

## The Presence of God in the First-Century Church

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Hear these words from the apostle Paul, writing to the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia:

Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God . . . You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him. (1 Peter 2:5–9, CEB)

I think we would all agree that this is an awkward time in the life of our church, this Body of Christ. Centre Street Church is significantly different from twenty or thirty years ago. The most obvious changes are that we no longer have a pastor, we have a lot of empty pews, and our 200-year-old building is suffering from decades of deferred maintenance.

Hand in hand with the disruption created by these changes goes the fact that we have a wide variety of opinions about the best way to respond. I think it's fair to say that the only thing we all agree on is that we can't simply ignore the changes and hope that history will somehow magically reverse itself.

Worried that the church is on the verge of closing, some of us believe that these three changes—the lack of pastor, empty pews, and deteriorating building—are the main problems, and thus we feel an urgent need to get professional clergy back into our pulpit, attract more people to church services, and find the money to address our deferred maintenance backlog. Worthy goals, indeed. Others among us see these same three changes as *symptoms* of problems with organized religion that extend well beyond this church and will continue to cause upheaval and dramatic change on a more global scale for the foreseeable future.

Among this Body of Christ, we have some people who grew up here and have attended for all their lives. This church has been not only the place where they gather to worship, but also the center of their social lives, and thus they naturally have a strong emotional attachment to Centre Street. Others among us, especially those who discovered Centre Street within the past few years, are more likely to be here because this is an open and affirming church with progressive, inclusive theology and a social conscience, but they don't necessarily have that same kind of emotional attachment.

It's clear to me that even in the midst of this confusing, challenging swirl of opinions, emotions, ideas, and good intentions, the one thing that we share is that we're all sincerely seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance about where God is leading Centre Street and what it will become.

Brandon Robertson<sup>1</sup> is a writer and public theologian who serves as the pastor of Sunnyside Reformed Church in Queens, NY. Now 32 years old, Robertson writes a lot about how millennials view organized religion and spirituality. Here's what he said in an article published in *Sojourners* magazine:

“My generation, the millennials, are not walking away from their faith in Jesus, but are walking away from the modernized, politicized, sterilized, Europeanized version of Christian faith. Organic, grassroots communities of faith are forming all across our nation without buildings, without marketing, without ordained clergy, without 501(c)(3) exemptions, and without the privilege that most institutionalized churches have enjoyed for so many decades.”

In 2024, staring into an almost unimaginable future in which the very existence of life on this planet is threatened by climate change, among other things, what does it mean to be a church? And how does this Body of Christ offer a spiritual home and refuge to people whose faith is pulling them away from what they see as secularized, institutional churches?

It's no secret that people are, indeed, turning away from churches like the ones in which many of us grew up. I recently read a book co-authored by Jim Davis and Michael Graham,<sup>2</sup> published just last year, titled *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* Davis and Graham write that in the past 25 years, 40 million American adults have stopped going to church. You might be surprised to hear, however, that one of the main reasons that people cite for leaving the church is that although church provided them with a community and social interaction, it failed to support their faith journeys and provide opportunities for their spiritual growth. Without that, they can have just as much fun at a soccer game or going out to dinner with friends.

As we heard a moment ago from Brandon Robertson, young adults aren't leaving their faith—they're leaving the institutional church because they no longer believe that it reflects and supports their faith. So again, what does it mean to be a church in the mid-21st century—and in this chaotic and divisive social, political, and economic context?

If we look to scripture for answers, we find two models for how to be a church—an Old Testament model in which access to God is available only through a mediator, and a New

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, Brandon. "To the Dying Church from a Millennial." *Sojourners* (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Davis, Jim, and Michael Graham. *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (2023).

Testament model in which people have direct access to the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. The key difference is that idea of mediation versus direct access.

We tend to think of a mediator as a priest or clergy member who serves both as God's representative to us and as our representative to God, telling us what God wants us to hear and praying to God on our behalf. But many of the trappings of the institutional church—everything from the "church language" to the hymnals to the buildings themselves—can reinforce that sense of separation or distance between us and God.

So what does the Bible tell us about this difference between mediation, in the Old Testament church, and the direct access to God in the New Testament church?

In the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, God was literally, physically present with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They had a close, personal relationship; we read about them walking and talking together in the evenings. But when Adam and Eve, representing all of humanity, rebelled against God, God threw them out of Eden and withdrew God's presence. Direct access to God was lost.

Later in the Book of Genesis, God promised Abraham that, through his descendants, God would restore God's presence to humanity. Their relationship would be healed, and people would once again have direct access to God's presence. It wasn't until the second half of the Book of Exodus, however, that God did this—or *tried* to do this—after he rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

The Israelites, wandering around in the desert for forty years, found themselves at the foot of Mount Sinai. And then God revealed himself to them in the form of a huge storm cloud at the top of the mountain. For the first time since the Garden of Eden, God was actually physically present, right there in front of them, in the form of this cloud.

When Moses, the Israelites' leader, climbed up the mountain, God told him that he was inviting Israel back into a close relationship with him, with direct access to God's presence. The word *covenant* is used to describe this new relationship, this agreement between God and Israel. God promised Moses that if the Israelites would trust God and obey his commandments, they would become his kingdom of priests to represent God to the rest of the world. And when Moses went back down the mountain and told the Israelites this news, they eagerly agreed to this covenant: that in return for direct access to God, they would trust and obey him.

So God said to Moses, "Great! Go back down this mountain and tell them to get ready to meet me." And the Israelites did get ready to meet God, but at the last minute they changed their

minds and refused to go into God's presence. They were too afraid. They felt unworthy. They don't trust God enough to enter his presence, so they asked Moses to do it for them—and he did.

