hearers what Jesus was claiming (see John 8:56-59), and they attempted to kill him as a result - it was blasphemy to assume you were God. Yet these seven descriptions reveal various ways in which Jesus was the presence of God with humanity on earth. He was the bread of life (Jn. 6:35) meaning that he was the spiritual food needed to be truly alive. He was the light of the world (Jn. 8:12) present to illuminate where people should go. He was the door of the sheepfold (Jn. 10:7,9) acting as the entry point into relationship with God. He was the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11,14) becoming the true pastor to all of God's people. He was the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25) pointing to the new creation to come and everlasting life through him. He was the way, truth and life (Jn. 14:6) operating as the God who guides into all truth. He was the true vine (Jn. 15:1, 5) providing the sap and life of God, to grow God's people in fruitful ways.

All of these images are tangible and active pictures of God relating to humans. They aren't stand alone titles of the divine, they describe the functions of God on earth with people. *Feeding, illuminating, welcoming in, pastoring, giving new life, guiding, growing*. This was the role of Yahweh under the old covenant. Now, that same Yahweh was walking around Galilee in real human history. Therefore the presence of Jesus (during his ministry) was the new abiding temple-like presence of God.

Q: In what ways does your personal experience of Jesus fit with his self-descriptions in his 'I Am' statements? (Feeding, illuminating, welcoming in, pastoring, giving new life, guiding, growing)

The new Sabbath encounter with God: Sabbath all the time with Jesus

Jesus claimed to be 'Lord of the Sabbath' (Matt. 12:8, Mk. 2:28, Lk. 6:5). In Lev. 23:2 it says "There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, a day of

sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the Lord.” Along with the sacred festivals, every seventh day was a holy day set apart for people to rest and focus again on God. Sabbath was a time for restoration and renewal, putting people back into a good place with God, themselves and their circumstances. So Sabbath was God’s restorative time.

For Jesus to claim to be ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ he was making a long list of big claims, but most obviously he was claiming to be the new **time** where God’s rest and restoration could be found. There are many examples in the gospels where Jesus was in conflict with religious leaders primarily for healing on the Sabbath day. When Jesus made people well, he was bringing a Sabbath experience to each person. They were being put right again, just like the Sabbath was a collective reset. So we see that Jesus was now not only replacing the Temple - the **PLACE** where people would meet God, he was replacing the Sabbath **TIME** when people would meet God. Wherever Jesus was active and ministering, that was God’s moment, God’s day.

(It can of course still be argued that (in sociological terms) that a dedicated day of rest is still a godly necessity. However, access to the heart of the Sabbath rest can now be found seven days a week in Jesus Christ.)

The new Holy Land: God’s territory redefined by the Great Commission

When Jesus rose from the dead and gathered his few remaining followers for their commission, he changed the parameters of their spiritual geography. “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18-20). With these words Jesus asserted his authority over every single place on earth. Instead of the designated and limited land promised to Israel (Gen. 15:18-21), the scope of Jesus influence was now without limits. Every single place, nation, tribe and tongue was to be brought under his loving rule. So God’s space was expanding into every place imaginable, and in hindsight the three year ministry of Jesus was the model for how this should happen in practice. The kingdom rule of God on earth through his Son is what the gospels record in wonderful detail. That was how the Kingdom was coming on earth as it was in heaven.

Five recognisable social spaces: where God’s presence was operating

We can now closely observe God’s presence in time and place in Jesus Christ’s social interactions. The narratives of all the gospels give a comprehensive portrait of how Jesus operated. He clearly used certain social spaces repeatedly to bring God’s presence on earth.

PRAYER SPACE

Jesus is regularly described as seeking alone-time with God. (Luke 4:1-2, 14-15, Matthew 14:1-13, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12-13). This was clearly a high priority time for Jesus, where he related closely and transparently with his Father. These times appear to be the re-centring, re-fuelling moments for Jesus; empowering and guiding all he did with others. They are a clue indicating what God desires for all human beings; inclusion into the love of God; Father Son and Holy Spirit. It cannot be over-stressed that prayerful exclusive God time is a fundamental human need, which we all must devote time to, and must prioritise over less important things.

