

WILL GOD DWELL INDEED WITH MAN ON EARTH?

JAMES F. GUSTAFSON

"But will God dwell indeed with man on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!"

This great text, put into the mouth of King Solomon, comes from a time in the history of the Jews when they had much to be thankful for. David, to be sure, had died. But he had succeeded in consolidating the nation and in expanding its geographical boundaries. The succession of Solomon to his throne had been relatively peaceful, at least by contrast with royal successions after that time. The Chronicler reports that it was a time when all things were going well. "Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father; and he prospered, and all Israel obeyed him." (I Chron. 29:23) The events of the times were reassuring; trumpeters and singers were praising and thanking God, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." What could be more fitting than to build a great temple in which to house the ark of the covenant, a place wherein God could dwell? It must have been a splendid house of God. And yet, in all the elation of its dedication comes the haunting question: "But will God indeed dwell with man on earth?" Can any construction of human hands, any movement of human communities, any individual person, any creedal statement, any rules of behavior, any institution, encase and encompass God? Can any achievement of man embody the source of goodness and steadfast love, of life and strength: God? "Behold," Solomon says, "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!"

The history of our religion is the history of building arks and temples in an effort to be able to say where it is that God dwells with man on earth. It is the history of human efforts to nail down the presence of steadfast love and goodness so that men can identify totally with them, can manipulate them, carress them, judge others according to them, indeed, exercise sovereign power over God's presence. It is the history of exaltedly and enthusiastically proclaiming, "Surely God is in *this* place," or pointing to events and saying "Lo, here," "Lo, there." It is the history of human striving for absolute certitude about the

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presence of God by trapping him, netting him, packaging him, imprisoning him.

We are alert to the signs of this history all around us, in the past and in the present. We remember that the Hebrew people, in the anxieties and uncertainties of what seemed to be endless wanderings in the Sinai desert, were led to melt down their golden jewelry in order to build a calf; and we remember that Moses returned from a signal moment of knowing God's presence on the mountain to cry out against this idolatry. God could not be encased in a calf; he spoke to men through this law. We remember that the Hebrew people built an ark of the covenant which had all the aura of the sacred mysteries, and around which developed both reverence and taboos; and we remember that such a religious symbol with all of its presumed magical powers could not preserve the moral, spiritual, and political health of the people. We remember that codes of the Torah, of the law, were formulated, regulating both moral and ritual behavior; and we remember that prophets arose to proclaim that feast and sacrifices exercised in accordance with the law were a stench to the nostrils of God. For, after all, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

We remember the efforts of the Christian community, in the ancient past, and in its present, to fix and limit once and for all the decisive presence of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. There was to be only one access to God; no man could come to the Father except through Jesus Christ his Son. There was to be correct belief about the meaning of God's presence; and that meaning was to be decided by Synods which sought to fix for all time, in the language and thought forms of a particular time, what the relation was between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. And yet, we remember that the gospel writers seem always to have Jesus pointing beyond himself. It is not Jesus, but our Father who is in heaven who gives good things to those who ask him. (Matt. 7:7-11) And even the gospel writer who has Jesus say, "I and the Father are One," remembers also to have Jesus say, "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing." (John 5:19)

We remember the horrendous wars that were fought in the name of creedal orthodoxy, the persecutions of Jews in the name of religious truth, the death of Servetus for heresy in Calvin's Geneva, the banishment of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchison from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the threats of heresy against Horace Bushnell of Hartford in the 19th Century; the ecclesiastical trials of Biblical scholars that took place in the lifetime of some present here, the suppression of the writings of Teilhard de Chardin in the Catholic "Holy Office" and the

silencing of Father Courtney Murray, the fanaticism of fundamentalists Ian Paisley and Carl McIntire, the recent opposition to a replacement of the Seventeenth Century Westminster Confession in our sister denomination, the United Presbyterian Church. And we remember that all of this was done in the name of certitude: a certitude that God indeed dwelt with men on earth, but only in *this* creed, or in *that* form of religious experience, only in the words of Scripture interpreted in *one* way, or in *one* historical family of Christian people.

We respond in smiling bemusement, or in righteous indignation, or in painful suffering to the events taking place in Rome where the great Archbishop Cardinal Suenens of Belgium, with loyalty and deference, is seeking to make the point that God is more likely to dwell on earth in the college of bishops than in an absolute monarch, the Pope. But we also remember that a servant of the same Roman Catholic church, Karl Rahner has also said that there are servants of God in the world who do not know and acknowledge him, but who by God's infinite goodness are "anonymous Christians." God is not confined in the Roman Church, nor indeed, in the Christian tradition.

