

## Can a Christian enter God's presence?

I have heard 'we are about to enter God's presence' or 'let us draw near to God' many times at the beginning of services. Are these phrases true? Do we really believe that God is just present in corporate acts of worship? Is he really shuffling around our church buildings in his slippers eagerly waiting for us to return the next Sunday? Can a Christian draw near to God or enter into his presence.



Many Christians would say that in worship we draw near to God<sup>1</sup>. If you believe this, then worshipping together is essential as it is the place where we connect God in a special way and where we are transformed through the very act of being in his presence. Apparently there are over 100 passages in the Bible that describe the worshipper as approaching or appearing before the Lord<sup>2</sup> but I'm not sure how many of these are in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, you did draw near to God in the temple or tabernacle and many Christians build their theology of worship around this model, but is that still right for us today?

### Do we make sense?



The way that we use contradictory language in church can lead to real confusion for people who are unchurched. The drawing near type of language can be common amongst service leaders, but we also use comforting words such as Jesus' saying: 'I am with you always'<sup>3</sup> or the reminder that we are always in God's presence from Psalm 139.<sup>4</sup> It seems strange to continue to hold services with these contradictions? Either we do draw near to God in worship or we are in his presence always. I think that it's fundamentally important that we reject completely the language of drawing near. Christians are not separated from God!

### Once upon a time in a world not so far away

Christians believe that God created the world as a place without sin but that through human choices sin entered the world. So Isaiah can say *'It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.'*<sup>5</sup> It is such a sad and tragic picture: the creator with his tattered and damaged creation, the perfection that he made is distorted and ruined. The grace of God though is overwhelming. Instead of rejecting and turning his back on us, God constantly moves back towards us. Instead of hiding behind the wall of sin, he seeks to knock it down and to build a bridge. 'The story of the Bible isn't primarily about the desire of people to be with God; it's the desire of God to be with people.'<sup>6</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Barry Liesch, People in the presence of God, Highland Books, 1989, p21

<sup>2</sup> Liesch p23

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28.20

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 139.7-10

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 59.2

<sup>6</sup> John Ortberg, God is closer than you think, p14

## Is sin so bad?



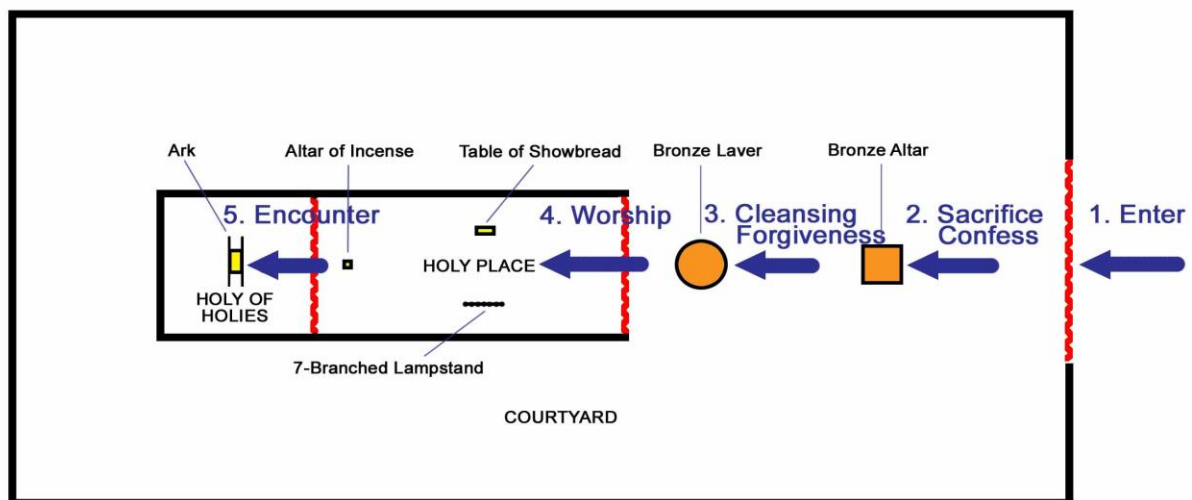
Have you ever watched the news and had look away in revulsion? The revulsion is felt when we see the hurt and damage which is caused by sinful actions. The revulsion is greatly enhanced when we witness such events. Part of the effectiveness of comic relief is when we see celebrities visiting the poorest parts of the world. Seeing pop stars such as Harry Styles and Liam Payne in tears as they visit a hospital in in Ghana<sup>7</sup> is moving for all of us and is no doubt life changing for them.

Christians believe that God is present everywhere, that he not only sees and knows everything, but that he is present in those situations.<sup>8</sup> God is a holy God and he cannot tolerate sin. This isn't because he is a snob, but it is because He understands and sees the damage that sin does. He longs to be restored in relationship with people, but he cannot have a real relationship with us in the presence of the sin that he finds so toxic.