INTIMATE SPACE

Jesus is often recorded as speaking to many individuals, with highly personal and life-changing words. He receives their grateful affection; like the forgiven woman who cries over his feet (Luke 7:36-50). He ate and spoke with Zacchaeus at his house (Luke 19:1-10) and caused him to change his ways. Regarding his chosen disciples, there are several references to Jesus giving particular attention to Peter, James and John. They are with him on the mountain at his transfiguration (Matt. 17); out of the Twelve they exclusively observe his raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:37), and they are the closest to him in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37). It is clear that Jesus invested intimately in them, for the benefit of all involved. One to one space or intimate space was

a place Jesus used for intensive exchanges and important relational communication. Therefore followers of Jesus today are to be consciously with him intentionally in places of intimacy with selected people.

Q: In what ways have you known closeness with God? Do you have a few close friends who you share deeply with?

FAMILY SPACE

Jesus selected the Twelve after a night of prayer (Lk. 6:12-16). He gave them full access to his public travelling ministry, and invested in them as a group when the crowds had gone away. The disciples joined him for social events (Jn. 2:1, Matt. 9:10, Lk. 10:38-42) and received his explanatory teaching in private (Matt. 13). This chosen group were being trained as a family unit; to learn how to relate to him, each other and those beyond the group. It was in this family-sized space that Jesus created a sense of belonging and shared purpose. More than any other social space, Jesus predominantly lived here with the Twelve and travelling women (Lk. 8:2-3). It was this group he identified as a new spiritual family (Matt. 12:48-50). By giving such a large amount of time to this chosen missional group, Jesus modelled a new spiritual social centre for all believers. Family space is a vital place of belonging, train and formation. Therefore followers of Jesus today are to spend **most** of their time living in this 'family on mission' space. Like Jesus with his travelling family, watching what he does and joining in, followers are to find him and imitate him in this powerful disciple-making space.

Q: What is your experience of spiritual, missional family? Is this your most frequent spiritual home?

EXTENDED FAMILY SPACE

In Luke 10, we find (once only) a reference to another group; the Seventy Two. We know almost nothing about them, except that they like the Twelve were sent out as representatives of Jesus to villages and towns. We can be confident that they too must have been selected by Jesus according some qualifying criteria, and perhaps yet more discerning prayer time. They must have had enough time with Jesus (if not as much as the Twelve) to be able to appropriately share his message. The instructions to these seventy two are very similar to the words that sent out the Twelve (Matt. 10), so it is possible that the Twelve were part of or involved with shaping the seventy two, passing on what they knew. The natural advantage of this medium-sized social group is that it could do more than the Twelve could in geographic and social scope. It may not have the intimacy of the Three, or the family feel of the Twelve, but it did have a sense of 'team', with a shared vision and purpose. They were forerunners, giving a taste of what Jesus was like. They had a bigger surface area - able to connect more widely, and could possibly draw others in if they were open. Likewise, followers today are to work in these mid-sized teams; extending the influence of Jesus into wider or unexplored spaces, drawing in new and interested people.

PUBLIC SPACE

It is well known that Jesus' ministry was a public affair. He didn't operate behind closed doors, for followers only, though he was often in the homes of many enquiring people. He frequently met groups in synagogues (as that was where village communities gathered), and increasingly had to manage crowds. The emergence of crowds was a natural by-product of Christ's healing ministry - miracles and healing drew literally thousands of needy people - some looking for their own cures with others simply drawn to the spectacle.

It needs to be said that the attraction of crowds was not an end goal for Jesus. In Jn. 2:23-25 it says " Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person." Jesus was wise enough to know how fickle crowds could be, and did not give himself to their preferences (Jn. 6:15). However, crowds were seen by Jesus as opportunities for 'fishing' - where he would speak his parables in the hearing of all, to see if there were any amongst the

throng who wanted to find out more. These few among the many would be 'good soil' receiving God's good seed.