God was disappointed, but he still wanted to be in direct relationship with the people, so he said to Moses, “Okay, if Israel won't climb this mountain to be with me, then I'll come down the mountain and be with them.” And that's why he told Moses to build the Tabernacle, as a place where God's presence could, once again, be right there among his people—and this is where the idea of *church* first enters the picture.

Unfortunately, as Moses descended Mt. Sinai to tell the Israelites this good news, he saw that during his absence, the short-sighted, impatient Israelites had built a golden calf and worshipped it. They had *already* broken the first two commandments of the covenant: “You must have no other gods before me” and “Do not make an idol for yourself.”

Upset by Israel's actions, God wanted to drop the whole covenant idea, but Moses convinced God to stick with it. By the end of the Book of Exodus, the tabernacle—that big, fancy tent—was complete and God's presence did, indeed, come down from Mt. Sinai and enter the tabernacle. But when Moses tried to go inside, he couldn't. Why not?

Although the whole point had been to restore humanity to God's immediate, direct presence, the Israelites had broken their covenant with God when they worshipped the golden calf, so they were denied direct access to God as punishment. Instead, God designated Aaron and his sons to serve as priests, acting as middlemen between God and his people. The church of the Old Testament gradually developed a complicated, hierarchical infrastructure that was expensive to maintain and enforced a strict separation between God and humanity. It was a church of rituals, a church run by generation after generation of priests on behalf of the people, with multiple layers of authority and rules.

This church survives into the New Testament, housed in the Temple at Jerusalem. This is the model that many churches follow today, built around (1) the tabernacle or temple, replaced today by church buildings, (2) the priests, replaced today by clergy and staff, and (3) the financial offerings necessary to support this infrastructure.

But a new covenant between God and humanity would eventually be established through Jesus in the New Testament, when the gift of the Holy Spirit offers the direct access to God that people had not enjoyed since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden. This new covenant is foretold by the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 31:

“The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part

as the Master. This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand.”

Jesus initiated the new covenant at the Last Supper, when he said to his disciples, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” And every time we participate in the Lord’s Supper—or Communion, as we call it—we participate in the renewal of that New Testament covenant.

In this New Covenant between God and God's people, when asked what is the greatest of the Ten Commandments, Jesus said, "Now there are only two commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul . . . and love your neighbor as yourself." That's our part of the New Covenant, to love God and one another, much as in the Old Testament Covenant when the Israelites agreed to honor and obey God's commandments.

And what does God do in return, as God's part of the New Covenant? Jesus says in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth [who] lives inside you." The Holy Spirit lives inside every one of us sitting here this morning, and that same Spirit is the manifestation of our direct access to God.

So if God's previous covenant with the Israelites was directly linked to the structure and function of the Old Testament church, what about the New Covenant and the New Testament church? And to bring the question forward in time to 2024, what can we learn from the New Testament church about what God's church is becoming two thousand years later?

What does it mean for Centre Street Church today, in the year 2024 and looking forward, that we have direct access to the presence of God through the Holy Spirit? And going back to what Brandon Robertson wrote about how younger generations haven't turned their back on faith and spirituality, but rather on the heavily secularized institution of the church, how can Centre Street Church minister to people today, when the world is in such dire need of refuge and compassion?

Centre Street already displays some of the characteristics of a New Testament church. For example, we seek the Holy Spirit's power and direction, we regularly worship together, we pray individually and together, we take care of one another, and we look for ways to help people in need. But we're also clearly struggling in many ways, because the way forward is not yet clear to us.

Andy Root,<sup>3</sup> a theology professor at Luther Seminary, recently published a book titled *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation*. In this book, Root argues that most churches believe that their problem is that they don't have enough people, enough money, and enough relevance to the world around them. And of course, if you think that your problem is that you don't have enough of something, the answer is to get more of it.

But the reality is that it's exactly that "more, more, more" attitude that is causing people to leave the church. While churches are trying to "save" themselves by becoming bigger, better, wealthier, and more important, God is waiting for us to stop focusing on *having*—and instead focus on *being*. So how do we do that? Andy Root describes it as a three-step process:

(1) The first step in being, not having, is what Root calls a *humble death*. In our case, we face the fact that the Centre Street Congregation Church of the 1980s is gone, and it's not coming back. The world has moved on, and so must God's church. So we patiently wait for God's direction, humbly confessing that having *more* cannot save us, and that we need something more than we ourselves can provide.

(2) Step 2 in being, not having, is *confession*, according to Root. We confess that we don't want to wait—we want to accelerate and grow, to regain lost ground. And then to also confess that our impatience has more to do with our own anxiety than with our trust in God. Waiting for anything, including God, is hard.

(3) Finally, step 3 in being, not having, is gratitude. Not gratitude for what God will give us, but for the fact that God is with us.

In closing, I can do no better than to return to the words of Brandon Robertson, who offers us these words of encouragement and clarity:

"We are moving into a new age of human history where God's Spirit is doing fresh work in our world . . . May we be open and willing to allow God to do his refining work on us, understanding and embracing the pain of change, and looking forward with great hope and expectation for the days to come."

Here at Centre Street Church, the Holy Spirit offers us direct access to the presence of God, and God has plenty of work for his church to do in the 21st century. My fervent prayer for this church is that we wait and listen for God's voice, that we focus on who we are rather than on what we do or don't have, and that we embrace the ethos and spirit of the New Testament church.

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<sup>3</sup> Root, Andrew, and Blair D. Bertrand. *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation* (2023).