## God in a box

The Tabernacle was created as meeting place between God and his people<sup>9</sup> and the presence of God was in the Holy of Holies. Ralph Wilson helpfully explains the process and gives us this helpful diagram to explain the process that was involved in encountering God in the tabernacle<sup>10</sup>

### Flow of Worship



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Sacrifice and cleansing from sin were required before entry into the holy place and this same principle applied in the temple that was later built in Jerusalem. Only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies and then only once a year<sup>11</sup>, but this was still an opportunity for the rest of the people of God at least to get close to Him.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2283317/Harry-Styles-moved-tears-Comic-Relief-trip-Ghana-meeting-year-old-child-suffering-malaria-anaemia.html>

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 139:7-12

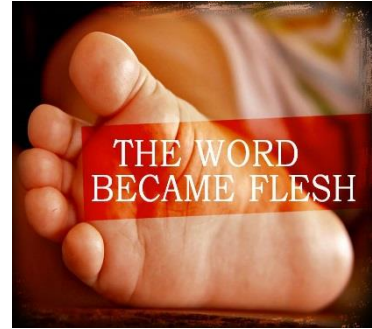
<sup>9</sup> Exodus 29:42-46

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.jesuswalk.com/moses/7\\_tabernacle.htm](http://www.jesuswalk.com/moses/7_tabernacle.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 9:7

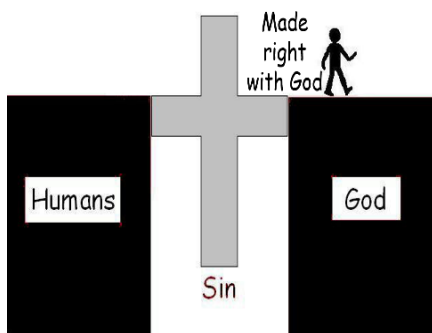
## God in the flesh

*'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth'.<sup>12</sup>* The Greek word translated as dwelling among us literally means tabernacled and this explains the use of we have seen his glory. Only the High priest could encounter the presence of God in the Holy of Holies, but when people met Jesus, they could encounter the presence of God for themselves. The glory that was reserved for the pure and righteous was made available for all to see in Jesus. The presence that was in the Holy of Holies was made real in the flesh.



People are very aware of nut allergies and the dangerous consequences of people with such allergies eating nuts. Is it appropriate to describe God as being allergic to sin? The love of God for us is so powerful, that He becomes one of us and he chooses to live amongst us and as a consequence he was surrounded by sin that he finds so toxic and offensive.

## God the liberator



<sup>22</sup>*We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.* <sup>23</sup>*For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.* <sup>24</sup>*Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.* <sup>25</sup>*For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.*<sup>13</sup>

Our sin separates us from God and we have fallen short of His standard but Jesus died as our sacrifice for sin. When we accept and put our trust in His sacrifice, then we are made right with God. Although we still sin, God declares us righteous. We who were far from God have now been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

## We are the temple

The New Testament teaches that we are now the temple of God<sup>15</sup> and the presence of God lives within every Christian.<sup>16</sup> Once we could have encountered God in a building, then in Jesus we could have encountered God in the flesh but now people can encounter God when they meet a person who has accepted Christ as their saviour and Lord. We may travel the world looking for wonders to behold, sights that take our breath away and yet the greatest wonder is within us and sadly we often take Him for granted.



<sup>12</sup> John 1.14

<sup>13</sup> Romans 3.22-25a (New Living Translation)

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 2.13

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthian 3.16, 6.19, 2 Corinthians 6.16, Ephesians 2.21

<sup>16</sup> Romans 8.11

If things have changed from Old Testament times and we now carry the presence of God instead of having to come to a tabernacle or temple to enter Gods presence, then how can it still be right to talk about us entering Gods presence?

### **But what about drawing near?**



*Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded.<sup>17</sup>*

*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.<sup>18</sup>*

Both these references come from letters in the Bible that are written to Jews and both of which draw upon Old Testament language. At face value both verses state that we can draw near (come closer) to God, but both also talk about washing with water as a means of cleansing from sin. Many of the same people would passionately quote part of these verses to encourage us to enter into Gods presence, would be offended by the suggestion that we can be cleansed from sin by washing with water. These verses (and those that surround them) are best understood as analogy - that the writers are using language that the readers understand in order to help them to understand their point. One of the key arguments in Hebrews is that the Old Testament covenant with its' animal sacrifices doesn't work as a means of getting us to God, that it doesn't 'make perfect those who draw near to worship'.<sup>19</sup> I believe that the writer is encouraging his readers to abandon the idea of having to be cleansed to draw near and to accept that Christ's sacrifice has made us holy once and for all.<sup>20</sup>

### **But doesn't Jesus only turn up if there are 2 or 3 of us?**

*'For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them'.<sup>21</sup>* These words are often quoted in prayer meetings almost as a reminder to God to pay attention because there are enough of us now. It is probably worth making clear that the verse doesn't say 'Unless there are two or three of you I am not there'. We also need to notice the emphasis on 'among them' or 'in the midst'. In other words Jesus should be the centre of attention when we gather rather than us pursuing our own agendas. We should also take notice of the verses that come before this one which talk about two or three people as witnesses when speaking to a believer who won't turn away from their sin. In discussing sin and offering correction, especially where the sin is against the person correcting, we must remember Christ is at the centre.



