

1993

A Theology of Presence

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul N., "A Theology of Presence" (1993). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 312.
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BY PAUL ANDERSON

ONE SUNDAY MORNING after I had delivered a sermon on prayer, a woman came and shared with me about several unfortunate events in her life. "I tried God," she said, "it didn't work."

Job's comforters came to "help" him in his distress saying, "Okay, Job, what have you done now? There must be some reason why all this is happening to you, ... fess up, repent, and God will make it better." (Anderson paraphrase)

Jesus was killed as a common criminal at the hand of the Romans. He was rejected by His own, and those who followed Him were ridiculed by the masses and persecuted by rulers. Was this success?

All too easily we fall into the trap of assuming that God's main interest is to make things nice for us. On one hand, that's true. God loves us and desires nothing but the best for our lives. On the other hand, the way God blesses us begins and ends with a new relationship. He offers us His *presence*, and out of that reality all true blessings flow.

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 understandings. We begin to develop a "theology of presence."

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 "en housed" 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 cliché 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 religious 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

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 without measure. God's presence is now available to all.

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

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 come to see the world through the eyes of faith, new possibilities emerge. We begin to see traces of God's presence and subtle workings in the world in ways we'd rarely imagined. Through Scripture, church history, the gathered meeting, and our times of prayer the living Word of God addresses us and makes all things new. Not only do we see new possibilities for God's saving and healing presence to work redemptively in the world, but God begins to use *us* as active means of that work. Not only do we develop a living theology of presence—that's what we become. **EF**

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 perusal at the EFI-NA yearly meetings.