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## REALISING THE NEW COVENANT Part 3:

# THE TEMPLE

*Part 3 in a 5-part series that examines the essential components to the Old Covenant:*

### *Law, Temple, Priest, Sacrifice*

***Understanding the New Covenant brings freedom, revelation and life. It can also set us free from centuries of unhelpful religious tradition.***

If there is one thing that starkly contrasts the difference between the Old and the New Covenants, it is the issue of the *presence* of God and how He is to be worshipped. In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices played a huge part in worship, and the place of worship revolved around the Tabernacle (Tent), and later the Temple in Jerusalem.

Since God never changes, it's imperative that we understand how the teaching of the Old Testament relates to the truths taught by Jesus. Since the Old Covenant foreshadowed truths that were to be more fully revealed through Christ, what is the fulfilment of the Temple under the New Covenant today?

The premise of this series of articles is that the Church today has misunderstood much of what the Old Covenant foreshadowed, and that historically we have sought to revive Old Covenant traditions rather than move into the reality of what they represent under the New Covenant.

#### **Where is the Presence of God?**

The Old Testament clearly teaches that God "does not dwell in Temples made by hands", and yet during the 40

years that the people of Israel in the wilderness, God condescended to manifest His presence among them. First He met with Moses on Mt. Sinai and then at the Tent of Meeting throughout their time in the desert. Finally at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Glory of the Lord filled the Temple and His presence was manifested there. Fire came down from heaven and burnt up all the offerings; the priests were unable to go in because of the glory of the Lord; Solomon made an offering of twenty-two thousand oxen, and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep. The celebrations lasted for seven days, with all Israel present, then he sent the people away.

And so God established His presence in the Temple at Jerusalem and accepted worship from His chosen people, all the time awaiting the fullness of time, foretold by the prophets, when the promised Messiah would appear and reveal God's plan for the salvation of all people - both Jew and Gentile. It is of the Messiah that Isaiah spoke when he prophesied, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that

you may bring my salvation to the ends of the Earth.” (Isaiah: 49:6 See also Luke 2:29-32)

It was actually during a conversation that Jesus had with a gentile woman that Jesus made direct reference to this. The Samaritan was well acquainted with the theological wrangling that marked the differences between Jew and Samaritan: *“The woman said to him, Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our fathers gave worship on this mountain, but you Jews say that the right place for worship is in Jerusalem. Jesus said to her, Woman, take my word for this; the time is coming when you will not give worship to the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem... But the time is coming, and is even now here, when the true worshippers will give worship to the Father in the true way of the spirit, for these are the worshippers desired by the Father. God is Spirit: then let his worshippers give him worship in the true way of the spirit.”*

Jesus was introducing the New Covenant, and under this covenant true worship would not be anchored to

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any particular location, building, structure or tradition. Henceforth worship would be a matter of true and genuine faith and the dwelling of God would be with men. Emmanuel - God with us!

### How Jesus Changed Everything

At the very moment that Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the Temple which separated God’s people from most Holy place was miraculously torn from top to bottom. This signified that the way was now wide open for all people to freely approach God. The first followers of Jesus initially kept meeting in the Temple courts and gathering in homes for fellowship. But it must have soon become apparent to those first believers that being Jewish could never be the same again. After all, how could they continue to see the Temple as God’s abiding place when God had taken up residence within them and was doing miracles among them? Why should they assemble to hear the reading of the Law, legalistically interpreted by their teachers, when God had written His law of liberty upon their hearts? How could they continue to bring animal sacrifices for worship when the “once and for all” sacrifice had finally been made by Jesus himself? How could they follow the teachings of their Priests when Jesus was now their high priest who had risen from the dead, and every believer was now called by God?

Persecution soon resolved those questions. The “followers of The Way”, as they were called, were forced to withdraw from the Temple as many were pursued and arrested. The church in Jerusalem also began to realise that God was calling Gentiles and that they too were coming to faith in Christ. By the end of that generation, in fulfilment of the words of Jesus, the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Romans. Everything had changed forever.

The Old Covenant foreshadowed the new, and under the New Covenant the Temple of God is *us*. Under the New Covenant, the Temple of God is no longer built of stone, but God manifests His presence *in us*. “You also, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a

holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” 1 Peter 2:5 “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” Eph 2:22

We are stones being built together. Love is the mortar that binds us, Christ is the lamb that has been offered for our sins. Our own lives are the acceptable sacrifices that we offer as worship to the Lord.

