

What do we mean when we say that in worship we ‘come into the presence of God’?

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Abstract

God’s presence is spoken of in differing ways. God is omnipresent. Yet we also speak of God as “present” in particular places and situations. Some would feel that there is no special presence of God in any place, but that God’s glory, beauty and presence are to be seen and felt throughout the creation. Others hold to a very special sense of God’s presence in the gathering of God’s people and in the liturgy, so that to gather as God’s people is to enter into God’s presence. Still others find God present to be worshiped and adored specifically in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The crucial common thread to our understandings of the presence of God is that it is in and through Christ that God is present to us.

Where is God found?

God’s presence is spoken of in differing ways. We believe God to be omnipresent—present in all places at all times. Yet we also speak of God as “present” in particular places and situations. Pre-eminently we speak of the presence of Christ in the gathering of his people, even in gatherings of two or three (Matt. 18.20). We also speak of God’s presence in a personal, subjective, experiential way. People speak of having seen and felt the “presence” of God. Systematic theologians have distinguished between God’s physical and ethical immanence. God is everywhere, but God is not “with” everyone, nor is God in every situation.¹

The concept of “presence” is not readily definable, as Rahner notes:

Such a word ... does not admit of any strict or precise definition, any more than does man himself. Every attempt at describing or defining what ‘presence’ means ends up by appealing to that basic and primary experience in which, the moment we make it, we recognize what ‘presence’ is, and yet which at the same time we are incapable of expressing.²

God’s presence has been made known and discerned in many ways and places. We should not overstate the particularity of God’s presence in any situation, such as a church gathering, to the detriment of an awareness that we are never out of God’s knowledge and presence. When we

1. Bavinck, Herman. *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977) [from *Gereformeerde Domatiek*, v.2. 3rd edn, 1918], p.162.

2. Rahner, Karl. “The Presence of the Lord in the Christian community at worship.” *Theological investigations; vol. 10: writings of 1965-67*, 2. London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1973, pp.71-83, at p.71.

gather “in God’s presence” for worship, or “enter God’s presence” in private prayer, we do so knowing that God is everywhere present in creation.

God’s presence in creation

Scripture speaks of creation as a sign and expression of God’s relationship with God’s people and the whole of humankind. Many have written of the natural world as a place of personal encounter with the greatness and beauty of God in a way that is nonetheless intimate.³ Spiritual experiences mediated through the senses are notoriously subjective, and must be subject to tests of coherence and adequacy. James Nash observes, however, that to restrict the database of faith and theology to scripture and tradition alone, excluding general revelation, “natural” theology, or mystical experiences, is an arbitrary limitation on the freedom of the Spirit and a denial of God’s presence and *present* revelation.⁴

Nancy Wright says that texts as John 1.3 and Colossians 1.17 “seem to indicate that the holy is much more within the Earth community than we Western, Enlightenment-influenced Christians have thought”.⁵ As a spiritual director, she asks herself, “Now I am wondering whether we spiritual directors should wait expectantly for spiritual directees to see God in creation. I think we should.” Individual experiences of the “spirit” of the Earth will differ. Some will feel celebration and joy - others are moved by grief for the sufferings of the Earth. “But a caveat must be stated: we cannot lose the distinctiveness between God and the Earth.” We may experience the love of God while in nature. But it is not simply nature loving us. “God is intrinsic in nature, even while transcending it.”⁶

James Nash describes the experience of God’s presence in the natural realm as “sacramental”.

... nature is sacred by association, as the bearer of the sacred. We are standing perpetually on holy ground because God is present ... The sacramental presence of the Spirit endows all of creation with a sacred value and dignity.⁷

Moltmann declares that a Trinitarian doctrine of creation does not start from an antithesis between God and the world. God creates the world and at the same time enters into it. It lives by

3. For example, Paul Collins in *God’s Earth: religion as if matter really mattered* (North Blackburn: Dove Books, 1995).

4. James A. Nash. *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 112.

5. Nancy G. Wright, “Christian spirituality: mending the web” in *Theology for Earth community: a field guide* / edited by Dieter T. Hessel. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, pp239-249, at p.245.