Jesus was in and out of different public spaces with new people. Centurions, Synagogue leaders, well-known tax collectors, a woman collecting water at the well, lepers. He was sufficiently visible to the local scene for all kinds of people to bump into him or seek him out. He sometimes avoided exposure (Mark 1-7) but also walked into the public arena on purpose. Most clearly, during his last days in Jerusalem he spent huge amounts of time under the gaze of both adoring crowds and suspicious enemies. He was, in those days, intentionally provocative; looking for responses and reactions. When he over-turned the tables in the Temple court, it was an incredibly public act, designed to be seen and intended to cause an effect. This public space was a place where Jesus operated with great skill and wisdom, creating opportunities for the presence of God to be seen by many, as a public witness to his Father. So followers of Jesus today also need to learn the art of being with Jesus in the public arena, discerning when and where to operate. We need to learn to fish like Jesus did in public, bringing God's presence there.

Time and Social Space with Jesus Christ: God's new centre

This portrait reveals how the presence of God in Jesus Christ was now scattered and spread into all kinds of wide spaces, nooks and crannies. No longer the reserve of holy days in holy buildings, but in all kinds of places, with different social dynamics according to group size; wherever the Holy Spirit led the Son of God during his three year ministry. These arenas were now the location for the presence of God on earth: Prayer space, Intimate space, Family space, Extended family space, Public space. The local presence of God in Jesus was being powerfully felt often in all these spaces. This was where God was (in particular) on earth during Jesus' three year ministry.

Church as the new temple; after the ascension: the new localised manifestation of God's presence

Just before Christ ascended, he commanded his disciples to wait for the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1). This was to formally hand on the embodied ministry Jesus had lived publicly for the previous three years. Jesus was the representative human where the Holy Spirit operated from. Now, his followers would be a collective human host, welcoming and sharing the same Holy Spirit.

The Acts 2 event is given great prominence by Luke, signifying a new 'temple' dispensation, a new arrangement by God. Jesus had been the pioneer of how to host the holy presence of God in human form. Now his disciples would receive the same power and gifts, transforming their ability to carry the presence of God as Jesus had done.

The impact of the Spirit-filled community was huge. Quite suddenly the surface area of God's felt presence increased; with Jesus initially being the one Spirit-filled man in Acts 1:2, then 120 people were filled by the Spirit (Acts 1:15 + Acts 2:4), and then 3000 people became new believers, presumably also receiving the Holy Spirit too. This was the newly birthed New Covenant Temple of God, hosting his presence in many places throughout Jerusalem. Soon, after Peter and John healed the lame beggar (Acts 3) the number of men (not counting women and children) grew to about 5000, so the new red hot location of God's local dwelling place was rapidly increasing in the city. As with Jesus' ministry, in the light of a public witness with signs and wonders, the increase of God's felt presence was growing. This was the spreading of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Q: How do you feel about the story of God's presence spreading through many people?

The new temple: individual and collective

In later apostolic letters, Paul describes individual believers as being the temple of God - this being the obvious reason for such people to abstain from wicked behaviour (1 Cor. 6:19-20). To host God's presence required a purity of life worthy of such a high calling. There was even a threat of destruction if a person destroys God's new temple; (1 Cor. 3:16-17), thinking of both individuals and collectively as groups of people. We see in Acts 5:1-11, the harrowing story of Ananias and

Sapphira, who were believers who tried to deceive the church with false generosity. This was exposed by Peter, and they fell down and died. This event replicates the earlier story of Uzzah (2 Sam.6:7), indicating that God's presence was still dangerous. Paul more beautifully described the new temple in Eph. 2:19-22, stressing the interconnectedness of believers, who together host the presence of Almighty God, as God built people together more and more as a unit. Rev. 1:5-6 says "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father..." More formally, the author of Revelation describes a victorious believer as being made to be a pillar in God's temple (3:12). These various descriptions confirm an Early Church understanding of being the new dwelling place of the living God, with Christians as both the priests of the new arrangement and the location of God's local manifestation.

