

The Dwelling of God Is with Men

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I have always been fascinated with the Biblical idea of God's dwelling with man. The book of Revelation prophesies, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He shall be with them and they shall be His people." This prospect has always been somewhat of a puzzle for me.

We have thought of God as almighty, high, over-reaching, transcendent, cosmic, infinite, something to bring down to earth. With this kind of concept, it has been very difficult to envision how this Being could, in fact, dwell with men. And yet, this is the promise of the Bible. One assumes that the promise means that God will dwell with each of us individually and with us collectively.

The question for me is "What does this mean?" What does it mean that God will dwell with us? How will that happen? In the kind of half-conscious, unformed assumptions that I've had, I've thought of some vague, ethereal energy force floating in free form between us and around us. And this would be God's dwelling with us. It would be something like the fog rolling in.

This idea I no longer accept, or at least I'm suspicious of it. What I want to arrive at is an alternative view of what it may mean for God to dwell with man. What is obvious from what I've said so far is that my idea has changed. At one time I thought of God dwelling with us in a certain way. Now I no longer think of it in that same way. This process of change is, in fact, an historical one.

For example, in Greek times, people thought of their God or gods in very different ways. There was Apollo, Zeus, and a host of other gods who dwelled in the mountaintops and caves. Through time, this idea changed, and a more unified view of God emerged. But even then, the Hindus had their god, the Buddhists had theirs, Catholics had their God, and the Jews theirs. Each religion had its own separate god. Again, this view has changed, particularly within the last two centuries.

We now envision one God who manifests Himself in different ways. Of course, we also are a part of the historical process. So, in a 100 or 500 years, people may look back on our image of God and think it very removed from the real thing, far off the track, and undeveloped. This process is sometimes called "re-imagining." It is not only an historical process but also a personal process -- something that each of us must do in the course of his own life. The basic process is that, as man changes and matures, his image of God changes. His image is shaped by his experience.

I've also been curious over the past several years about something that Reverend Moon has said. Many times he has said things like, "You must pray to God," "You must ask God," "Unless we depend on God, we can never succeed." "You must center everything on God," etc. However, at other times he's said things like, "You must do it on your own," "Don't wait for God," "You must take the responsibility," "Don't wait for God's command, but act before God's order," etc. Indeed, at one point, Reverend Moon

said, "Subsequent to the next seven years, God will hold direct sovereignty through His blessed families.

Then God will have rest from His battle." He said this January 1968, God's Day. So, Reverend Moon in some way hints of the day when man will take over, man will make it on his own, living in the world, and working in the world through his own responsibility as if God was retired.

So far, I've introduced three ideas: 1) the idea of God dwelling with man, 2) the process of reimagining, and 3) the idea of man living in the world as if God were not there, making it on his own. Now I'd like to try to tie these together. Recently, I've encountered in a very brief way, the thinking of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of his ideas is very relevant here.

This is that he believes that God is leading man to being able to live in the world as if He were not there.

To quote Bonhoeffer, "The God who makes us live in this world without using Him as a working hypothesis, is the God before whom we're ever standing. Before God and with Him we live without God. God allows Himself to be edged out of the world. And that is exactly the way, the only way, in which He can be with us and help us." Bonhoeffer takes the position that God is leading man to be able to live without Him. He points to the end goal of this process as "Man come of Age," and argues that it is *only* by God's stepping back and out of the picture that man can come of age.

The idea of man's living without God certainly is frightening. On another level, it comes to us as challenging and liberating. To relate Bonhoeffer's idea to our previous material, I want to suggest that the God we may be called to live without is not God, but the God of a certain image.

The process of God's stepping back is the flip side of our maturing and of our developing new images. We have thought of God in a certain way. Perhaps it is that pattern of thinking which we will ultimately be called to live without. I don't know. I only present the idea. But it may be something each of us will encounter in his own time.

The obvious question here, if what I have been saying is true (and of course it may not be), is what image or images of God we may have to give up.

We each have our own personal concept of God and special relationship with Him. Thus, the process of re-imagining is very personal and subjective. However, in a more general sense, we can make some comments.

We often talk about God's incompleteness, His suffering heart, and His need for man's response. Basically, I think what we may be called to do is to take those ideas much more thoroughly and deeply. Despite our talk, most of us put a lot of responsibility on God. Beginning with what we feel we need, and creeping into our hopes, often comes the Almighty, the All Powerful.

It seems to me that as we genuinely incorporate the concept of God as incomplete, and dependent upon us, our own sense of responsibility is enhanced. By "responsibility" I don't just refer to the responsibility for our outward tasks and missions. Rather, I also want to refer to responsibility for who we are now, for the choices we've made and for our own ongoing self-creation. These are the areas in which in subtle ways we often make God responsible for us. However, I don't think this is the way things are. I don't think God takes responsibility for us apart from our taking responsibility for ourselves. It is through each person taking full responsibility for his own life that, in effect, God takes responsibility for him. As I take responsibility for my life, then God takes responsibility through me. In this way, life has a unitary quality. In the New Testament, Paul writes "Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God at work in you."

As each of us takes full responsibility for his living, and God participates in this, then unity is achieved. Man and God are one. In this way, we will find God dwelling with us, and the Biblical prophecy will be realized.