### New Covenant Worship

Intense persecution shaped much of the way that the first believers met, and as a consequence, some bible teachers today assert that the early church met in homes in order to avoid persecution. Before persecution broke out in Jerusalem, we know that the believers “continued to meet together in the Temple Courts” and “broke bread in their homes” In Acts 2:46 we are told that they met “from house to house” Acts 5:42. After persecution broke out in Jerusalem we are told that Saul went “from house to house” dragging off men and women to put them in prison. Acts 8:3 Apparently meeting in homes was an ineffective measure if it was intended only as a strategy for avoiding persecution!

It may come as a surprise to many to learn that there are no church buildings on earth that predate the late second/early third century. Many have argued that the early church met in the synagogues, but this ignores the fact that many converts were gentiles and would not have been welcome. It is true that Paul often went to the local synagogues to preach, he did so for one compelling reason: Even though he was called to be an Apostle to the gentiles, he believed that his countrymen should be the first to hear the gospel preached. Paul used the phrase, “for the Jew first, and then for the gentile” three times in the first two chapters of Romans and later in the same book goes onto outline God’s ongoing plan for the people of Israel. Paul taught that Israel was the vine of salvation and that gentile believers had been “grafted in”. So in the

various cities Paul visited, he went to those to whom the promises of God were first given - the Jews. Here he contended for the faith and used this public forum to proclaim the gospel. Paul made it a practice of seeking out any public forum to preach. But there is no evidence to suggest that gentile believers attended synagogues, or that built any other special places of worship.

An objective study of the Scriptures and Church history will reveal that meeting in homes was the general common practice among Christians for the first three centuries, whether persecution was present or not. But there is no magic formula here: the Christian message emphasised loving relationships ahead of religious observances, the family home presented the most obvious and practical venue for Christian gatherings. The meetings were intimate gatherings where believers practised hospitality, shared meals, cared for each another, encouraged each another, worshipped and employed their spiritual gifts.

Apparently the large numbers of believers in the Church in Jerusalem presented no valid reason to seek alternative venues to meet. The believers numbered about 5000 as they continued to gather in homes across the city. Whenever the gospel spread for the first for three hundred years, this practice of meeting in homes continued. We can

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obviously conclude some important points from this:

- The early church had a well organised structure based upon small groups which met in homes.

- Leadership was somehow able to function effectively with this context, despite the apparent challenges that this structure poses to our current way of thinking. Meetings were happening frequently (daily), therefore leaders would have been able to attend many different gatherings each week.

- All of the pastoral epistles of the New Testament were written to a Church where the primary mode of meeting was gathering in private homes. Therefore, everything that the Bible says about leadership, spiritual gifts, worship, correction, etc, can be understood in terms of its applicability in a home group context. See the appendix for a collection of Bible references that refer to these home-based gatherings.

- These home groups occasionally gathered together in larger numbers to hear visiting Apostles – even cramming into large homes for all-night meetings. This resulted once in a young man falling out of a third-story window to his death on the ground below! See Acts 20:7-12. This proved to be just another opportunity for God to demonstrate his resurrection power.

- Other kinds of meetings would have included outdoor gatherings for baptisms and other preaching events, but homes meetings remained the primary mode of meeting. Apparently no other method was considered necessary or desirable.

### So... What Happened in History?

To understand how the church got to where it is today, we need to go back in time.

It wasn't until the emergence of state-sanctioned churches in Europe and parts of north Africa in the early third century that we saw the rise of religious formalism with all its grand architectural trappings – the precursor to the common mode of church today. In fact, it was during this period that the Christian church began to very much resemble the pattern of the Old Covenant, com-

plete with grand temples, an ordained priesthood (suitably attired) and a complex set of rules and regulations. Monarchs and Emperors believed that God deserved the best of the best, so they constructed churches and cathedrals in a grand style reminiscent of the Temple in Jerusalem. Amidst all this, simplicity was lost. The Church progressively became a vehicle for grasping and consolidating worldly wealth and political power. The message was corrupted. In the quest for Christendom – Christ's kingdom on earth – the significance of a saviour born in a stable was overlooked.

The glorious Church/State also required money and lots of it. Whilst social justice prevailed in the early Church, these core Kingdom values were seriously undermined in the State-controlled Church. The individual now existed to serve the interests of the Church State. As the church slowly became the oppressor, the light of true Christian witness throughout Europe grew dim.