6. *Ibid.*, p.246.

7. Nash, *Loving nature* ..., 114-5

God's power, and yet God lives in it and is seen through it. If the Creator were to stand over against the creation, God would be standing against God's own self.⁸

Christian faith affirms the sacramental presence of the Spirit in the created order. Nature is made sacred by being the bearer of the sacred. The world is filled with the glory of God (Isa.6.3; Eph.4.6). As Nash says, "the world is valued by God as the place of spiritual presence and residence. It is God's beloved habitat - and ours."⁹ Ecological understanding implicitly challenges church sacraments and church practices. If we too strongly or inappropriately understand church *praxis* as the actuality or representation of the presence of God we risk taking God out of God's creation.

Existentialism and God's presence

An existentialist approach seems to avoid questions concerning the nature of God's presence in the world and the church. Existentialism focuses upon human existence. The presence of God is radically restricted to the divine impact or impression of the subjective world of individual experience. Thus Bultmann suggests that God confronts individuals through the Christian proclamation, and is present within their lives through a transformation of their personal existence. It is not meaningful to speak of God acting in the world. One cannot speak of God acting in the resurrection, for example, for the resurrection was an event in the personal experience of the disciples, not in the external world as such.¹⁰ However, existentialism does not gainsay the availability of an experience of God's presence prompted in some way by encounter with the natural world - even though the actuality of that presence may be subjective.

Constitution of the church as the community of Christ's presence

Karl Rahner speaks of the gathering for worship as constituting the presence of the church, thus making God present.

... there can be no act through which Christ is made more closely and forcefully present than the cult of the Church, and it is through this presence that the church herself is constituted ...

... No doubt this presence of Christ, in the cult of the local community, contains within itself very different elements. Yet it must be understood as prior to all these elements, and as unique. ... [The various elements] must be understood as different degrees in

8. Jürgen Moltmann. *God in creation: a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 4-15, 63-64, 98-100.

9. James A. Nash. *Theological Foundations for Ecological Responsibilities* /. 1997. URL: <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/nash.htm>

10. Alister E. McGrath. *Christian theology : an introduction* / 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997, p.278.

the actualization and intensity of this one unique presence through which God and man become united for the glory of God and the salvation of man.¹¹

There are a variety of church practices and liturgies, but these are all the outworking of the singular saving presence of Christ in his church. The saving presence of Christ is constituted through the word of the gospel, the sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and by hope and love.¹² This is not, Rayner says, so much through the general presence of the omnipresent God, as through the self-bestowal of God in the Spirit, and through all the mediating acts by which this divine self-bestowal is communicated.

... in this dimension of the Spirit a mutual presence of Christ and the faithful to each other is achieved at the highest level of actuality in the local Church.¹³

This one presence of Christ is the ‘actualization’ in both ‘visible’ and ‘existential’ form at the same time of that unity, and so that presence too, in which the faithful remain constantly united and so present to each other also, with Christ and among themselves.¹⁴

The local community is *the* Church present and complete at one specific place.

Rahner affirms¹⁵ a passage in *De Ecclesia*, the *Constitution on the Church* of the Second Vatican Council, which declares that:

the Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called Churches in the New Testament. ... In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in Diaspora, Christ is present ...¹⁶

Three other factors are essential: “the preaching of the Gospel of Christ”, the celebration of “the mystery of the Lord’s supper” and “that charity and unity of the mystical body, without which there can be no salvation.” These things are held to be constitutive of the presence of the Church, by the gathering of which we may say that Christ is present. “Christ is present through *this* community as constituted precisely in *this* way,” Rahner says.¹⁷ Formation of community in which Christ is present is not so much something happening *in* the Church; rather it is actualization *of* the Church.¹⁸

11. Rahner, “The Presence of the Lord in the Christian community at worship” p.76.

12. *Ibid.*, 78-81.

13. *Ibid.*, 75.

14. *Ibid.*, 82.

15. Karl Rahner. “On the presence of Christ in the Diaspora community according to the second Vatican Council.” *Theological investigations; vol. 10: writings of 1965-67, 2.* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1973), 84–102.