The transition away from Jerusalem: The church scattered

Luke makes much of the shift in thinking with regard to sharing the good news of Jesus with Gentiles. It was very clear from Jesus' own lips that the apostles were to take the message to the whole world (Lk. 24:45-47), echoed in Matthew's Great Commission (28:19). He himself had ministered to some Gentiles, including a centurion (Matt. 8:5-13), indicating a future universal ministry. Yet even after Pentecost, Luke describes an apparent reticence to intentionally go beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem. For sure, this was where Jesus had told them to start (Acts 1:8), but he had been explicit about a planned movement out to the wider world. Yet it takes the beginnings of persecution (with Stephen's stoning in Acts 7) to compel movement outward (Acts 8:1-8). To emphasise the apparent reluctance, Luke gives us the story in Acts 10 with a gentile god-fearer called Cornelius receiving a visit from an angel, and then Simon Peter needing a vision to persuade him to cross inherited Jewish boundaries. The Jewish believers were stunned that the Holy Spirit was being given to gentiles (Acts 10:44-46), and later there was a necessary explanation given to the Jerusalem church (Acts 11). At this point there still seemed to be a kind of culture shock, even a bewilderment over the new development.

Of course, Luke includes the story of Saul/Paul to illustrate the newly formed global mission. Acts 9 famously records Saul's conversion. When Ananias is sent to heal Saul's blindness, the Risen Jesus tells him about Saul's calling; "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (15-16). At some point the transformed Saul makes it to Antioch and gets inducted into the nuts and bolts of gentile mission. Dramatically, in Acts 13:1-3, a group of key people (including Saul) are worshipping and fasting, and the Holy Spirit interrupts their devotions with a command to release Barnabas and Saul for a missionary adventure. So by this point, instead of caution, instead of hesitant reservation, the Christians voluntarily sense a call to go to the gentile world. No longer compelled by persecution, now they are led willingly by the direction of the Spirit to the wider world. Paul eventually identified himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13, Gal. 2:8), in contrast to Peter, called as Apostle to Jews.

Why the reluctance?

Luke doesn't spell out in detail why the Jerusalem church was so slow to go to the world as Jesus had commanded. He simply reports an honest portrait of what happened. Yet there are several cultural/legal clues to take into account.

1. Separation from the nations.

There are several commands of God which called Israel (in the first instance) to be different to and separated from all other nations (e.g. Ex. 33:16, Lev. 20:24). This was to establish a people in the ways of God, under his guidance and not influenced by other nations in their idolatrous beliefs and wrong practices.

2. Covenant people called to holy devotion to God

Thus the people of Israel regarded their separation as a sign of their unique relationship to Yahweh. The males were marked with circumcision; children of Abraham, under God. The community was inducted into Torah, with great rigour and devotion. They embraced the festivals signifying their community identity and story. Israel dutifully submitted to the Levitical temple sacrifices; to maintain connection with the presence of God. So all these ingrained rhythms,

patterns and habits would naturally make it very difficult for Israelites to begin associating freely with gentiles. Gentiles were a contaminating presence, which polluted the nation. In Ezra (Ch.9) there was much pain and repentance when the books of the Law were re-discovered after some neglect, and the people realised that intermingling and intermarrying had become normal. So given this call to cultural purity, for Jesus' followers to be commanded to share faith with wicked gentiles must have felt incredibly strange and difficult.

3. Jerusalem Temple was the known centre

And yet we must also recognise that the Holy City was the jewel of Jewish faith, with the Temple the greatest treasure of all. It seemed completely natural therefore for the followers of Jesus after Pentecost to regularly share faith in the temple courts (Acts 2:46). Even as Spirit-filled believers they would naturally gravitate back to this location, as it symbolised everything that was happening to them personally.

Nevertheless, God used persecution to initially compel the church out to the wider nations (Acts 7), and gave their leader Simon Peter a 'disgusting' vision of unclean animals to change his mind. And as we have already seen, by AD 70, there was no temple to return to ever again. The old Temple was gone.