### A Shaft of Light

It wasn't until 1517, and the Great Reformation under Martin Luther, that we began to see a bright light amidst this darkness. The Reformation movement spread like wildfire right across Europe as the time had come for courageous and faithful souls to rise up and throw off the shackles of Rome. It was a glorious time of spiritual awakening throughout all of Europe. But even though the churches of Europe were substantially doctrinally reformed, it soon became clear that there were limits to how far that reform would go, and how much it would be allowed to result in the structural reform of church life. The independent States of Europe expected the churches to fulfil their civic duty to society and affirm the political rule of the State. Consequently, the reformed Churches of Western Europe remained paedobaptist (infant baptising) state-run churches which continued to serve the interests of the State. Every baby born throughout European "Christendom" was, by decree, to be baptised a Christian.

In the midst of all this were another group of Reform-

ers. But these were calling for the separation of Church and State and asserting that baptism was a right reserved only for people who were old enough to make a personal and deliberate profession of faith. These 'ana-baptists', or 're-baptisers' as they were called, were persecuted severely – most surprisingly, even by some of the Reformers themselves. The likes of Luther and Zwingly, who had arisen to positions of power and influence in post-reformation Europe, actually had many of these conscientious believers imprisoned and executed. Many were forced to baptise their children or face expulsion or the confiscation of their property. Many fled to the only place in the world where they could be assured of true religious freedom: The *New World* – America.

It is here that we find something profoundly interest-

believers fleeing Europe would have been unaware of the solid foundations they were laying for global evangelisation - they were simply staying true to their conscience, their beliefs and convictions. Our historical perspective today can now vindicate their faith. Whilst many churches in Europe stand empty, the faith of the spiritual descendants of the ana-baptists have taken the gospel to the ends of the earth with great missionary zeal, and 70% of all Christian worldwide are now living outside of Western Europe and North America.

This is something to bear in mind today if we are tempted to ignore this and take a pragmatic approach in adopting or perpetuating existing church structures. What looks like success from our limited human perspective, may be clearly seen to be error by future generations. We

Church, or how they effect the spiritual life of the Church today. Let's take a closer look.

### Western Culture vs Biblical Christianity

Things which characterise Western religious culture are:

■ **Large gatherings in large venues.** It wasn't until the 3rd century that purpose-built places of worship began to pop up in the form of grand churches and cathedrals. This was a direct result of Christianity being embraced as the official State Religion. These cathedrals invariably cost significant, if not shameful, amounts of money. The Reformation succeeded to some degree to demystifying the holy places and removing the catholic imagery, but as far as fundamentally addressing the basic format of congregational worship, it succeeded in achieving little more than a change of architecture. Martin Luther himself made a profound statement which hints that he may have desired the simplicity of the early Church:

*"Those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament and centre everything on the Word, prayer and love".*

This sounds like a description of the first century Church. But for whatever reason, whether due to political interference or cultural resistance, things turned out much differently. The Lutheran places of worship ended up bearing a striking resemblance to the Catholic cathedrals that they replaced. The obsession with holy real-estate was reproduced right throughout Europe.

■ **Professional Clergy & Subdued Laity.** Along with the elaborate cathedrals, church meetings continued to emphasise the Clergy/Laity distinction. Priests and Pastors continued to be professional ministers, often distinguished by formal attire and retaining special responsibilities and privileges. Leaders in the Western European model of church continued to be known by their titles (Eg: Reverend, Pastor, etc). By contrast, leaders in the first century church were known only by the first names (Peter, Paul, James, etc). In the Western European

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### Our primary objective is to *make disciples*.

ing: When we trace the spiritual lineage of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity today, we find that it can be traced back to those ana-baptists who fled to America, and not the Reformed churches of Europe. Even when Europe did later experience times of revival, such as that which took place in England through John Wesley, one has to acknowledge that Wesley was converted after meeting Moravian (ana-baptist) missionaries when returning from America.

This illustrates a powerful principle that God has shown in His dealings with man throughout the history: *He chooses to work through a faithful remnant rather than endorse the straying majority.* Most of those ana-baptist

need to understand that the Church today (even in America) is still carrying a lot of baggage from 1700 years of Western European religious tradition.