16. *De Ecclesia: Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council*, §26.

17. Rahner, “On the presence of the Lord in Christian worship ...”, 90.

18. *Ibid.*, p.101.

Protestant writer, Gordon Lathrop speaks similarly of each gathering of church people as a gathering of *the church* in Christ's presence.

We are in the company of the risen Christ, who is at the heart of the reading of the book and the interpretation of its meaning, whose risen presence is at the centre of the meal. ... Because of God's presence, our local meeting becomes the whole catholic church dwelling here. ... Anyone who comes into this meeting encounters the whole assembly of God.¹⁹

From the point of view of the liturgy, Lathrop says, the church is always local; it has no other existence. Yet each local gathering is a gathering of *the church*, meeting with Christ, knowing Christ risen and *here*.²⁰ The readings are read because they speak of him. Washing and prayers are done in his name. The meal is his memorial.

These very things ... are the privileged places for that encounter with his very identity. That is what "The body of Christ", spoken to those receiving the holy bread, means: "This is the identity of Christ, for you."²¹

More than simply *being* the church of God's presence, our gathering *acknowledges, affirms and declares* God's presence.²²

The Holy Spirit makes Christ present

Karl Rahner distinguishes a "habitual" presence of God and a "special" presence by which the Spirit is intimately involved in and committed to Church *praxis*.

... in the cult and through it there takes place a special presence of Christ over and above the 'habitual' presence of the Spirit and so of Christ in the Church. This special cultic presence of Christ is such that it does not exist with *this* degree of actuality apart from the cult.²³

Whether or not one can accept the idea of a "special" presence of God, the point is made that the presence of God in the church is preeminently an achievement of the Spirit.

For it is only in the *pneuma* of Christ that the Church can teach, pray, believe, hope, love and confer the sacraments. Now it is in these activities that the cult of the church is achieved, and it is through this cult that Christ and the faithful are rendered mutually present to one another in the most actual and sublime form possible.²⁴

The Holy Spirit makes it possible to enter into intimacy with God, rather than adoring God as infinitely remote and 'other'.

19. Gordon W. Lathrop. *Holy people: a liturgical ecclesiology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p.53.

20. Ibid., p.64.

21. Gordon W. Lathrop. *Holy things: a liturgical theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Pr., 1993, p.135.

22. Ibid., p.137.

23. Rahner, "The Presence of the Lord in the Christian community at worship", 74.

24. Ibid.

.... this presence of the Spirit in the church is the ‘medium’ which is the necessary prior condition for that further presence which is achieved precisely between Christ and the Church in the enactment of the cult.²⁵

Chrichton also draws attention to the important place of the Holy Spirit in bringing Christ into present reality in the gathering of the church. In eucharist, for example, though not part of the *anamnesis*, God the Holy Spirit is always in the “near background”. The Holy Spirit is not present simply at the *epiclesis*, as if the Spirit comes into the celebration only at a certain point. The liturgy brings past events into present experience, but it also looks to Christ as he now is, present in the Spirit.²⁶

In our gathering, the Holy Spirit brings not simply the presence of God but an awareness of who God is. In the presence of God, the Spirit makes available to us the things God is for us – conviction, power, giftedness, creativity and many other riches.

This meeting also acknowledges the glory of the one God who is present in the world as *the Spirit* that creates something out of nothing. That very Spirit enlivens this meeting. ... The Holy Spirit is God enlivening this meeting by drawing us into the death and resurrection of Christ, into the identity of Christ. ... [T]he presence of justice and mercy, the reality of creation and redemption, the restoration of thanksgiving, the recovery of the future - these are revealed to us only as the Holy Spirit breaks the things of this meeting to the purposes of Jesus Christ.²⁷

God’s presence in symbol and liturgy

The activity of the Spirit as the presence of God is outworked in liturgy in its widest sense as “the people’s work”.

