A Theology of Presence

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A Theology of Presence

Immanuel: God with us. He brought healing to those He touched and the saving reality of God's presence to those who believed.

"Through Jesus, the saving/healing power of God became accessible to the world in ways never experienced before. Through Him the Holy Spirit is poured out beyond measure. God's presence is now available to all."

In many ways, the healing and saving power of God's presence is the main theme of the Scriptures:

- In the beginning, humans walked with God in the Garden—enjoying God's presence; but because of sin they (and we) became alienated from God and strangers to God's presence.
- God's promise to Moses at the burning bush was that "I will be with you" in his commission to tell Pharaoh to release the Israelites. God's presence provided strength.
- God's presence guided the Israelites through the wilderness, as a fire by night and a cloud by day; and, centuries later the Ark of the Covenant "enpowered" the presence of God in their midst. God's presence produced guidance, empowerment, and deliverance.
- The ideal government, God's righteous ruling from Zion, eventually became the aspiration of the Jewish nation: that holy mountain of the Lord where the lion would lie down with the lamb and swords would be beaten into plowshares. All would thrive under their own vine and fig tree (a Jewish cliche for prosperity), and none would make them afraid. God's presence made society fair, peaceful, and prosperous.
- Eventually, the same God who spoke through the prophets and the Scriptures spoke to us through His Son. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us—exposed, and new alternatives emerge. God does miracles around us, and sometimes within us.
- In defiance of the biblical answer—men of Job's day, God overturned the conclusions of human wisdom. Calamity is not necessarily the result of human sin. Sometimes even the righteous suffer, and tragedy is finally inexplicable. Assessing blame rarely does redemptive good. The sovereign God stands above all attempts to find answers from the heavens, and the turning point of the entire book of Job is found in 42:5-6. Here Job declares that seeing God begins the way forward. We may think that what we need is the right answer—but God meets our deeper need and provides us with His presence. To see and to encounter God...is enough.
- In Jesus we see a radically new portrayal of success. Success is not a factor of winning nor doing better than the competition. It has to do with faithfulness to God's truth and living out of a life-changing relationship with God. In the light of God's presence, successes, failures, and other "imposters" may be viewed more adequately: from the perspective of eternity.

When we begin to take that seriously—when we begin to look at life through the eyes of faith—all things indeed become new. We become transformed by the renewing of our understanding. We begin to develop a "theology of presence."

As well as being scriptural, a theology of presence also impacts our daily lives. It's all too easy to think of God as our divine problem-solver, who helps us figure out life's mysteries and delivers us into success. Yes, God does all those things, and certainly crises and challenges drive us toward dependence on God, but the sequence is a paradoxical one. Only by releasing our sense of need to God and resting in God's presence do we find our true needs addressed.

To "try God," as though God were a prescription to remedy life's problems, is to miss who God is. God is a person, and persons require relationships. While God is pleased for us to turn to Him, lifting our daily needs in prayer, God also knows what they are before we ask. To commit Him our needs is to commit Him our lives. We may think we need that item, that honor, respect from those particular people—when actually, what we need most is God. All our needs reflect our deepest need: the need for God. Once we become immersed in the loving presence of God we do indeed find healing and provision, but sometimes they come in ways we had not imagined. False dilemmas become

About this issue: Ways God is at work in the world is the main theme of this issue. Especially take note of the "Publishers of Truth" youth essay competition on the theme "Traces of God." The winning essays are published within, and all qualifying submissions will be available for perpetual at the EFI-NA yearly meetings.