To see things God's way, we need to lay aside our most basic cultural assumptions and make a biblical paradigm shift. This, however, can be difficult. Culture has an extraordinarily powerful influence on the way we view the world. When we have so much invested in our current ways of doing things any change is likely to be met with resistance - particularly if we're convinced that there's nothing wrong with what we are doing. Most believers today are unaware of how many of current religious practices are at odds with the values of the New Testament

model of church, congregations were generally con- signed to sit in rows facing the front, with their participation usually limited to the comparatively passive roles of lis- tening, singing and placing money in the offering plate. We're all familiar with the Western European model: It usually takes place once a week (on Sunday); it usually goes for no more than 1 or 2 hours; it includes times of formal teaching, worship and the sacraments - and some- times liturgy. By contrast, the early Church met daily from house to house, broke bread in their homes, shared meals, enjoyed fellowship, employed their spiritual gifts, and retained a flexible and informal format.

Whilst the Reformation redressed many of the abusive excesses of 16th century Catholicism, it did little to rein- state the informal and interactive meetings of the first century. In the various religious traditions of Western Eu- rope, active participation beyond listening, singing and giving money has generally been discouraged, sometimes even prohibited, and nearly *always* limited due to the

**In the various religious traditions of Western Europe, active participation beyond listening, singing and giving money has generally been discouraged, sometimes even prohibited, and nearly *always* limited due to the practical constraint of time.**

practical constraint of time. The traditional Western Eu- ropean Sunday congregational meeting allows little time for sharing, giving testimonies, or the free operation of spiritual gifts. Even in many Pentecostal churches today, where in the past there has been a high value placed on public sharing and spiritual gifts, there's been a notable drift back towards tightly orchestrated meetings. This trend is effectively a nail in the coffin of the doctrine of *the priesthood of all believers*, and harks back to an Old Covenant paradigm where the people relied entirely upon a mediated experience of God.

Whilst we do not wish to be critical of the contemporary Church, we should understand that the formalisation of church life actually conspires to produce some outcomes which are diametrically opposed to some of our stated objectives. Our primary objective is to *make disciples*. When we allow the venue in which we meet to shape our meetings, certain problematic things logically follow:

■ **Limited Participation:** When the Church meets in large groups, it invariably limits how many people can participate and employ their gifts during any one meet- ing. Meetings with packed schedules don't allow for the adequate free expression of the spiritual gifts which were given by God for the edification of the Church.

■ **Spiritual Immaturity:** People that do not have op- portunity to discover or employ their gifts, or who are not encouraged to discover and employ their gifts, continue perpetually to be spiritual babies. The church may grow numerically, but if people are sitting in the pews and not growing to maturity, then the church is failing it's primary mission to "make disciples".

■ **Limited Fellowship:** When a brief and busy Sunday meeting is the primary point of contact for believers, there are practical limits as to how well people can get to know one another and develop meaningful relationships. A "friendly" church is not necessarily a church that under- stands the nature of true fellowship.

■ **Distorted Leadership:** There are a number of ways that leadership can distort. In heirarchical systems leaders can become dictators and autocrats. Or they can be-

come show directors controlling everything instead of servants who prayerfully watch and oversee all that is happening. Or worse still, they can become priests who put themselves between God and the people.

When we read the Bible we often notice what the Apos- tles did and said. But what is more amazing is how much they didn't do. With 5000 believers meeting in homes all over Jerusalem daily there must have been many meetings that the Apostles didn't even get to. While the Apostles devoted themselves to prayer, the Holy Spirit was busy calling and activating the people – some of whom were even performing signs and wonders in their spare time!.

Small groups develop leaders much more readily be- cause of the number of small-scale opportunities to lead. With less at stake in small meetings, and a more relational format for meeting, leaders can afford to test potential lead- ers with leadership opportunities. Supportive groups can also encourage people to find confidence to discover their gifts. When these leaders are experienced, they can gradu- ate into situations where they have increased leadership responsibility. It is this kind of relational discipleship that we see in Jesus' relationship with his disciples.

■ **Irresponsible Stewardship:** One of the most dis- turbing aspects of the Western European model of church is the profoundly wasteful misappropriation of funds. The fundamental flaw in the Western European model of church is the most basic assumption that the Church *needs* a special place to meet. This is an inherited as- sumption that is so basic to our western way of thinking that very few stop to even seriously question it.