Through the sacraments, Scriptures, preaching, teaching, members, and ministers of this new Easter community, the Spirit mediates the presence of the crucified and risen Christ. ... In particular, the Eucharist forms the central sign of Christ’s communing presence with his followers in self-gift.²⁸

The liturgy makes Christ present in word, symbol and sacrament so that through its celebration we may have a saving encounter with God.²⁹ In the church sacraments, the Christian community recognizes the presence of the redemptive mystery. Thus Schillebeeckx says that,

In an earthly embodiment which we can see and touch, the heavenly Christ sacramentalizes both his continual intercession for us and his active gift of grace.

25. Ibid.

26. J. D. Crichton. “A Theology of worship” in *The Study of worship*, edited by Cheslyn Jones and others. Rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1992), 3-31, at 17.

27. Lathrop, *Holy things*, 135, 137.

28. Gerald O’Collins. *Christology: a Biblical, historical, and systematic study of Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 307-8.

29. Chrichton, “A Theology of worship,” 17.

Therefore the sacraments are the visible realization on earth of Christ's mystery of saving worship.³⁰

As the church is Christ's body, liturgical acts, rightly and truthfully carried out, are the embodiment of the actions of Christ, making him present. The church is the subject of liturgy and sacrament as well as their object. Liturgy is essentially and by its nature sacramental, for its embodiment of the word of God makes Christ present to his body.³¹

The intention of the experienced dialectic of the *ordo*, of one thing placed next to another thing, is to place us in the presence of Christ by the power of the Spirit, and so before the face of the one, eternal God. Indeed, entrance, reconciliation, access to the holy things of God made available to those who are not holy, are what the whole meeting is about."³²

The symbols of water, bread and wine, Lathrop says, have been made into the bearers of central Christian meanings and, by the promise of God and the power of the Spirit, the very presence of Christ.³³ Whether the symbols contain the *actuality* of God's presence, or simply remind us of a grace or meaning in God's presence is debated. But the association of symbol and presence remains.

Presence as relationship

Presence entails being in relation to someone.³⁴ Writing of the presence of Christ in the world, O'Collins argues that only persons can in the proper sense be present; presence happens in a personal relationship. One's voluntary personal presence is a form of self-bestowal and may work to effect a communion of life and love. Presence can be mediated may happen symbolically. Human relationship and presence is always mediated through voice, actions, appearance, etc. Presence may have differing qualities and modes - closeness, intensity, and degree of free choice. It is not a simple choice of presence or absence.³⁵ (Here again some variation in God's presence is postulated.) Thus when we speak of coming into the presence of God, we anticipate an experience which expresses our relationship with God, whether a relationship of fear or confidence, distance or intimacy. For some, such experience may be intense.

30. Edward Schillebeeckx. *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 45.

31. Chrichton, "A Theology of worship," 23.

32. Lathrop, *Holy things*, 138.

33. Lathrop, *Holy people*, 64.

34. Rahner, "The Presence of the Lord in the Christian community at worship", 72.

35. O'Collins, 311-3.

The language of entering in

The Old Testament heavily influences our language about the presence of God. Many narratives in the Old Testament speak distinctly of the presence or non-presence of God in a particular situation. There were dedicated places where God promised to be present and where God's presence could be approached. God was present in the Holy of Holies, to be closely approached only by the High Priest on the annual Day of Atonement.³⁶

Entering into God's presence in the Tabernacle, the Temple, and the City of God, is especially celebrated in the Psalms.³⁷ The Psalms are replete with the joys and demands of entry into God's presence and dwelling in God's house.³⁸ This Scriptural language has been carried forward into the church. The Psalms have been the heart of the Divine Office for centuries. Modern worship choruses contain their words. Yet we need to be careful with language that speaks about entering into the presence of God in holiness with sacrifices of praise. We need always to remember that we have access to God solely through Christ, our great High Priest (Heb.4.14ff). The New Testament speaks of a "sacrifice of praise" (Heb.13.5) but this is not a mode or condition of entry into God's presence; rather, it is thanksgiving for its own sake and from a heart that is grateful toward God.