We remember that our fathers in the faith a hundred years ago were sometimes saying that virtue and prosperity were the warp and woof of the Christian life, and that God was surely present in rewarding the rich and the powerful who piously called upon his name. And we remember that prophets like Walter Rauschenbusch arose in their midst to say that the Kingdom of God is not the kingdom of an economic system that exploits the poor, that makes the immigrants suffer in the slums of the East Side of New York City, that puts small children into coal mines and factories for ten and twelve hours a day.

We remember in our own time that some were saying that a crusading spirit against communism was a sure mark of the presence of God's righteousness, for the powers of evil had taken the personified form of a new devil who was tyranizing the nations. But we have come to see that God is not the present defender of any given historical establishment, and that he might well be working for justice through the rebellious impulses of the down-trodden and the oppressed, the poor and the black both at home and abroad.

We remember that in the formation of our United Church of Christ there were those who in effect cried out that God's voice could be heard only through a local congregation of people, and that any compromise of this belief was reason enough not to join with our fellow Christians in the formation of the new denomination. And we remember others who had so entwined their identities as ethnic groups with a sense of the living presence of God that they found it difficult to join

their social history with the histories of others to seek a new presence of God.

We remember the cries of our peers and the young, that we live and act as though God's dwelling on earth with men depended upon a high rate of return on the investments of our endowment funds in the Boards of Homeland and World Ministries, or as if he dwells in the life of a congregation only if it sings to organ accompaniment and in the harmonies, rhythms, and words of a past era. Or, as if he can dwell on earth only if there is successful fruition of the Consultation on Church Union to bring greater institutional unity to the diverse modes of Protestantism in America. Or, as if he will continue to dwell on earth more securely if we budget for new carpets in the sanctuaries rather than for support to the demands and requests of the black, the Spanish Americans and the other poor of the land.

"Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built."

But, we must remind ourselves, not only the houses which we *have* built, but also the houses we *are now* building! We are as likely to seek to box God in our new packages as were all those who have built arks and temples in the past. If the steadfast love and goodness of God escapes the imprisonment of the creeds and the institutions, the social histories and the laws of our forefathers, does it not also escape our nets, our traps, our pre-occupations?

Will not the houses we are building for God to dwell in also fail to contain him? Does God dwell in sensitivity training, or urban development, in social revolution or guaranteed annual incomes, in a theology of secularity or a theology of hope? In frantically changing ecclesiastical, theological, liturgical, and moral reforming crusades?

There are two persistent and treacherous problems in building houses to contain God, the power of love and life. One is *idolatry*; we become so absolutely identified with the house that is built that we forget the one it is built to house, we become so certain of the historical identity of the presence of God's Spirit and activity that we forget that anything historical, human, finite, can only point to the glory, majesty, boundless love, and power of God, whom it is meant to serve. The second problem is *shallowness*; all the manipulation of psychological gimmicks, economic and technical devices, genetic engineering and political enthusiasms can fail to meet the deepest needs of the human spirit for joy, peace, and mercy, and for confidence, hope, and love.

But there are also two persistent and treacherous problems if we *do not* build houses in which God can dwell on earth. One is *sloth*; we lazily assume that God's work will be done without our finding the forms of church life and mission in and through which God can work

to meet the anguish and the suffering, the oppression and the injustice of the miserable time in history in which we have been called to live and to work. The other problem is *rootlessness*: we become carried away with every sentiment and emotion that is evoked by the persons and events around us; we become tasters of every new wine that is placed before us; we flit like honey bees from the nectar of the theology of the laity, to that of the theology of secularity, from the nectar of the theology of the death of God, to that of the theology of celebration. And there is no rooting and grounding (Eph. 3:17) to nourish our spirits and to direct our movements in the speedily shifting winds of this awesome and exciting time.

Idolatry: Is it any less a mistake to say that "God is a pregnant woman on a street corner" as did an experimental liturgy used at General Synod in Chicago than it was to say "God is a golden calf in Sinai?" Is it any less idolatrous to be certain that the fulfillment of the human spirit will come from sensitivity training than it is to assume that it will come from Billy Graham's evangelistic crusade, or from obeying the Pope's dictum that every act of sexual intercourse must be open to the generation of new life? No! We must learn in word and in deed to remember that if heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain the infinite power of love, neither can our words, our techniques, our gimmicks.