It is interesting to note that throughout the world today, the Church is growing fastest in places where purpose- built meeting places are in short supply. Throughout the developing world and in restricted countries, believers gather together in homes, under trees and in open air meetings. Even though many of these believers do not have our modern facilities, the Lord continues to add to their numbers daily, to the point where their progress makes our lack of progress look embarrassing.

Because of the huge costs associated with purpose-

built worship centres, kingdom finances are directed away from mission and mercy ministries, and diverted into real estate. In many cases, believers are coerced into giving more and more money to support the building program. Old Testament Bible verses, such as Malachi 3:8-10 are erroneously applied by leaders desperate to raise money. The fact that these verses apply to the Old Covenant Temple and Priesthood system is conveniently ignored, and this amounts to spiritual abuse.

According to the *Annual Statistical Table on Global Missions, 1999*, 12.3 trillion dollars is donated to Christian causes throughout the world each year. Of this, only 5.4% is given to foreign missions and of that, only 1% (approx. US\$112,914,000) is focused on people groups that do not have a viable Christian witness: That sounds like a lot of money. But it is not uncommon to find individual churches in North America which use about one tenth of this amount to build new worship facilities. I recently calculated that the amount of money used by one particular church in America could have provided start-up capital for 66,000 family businesses among the poor in Africa. (See [www.fouww.org](http://www.fouww.org))

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world'. What then will be God's answer to this shameful misappropriation of money? God hears cry of the hungry poor and those perishing without hearing the gospel. The Master has gone away and has left us in charge of His affairs. We will surely one day have to give an account to Him for all that we have done.

But if believers were to give one tenth or their income, this could potentially release one full-time worker into ministry for every ten wage earners. I strongly suspect that God is going to ask some serious questions on judgement day about what we did with the resources He has blessed us with. In the light of urgent need to preach the gospel, and the desperate humanitarian needs around the world, it is impossible to justify our culture's obsession with religious real estate. There is, after all, no New Testament precedent for it.

■ **Lack of Relational Discipleship:** Because the Western European model of church is congregational, it's very easy for people to get lost or hide in the crowd. Since it's virtually impossible to hide or be anonymous in a small home group, believers in home fellowships are held relationally accountable for how they live and how they apply what they are learning. Jesus specified that "making disciples" involved "teaching them to obey" his commandments. The Western European model of church is big on teaching, but small on doing. It focuses on learning truth, but often neglects the application of it. Relational discipleship in home groups provides a forum for applied learning where the shepherds can know the condition of their sheep.

■ **Limited Freedom:** Western church meetings are often rigidly orchestrated and strictly limited by time. Believers in the first century enjoyed a greater degree of freedom and interactivity. They could ask questions; they could seek prayer; they could take time to build meaningful relationships. These meetings sometimes lasted many hours with people being free to come and go according to their particular commitments. The people were free to share: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a

tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" 1 Cor 14:26

### Doing Things God's Way

When we meet in this way, we are meeting God's way. Meeting God's way means we come ready to be involved. Just like people "bring a plate" to share in a collective meal, so too we can all be encouraged to come prepared to share some spiritual blessing with others. That's what the spiritual gifts are for! The Bible says "To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good".

Meeting God's way is not just only about meeting in small groups or in homes. It's about fully embracing the underlying Kingdom values that lead to authentic Christian community and genuine service. It's a journey towards maturity. This is what constitutes real success in God's sight.

If we are going to meet God's way, then we need to question our most basic assumptions and ask ourselves where we got our preconceived ideas. If they don't match with the Bible then we need get back to the Scriptures. Overcoming our own cultural resistance and traditional mindsets will be the greatest obstacle in achieving this. It requires a major paradigm shift.

The pragmatic person may say, "I'll only do it if it works". A true follower of Jesus must say, "I'll do it because it's right!". We need to embrace biblical values, obey biblical directives, and employ biblical principles - not just because they work, but because they're right!

#### Appendix: Home gatherings in the New Testament

*The Book of Acts:* 2:2; 5:42; 8:3; 9:11; 9:17; 10:22 10:25 11:14; 16:15; 16:31-34; 16:40; 18:7-8; 18:26; 20:20; 21:8-11; 21:12-13; 21:16-17; 28:7-9; 28:30-31;

*Romans:* 16:5; 16:10-11; 1 *Corinthians* 16:15; 16:19

*Colossians* 4:15; *Philemon:* 1:2

*Recommended Reading:* "Going to Church in the First Century" by Robert Banks.