Happily, by Acts 13, the old hesitations were being replaced by a new understanding. This must have included a new understanding of church as God's temple.

Q: What do you think about this slow inclination of the Early Church to move away from Jerusalem? As a gentile, how do you feel about their initial hesitation over reaching out to 'us'?

Lessons for the church in the 21st Century

All this bible study needs to be more than an academic exercise. Is there something that God wants us to learn and apply from this Temple Theology? How might it apply to our circumstances?

I have written elsewhere, "From the Second Century onwards, changes in beliefs, adopted from pagan surrounding cultures, began to shape church practice. (see <https://www.manchester.edu/docs/default-source/academics/by-major/philosophy-and-religious-studies/journal/vi1-2/4-schall.pdf>, <https://www.Youtube.com/watch?v=aFHH3RpOmKk>) Once Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the State religion in the Third Century (now that it looked a little bit more like a Roman religion), the patterns of Christian practice moved rapidly towards more formal expressions. Buildings for worship, liturgical rites and appointed priests became commonplace. It could be argued that some benefits arose from the adoption of Christianity (like the cessation of persecution), but there was also a growing separation from what Jesus had taught in practice. The absence of his three year ministry in the creeds is an indication of this shift. This may be the biggest tragedy in church history."

All Western Christians have been raised within a culture that tends to regard sacred buildings as central, with special leaders required to run special services. So perhaps we too may need to go through a similar transition like the early Jerusalem church; being set free from wrong thinking. Here some questions to help us explore this application of Temple Theology.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To what extent have Christians returned to an Old Testament idea of Temple?

The normal Western idea of Church tends to be focused on meetings in special buildings. To what extent is this a hangover from Old Testament thinking? In what ways do Christians think of God being located in buildings and services? Remembering the Jewish nation for forty years after the resurrection - still using the old temple: Might it be possible for Christians to be attending to an old temple idea which is actually different from what Jesus initiated?

2. How might such a view prevent Christians from 'leaving Jerusalem' again?

We are all creatures of habit. Like the Early Church we will have ingrained pictures and paradigms of what is 'sacred space'. Where do you honestly 'feel' is the most obvious place or time when you are aware of God? To what extent (in contrast) are you open to occupying all the spaces that Jesus moved in?

3. To what extent do individual Christians consciously host the holy presence of God?

As a Christian, is it normal to think of yourself as a temple? How aware are you of the abiding presence of God in you personally? At all times?

4. Do Christians choose to occupy and function well in the social spaces Jesus used?

Think for a moment about the organisation and priorities of your church. Which social spaces match where Jesus lived? Which ones are we most often neglecting? To what extent do we prioritise the 'Family Space' as much as Jesus did?

5. How might we re-organise our time and priorities to more closely reflect Jesus; the example of true temple life?

Are you genuinely open to God re-organising your social priorities- so they host the presence of God like Jesus did? What first or next steps could you take to begin imitating Christ's social life?

6. How might God 'scatter' the church if we are slow to move out from our old and false centre?

It took persecution to scatter the Early Church beyond Jerusalem. What might God be doing to scatter us into new spaces? Is that something you would honestly recognise or resist? Is this movement something you are embracing or fighting?

7. How might we more maturely be led by the Spirit into a better expression of God's temple?

Can you think of times where the Holy Spirit in you has led you into a new and better demonstration of his life? Are there examples where you know you have been God's person in a situation? In what ways are you choosing to be a temple for God (on purpose) with other believers?

Conclusion

As we move more and more towards a church trying to become like Jesus, making disciples like he did, we will need this particular theological understanding to set us free from wrong pictures of God's temple presence. Jesus went into the temple courts and overturned the tables. This picture of Jesus disrupting the established ways can be a picture for us of Jesus changing our minds about what, who and where is the centre of things. It will require an adoption of Jesus' paradigm - him being the new temple, with us as his hosts - to become more affective in our church mission. Jesus and his hosting people are the true, mobile centre for God's presence on earth, in all the kinds of spaces Jesus occupied for God.