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<sup>17</sup> James 4.8

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 10.22

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 10.1

<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 10.10-14

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 18.20

## But what about God turning up?

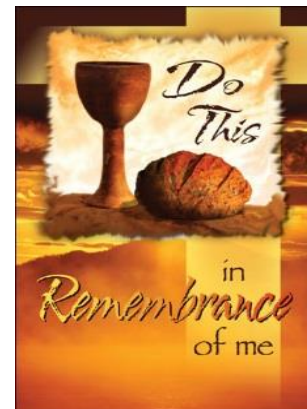


Many charismatic Christians use the phrase ‘Come Holy Spirit’ to begin a prayer time and certainly my experience has been that these words can be followed by powerful experiences of God being at work. I’ve also heard different evangelical leaders talk about an Evangelical Alliance council meeting in the late 90’s when ‘God turned up’. They were describing a meeting where those who were present felt God leading them in an extra special way. The phrasing though implies that God doesn’t turn up when we are having a more mundane business meeting (given the nature of many of these meetings you couldn’t blame him if this was true). I doubt if any of the leaders would have said that God wasn’t present at the other meetings, but the language is still unhelpful.

I have a wonderful wife. We have been married for nearly 20 years, so she must be wonderful (and very patient!) We spend a lot of time together, sometimes we talk and sometimes we are busy with different things but we can still call on each other. Sometimes we laugh and other times we talk about paying bills. We are together for all of this time, but our experience is different. God is with us all the time, but sometimes he will do things in a different way while he is with us. Because he acts powerfully in obvious ways some of the time is no reason to believe that he isn’t with us the rest of the time. Although it should cause us to consider whether there is anything within us in those other times that is hindering God moving.

## But what about the sacraments?

Sacraments are viewed by many as ‘a means of grace’ where an ordinary object becomes a vessel for the divine.<sup>22</sup> When Jesus shared bread and wine at what has become known as the last supper, he invited people to remember him (anamnesis). ‘The force of anamnesis is to make Christ present. He is right there at the broken bread and poured out wine.’<sup>23</sup> It can be helpful to view our lives as sacraments as well. Our bodies are ordinary, but we carry the presence of God. The intensity and power of His presence can be limited by us, we need to choose by faith to allow God to work in us. ‘In the same way that every lungful of air gives life to our body every moment in time can – if we learn to let it – give life to our soul.’<sup>24</sup>



## Tuning in



I enjoy listening to radio five and in particular the phone in shows in the mornings but I rarely get the opportunity to tune in except when I am driving. They are on medium wave at 909 or 693 and I have found that in different parts of the country that one of these frequencies gives a better reception than the other so I have to retune the radio. Both frequencies are constantly broadcasting from the same source, but I have to tune in afresh in different circumstances.

<sup>22</sup> Ortberg, p67

<sup>23</sup> Webber, Ancient Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative, p133-134

<sup>24</sup> Ortberg, p68

God is with us always and we can't come into his presence but we do have to work hard at staying tuned into his presence and guidance. When I am in church or preparing a sermon I can often sense Gods presence and leading, so why do I rarely have the same sense when I am watching a film or playing with my children? Sensing Gods presence in the ordinary circumstances of life shows that we are well tuned in to Him.

## Stay connected

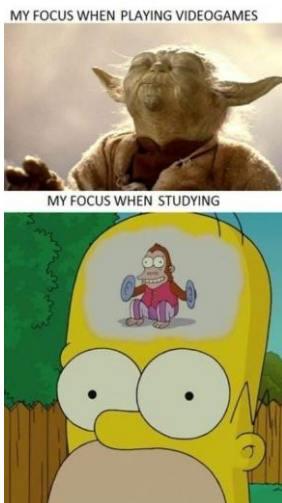
We recently had a problem with the internet in our house where one of the computers would lose internet connection. It always seemed to be a different one first which just goes to show how Christian the computers in my house are (they can't do anything without a rota). Turning the router on and off when there was a problem resolved this for a few weeks but then one of the computers wouldn't reconnect even after resetting the router. Eventually I humbled myself and looked to my internet service provider for help. It turned out that the router firmware needed upgrading and since doing this we have all been well connected.