Presence as experience

The Scriptures, and writing from every Christian tradition, are full of experiences of the presence of God. As we have seen, this may be understood theologically as God localizing and actualizing God's presence in space and time. Intimacy with God is, by definition, the closest, deepest knowing. It is part of the very purpose for which we were created.

Often, intimate experiences of God have been accompanied by strong physical and emotional phenomena. Biblical scholar James Dunn states that:

The earliest Christian community was essentially charismatic and enthusiastic in nature, in every aspect of its common life and worship, its development and mission. ... The fact is that ecstatic and physical phenomena have been a regular, commitment of religious awakening and revival movements within the history of Christianity.³⁹

36. The presence of God in the Old Testament is examined in Yves M.-J. Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple or the manner of God's presence to his creatures from Genesis to the Apocalypse*. (London: Burns and Oates, 1962.

37. Neville Graham. *God's presence among his people* (London: SPCK, 1971, 89-103.

38. Psalms 5.7; 16.11; 21.6; 23.6; 26.8; 27.4; 42.4; 45.15; 52.8-9; 55.14; 65.4; 66.13; 69.9; 84.10; 84.4; 88.1; 92.13; 93.5; 95.2; 100.2; 105.4; 116.18-19; 118.19-20,26; 122.1; 134.1; 135.2; 140.13.

39. James D. G. Dunn. *Jesus and the Spirit* /. London: SCM Pr, 1983. pp.189, 194.

Such demonstrable experiences continue today in charismatic, Pentecostal and other fellowship. A famous recent instance is the so-called “Toronto Blessing”, which Guy Chevreau places thoughtfully into a theological context in his book *Catch the fire*.⁴⁰

Daniel Albrecht⁴¹ argues that Pentecostal spirituality, for example, is distinguished by a deep, even mystical, piety that emphasizes an immanent sense of the divine. Here “worship” refers to an encounter with the divine as mediated by a sense of the divine presence or power. Pentecostals believe strongly in the manifest presence of God and practice worship as an experience of the immediate presence of God and as a way into that presence. Worship involves a deep communion between divinity and humanity, an encountering. Prayer and worship are intermingled. An attitude of expectancy shapes the practice of this communion. Believers expect God to come and meet with God’s people. God alone inaugurates this experience by God’s gracious acts and presence. Liturgy is a preparation, but cannot force God’s presence and moving. The Spirit initiates, guides, facilitates, and leads true worship. Yet, in my experience, there is on occasion an attempt to “bring forth” the presence of God by “entering in” through praise, concerning caution was expressed above. There is an element of Christian mysticism in this worship.⁴² Church services provide a context for a mystical encounter, an experience with the divine. Often, celebration melts into contemplation. This experience of being in the presence of God is fundamental to the Pentecostal spirituality. Karl Rahner has described Pentecostalism as an ‘everyday mysticism’.⁴³

Conclusion

We have seen a variety of understandings of what it means to “come into the presence of God”. Some would feel that there is no special presence of God in any place, but that God’s glory, beauty and presence are to be seen and felt throughout the creation. We may, however, become more aware of God’s presence in particular circumstances. Others hold to a very special sense of God’s presence in the gathering of God’s people and in the liturgy, so that to gather as God’s people is to enter into God’s presence. Still others find God present to be worshiped and adored specifically in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The crucial common thread to our

40. Guy Chevreau. *Catch the fire: the Toronto blessing — an experience of renewal and revival* / London: Marshall Pickering, 1994.

41 Daniel E Albrecht. “Pentecostal Spirituality: Ecumenical Potential and Challenge” *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal/Charismatic Research* [URL: <http://www.pctii.org/cybertabl.html>] 2 (1997)

42. Ibid.

43. Karl Rahner. *The Spirit in the Church* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 9-31.

understandings of the presence of God is that it is in and through Christ that God is present to us.

Macquarrie reminds us:

In Christ takes place the “advent” of God, his coming to be present, or his dwelling among us; and there likewise takes place the “epiphany” of God, the manifestation or showing of his grace and truth.⁴⁴

However the presence of God may be real to us, the means of that reality is faith in the risen Christ. It is by faith in him that we dwell in God’s house, in the presence of God’s Spirit.

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