Sloth: Are we any better off as the people of God for lazily saying that hard thinking about the Christian faith, and efforts to formulate it meaningfully for our time are fruitless, than the 17th Century Puritan divines were in trying to fix the truth about God in the Westminster Confession? Would we be any more true to our calling in our time by failing to shape the earthen vessels through which the treasures of God's justice and love, God's mercy and hope can be poured out to all men of our time than were the pious in other times who sat on their hands and left everything to God? No! We must labor with earnestness and conviction to find the presently effective theological formulations, programs of mission, means of change, and institutionalizations of church life, that are faithful witness as to God's love and power, and faithful instruments of his service.

Rootlessness: Can a Boeing 747 be steered without a rudder, or a missile without a guidance system any more than a sailboat on the Sea of Galilee; or than a refugee people in a desert thousands of years ago could find their way without the stars? Can we be moved and governed in all our creative experimentation, our many activities and shapes of ministry and mission, without drawing strength and insight from the faith and thought of others who have sought in their times and places to be faithful servants of the Most High? No! We must be

oriented and nourished by study and faith, by prayer and meditation, if our efforts are not to wither like the autumn leaves, and blow in every direction at the mercy of the winds.

But it is *shallowness* that concerns me most deeply. It is that the houses we build for God to dwell in do not point beyond themselves to the profoundest dimensions of life and power, to the sources of healing and comfort, of happiness and well-being we are called to know and to serve. The depth of my concern is not a fear of heresy, nor a nostalgic sense of loss in the crumbling of institutions and ways of life to which I am sentimentally attached. It is rather that the *deepest* longings of the human spirit cannot be met by new arks of the covenant, by the bricks and mortar of ecclesiastical gimmicks, by the support of radical social change. The arks and the temples of new techniques of education, of better housing, of black power, of pastoral counselling, of guaranteed medical care and income, of highway safety on the city streets *must* be built. There can be no mistake about that!

But the story of man is more complex. The oppressed long for justice, and justice is better than oppression. But those who have justice still long for love, for joy, for blessedness, for hope, for mercy, for fulfillment of the human spirit. The poverty-stricken long for economic security, and economic security is better than poverty. But the economically secure still long for peace of soul, for meaning and value that gives coherence and richness to their lives. The powerless long for the right of self-determination, and the power of self-determination is better than being the pawn of the powerful who decide what is in the interests of others. But those who have power long for purpose and direction, and cry out for a vision of human community that will bring in the gifts of the spirit. The fearful long for freedom from anxiety, and freedom from anxiety is better than crippling fear. But the free continue to be anxious, and grope for some faith, some belief, some foundation in which to rest their souls. Those in bondage to restrictive moral codes long for liberty, and liberty is better than bondage. But the morally liberated flounder in search for a way of life that preserves their dignity and rights and also fulfills their responsibilities to their near and distant neighbors. If they can say with St. Paul, "All things are lawful," they also say with St. Paul, "but not all things are helpful." (I Cor. 10:23) They long for a direction, for horizons in moral experience, for some unifying or integrating goal that draws life into goodness and rightness.

Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less the houses we build! There is a restlessness of the human

spirit that reaches beyond the houses we build for the presence of the Spirit of God, which even the heavens cannot contain.

Bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, words of Scripture, fellowship with one another in the church; none of these can contain God's presence any more than Solomon's temple could, or any of the programs we develop can. They are for us a dwelling place on earth for God's Spirit and Presence only as they point beyond themselves to the wideness of God's mercy; to the Love Divine, all loves excelling; to the boundless power that can bring newness of life and hope and peace and joy. They become for us a place of God's presence only as we open our spirits and hearts to the horizon beyond their visibility and audibility, their taste and their form, to the horizon beyond our church business and our mission programs, our coffee hours and our church suppers; to the horizon beyond our dedication to justice and to the end of war, beyond the pregnant woman in need and beyond black power. Every aspect of church life can be shallow, sterile, without vivifying force and majesty. We participate in the life of the church at the invitation of a host who bids us to open our spirits to his Divine Presence which heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain, much less the houses we build for it. It is in that presence and power whom we call God that we live; it is that presence to whose service we dedicate the work of our church, and our everyday life.

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."
(Eph. 3:20-21)

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