God is ever present, but that doesn't mean that we have a good connection to him. We need to humble ourselves and find out from Him, mainly through the Bible, the ways that we need to change our thinking in order that we may be more open to His presence. Sadly, we are so busy in life that we often resort to quick fixes, rather than working hard to keep a good connection to God.

## Stay focused

I really enjoy playing computer games with my children (okay, sometimes I play without them too). One of the problems with computer games is that is easy to become so immersed in them that you lose track of what is going on around you. The type of strategy games we play require 100% concentration and focus if you want to win.



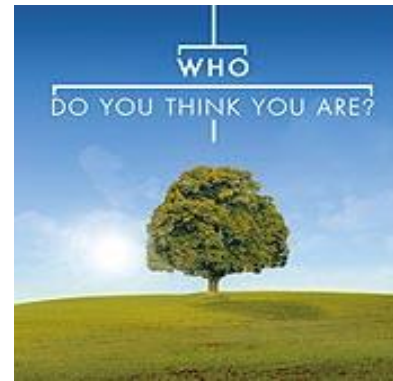
God is always with us but we do need to focus on and immerse ourselves in him. Rather than His presence distracting us from our surroundings, I believe that it is essential in interpreting and understanding our surroundings. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples as another advocate/counsellor/comforter/encourager.<sup>25</sup> The reason for the four different words is that the Greek work 'paraclete' doesn't have an English equivalent and it is may be best translated as all four of these words together.

The best way of understanding what Jesus meant is it is to remember the word another. The Spirits role in us will be the same as Jesus' role was for the disciples: to lead, teach, inspire, challenge etc. May we choose to be focused on the Spirit, that we might have all of His help, expertise and guidance in every area of our lives.

<sup>25</sup> John 14.16

## Who do you think you are?

Am I a sinner or am I righteous? When John had a vision of Christ in all his glory<sup>26</sup> he *'fell at His feet as though dead'*. His Old Testament understanding kicked in and his thoughts would have been something like: 'I have seen God in all his glory and this means I will die because I cannot exist in His glorious presence'. But how does Christ respond? *'Then he placed his right hand on me and said do not be afraid.'*<sup>27</sup> Christ touches and acknowledges John on the basis of the righteousness he had been given as a gift from God.



Who do you think you are? Do you see yourself as a sinner who is probably forgiven? Someone who God tolerates but who He is also constantly disappointed with. Or do you realise that you are forgiven and that you are a righteous child of God who he has accepted. God is with us always, not because we deserve it, but because of his grace. May we see more clearly who we are as we acknowledge His presence within and around us.

## Jesus changes everything



Reading the book of Acts, we see a church that is disorganized and that has problems. They believe that God is present with them and they expect him to be at work and we see the amazing transformative effect that this faith has. Thinking about the Church in the UK today, there is a sacred and secular split in the minds of many believers. The belief that God is present in sacred moments: church and on Sundays and maybe even at home group (well until we have coffee anyway), but we may not expect Him to be with or move in our everyday lives (secular moments). This is one of the reasons why it is essential that we grasp the truth that we cannot leave or

enter into God's presence. As we live in the truth that He is with us always may we also have an increased expectation and faith that He is and will be at work, in, through and around us.

## God is closer than you think

A few years ago, I was asked by a local school to go on a residential trip. As part of the activities, the students had to participate in a blind trail. They were blindfolded and they then had to follow a rope around a trail. At one stage of the trail, the rope went around a tree and down a short dip. The instructor was concerned that some of the children might slip or lose their way and so a responsible adult was needed to stand on this corner and to make sure that everyone was okay. Unfortunately there weren't enough responsible adults and so they had to make do with me. I stood and watched as most of the children made their way safely around the tree. One or two did let go or stumble, but as I gave them a chance to find their way and most of those did find the rope again by themselves.



<sup>26</sup> Revelation 1

<sup>27</sup> Revelation 1.17

One student did fall and began to cry 'it's okay' I said as I helped them up and led them back to the rope. I encouraged them as they began to move again and they completed the course.

If I only enter into Gods presence sometimes then life is like a miserable blind trail. Because God is with me, I can fumble my way through life knowing that He is there. I was fully present for every child on the blind trail, but the only one who knew that I was there was the one who fell. May we seek God for His leading, not just when we fall, but in every situation.

## Can a Christian enter into Gods presence?

To believe so shows that we are still living, at least partly, with an Old Testament understanding of God, salvation and worship. Every Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit and we need to acknowledge, celebrate and affirm God's presence in our lives. As we do this, His presence will transform us and change our understanding as we continue to become to the people that he is calling us to be.

May God set us free from anything that states or implies that we can come into His presence.



**In which of these pictures is God's presence found?**



Graeme Ross  
Minister of Orchard Baptist Church Colchester  
[honestaboutmyfaith.wordpress.com/](http://honestaboutmyfaith.wordpress.com/)