

**Meadowhead Christian Fellowship
Sunday 14th March, 2021**

Handout: The Tabernacle and the Christian

From Chapter 25 onwards, much of the book of Exodus is about the tabernacle, including instructions for building it (chapters 25-31) followed by its actual construction (chapters 32 to 41). So, it was clearly an important matter for the people of Israel whose worshipped was centered around the tabernacle (and later the Temple). But it can be hard-going for modern Christians, because we find it hard to relate to practices which are different from anything we know or can experience today. So it's easy to bypass the parts of the Old Testament which deal with the tabernacle and how God was worshipped. But there are great truths in here, which God will reveal to us, as we seek his face.

What on earth was the tabernacle?

The tabernacle (tent or dwelling place) was a rectangular structure which was 150 feet by 75 feet. That is similar in size to an Olympic swimming pool (and the one at Pond's Forge, Sheffield).

The tabernacle had three main sections (see also the images on pages 5-7 of this handout).

A Courtyard – where the people could bring their sacrifices and mingle with the priests.

The Holy Place – this contained a lampstand, a table with bread and an altar of incense. Priests were the only people who were allowed into the Holy Place - their duties included keeping the lamps burning, offering incense on the altar and renewing the bread.

The Most Holy Place – an inner room which contained the ark of the covenant. Only the High Priest could enter this room, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. For more details see Leviticus 23:26-32. The Ark was a gold-covered wooden chest with lid cover described Exodus 25:10-22

What did it mean to the people of Israel?

1. The tabernacle was a piece of heaven on earth – a place of connection between the LORD and his people. God was especially present in the tabernacle. It was built so that the God who saved them could live among them. Exodus 25.8 records God saying “let them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.”

2. It had to be built and used exactly according to God's directions. So, their religion was from the top down not man-made. The people of Israel are repeatedly told to build the tabernacle (and all that went into it) following the instructions given to them by God. For example:

Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you. [Exodus 25:9]

3. Central to God's revelation of himself to the people of Israel was his holiness. The LORD was a "consuming fire" and therefore sinful human beings risked getting burned unless they had a priest to act as go-between and had offered an acceptable sacrifice. Some Christians regard this as outdated and as having no relevance whatsoever to Christianity, but Jesus himself talked about fulfilling the Old Testament, rather than abolishing it. So, there is plenty for us to learn from the books such as Exodus – even though (and for good reason) we worship God in a very different way.

Where is God especially present today – what does the New Testament have to say about this?

1. Some Christian traditions have borrowed the language of the Old Testament and applied it to church buildings, furniture and those who work in them – so you can find in some modern church situations "tabernacles", "altars", "priests" "robes" etc. However, there is nothing in the New Testament which encourages us to think of church buildings as being as being, in any sense, equivalent to the Hebrew tabernacle (or Temple).
2. *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14).*

In this famous verse, John describes Jesus Christ using language which recalls the tabernacle, both when he describes the Word dwelling among us and when he refers to seeing the glory of God.

3. The book of Hebrews (chapter 9 in particular) sheds further light on the tabernacle, by explaining that the tabernacle which was the centre of Jewish worship was actually a copy of the original which is in heaven. This helps to explain why it had to be built following quite definite instructions. Hebrews tells us that Jesus entered the real tabernacle in heaven in order to present the sacrifice of his own blood. This was the

perfect sacrifice which dealt with sin once and for all, and so there is no need for it to be repeated.

²⁴ For Christ did not enter into a holy place made with human hands, which was only a copy of the true one in heaven. He entered into heaven itself to appear now before God on our behalf. ²⁵ And he did not enter heaven to offer himself again and again, like the high priest here on earth who enters the Most Holy Place year after year with the blood of an animal. ²⁶ If that had been necessary, Christ would have had to die again and again, ever since the world began. But now, once for all time, he has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by his own death as a sacrifice.

4. Paul says that believers are, in effect, tabernacles of God on earth, because of the Spirit of the Living God in us. See, for example, Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. This is hugely important and radical – with implications for how we relate to ourselves and to fellow Christians. Indeed the whole teaching on the New Testament that believers are “in Christ” or that Christ is in us, is incredibly relevant to understanding of the tabernacle today. If God is living in us, then we are, in a very real sense, living, breathing tabernacles of the Living God.

C S Lewis helps us grasp this huge truth:

And let me make it quite clear that when Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being “in Christ” or Christ being “in them”, this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts – that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body¹.

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he [or she] is your Christian neighbour he [or she] is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ is truly hidden².

¹ From *Mere Christianity* by C S Lewis

² the closing lines of a famous sermon preached by C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”, 8 June 1942 in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford.

5. Most of the Christians who have ever lived have believed that Christ is present when we baptise someone and when we take break bread and wine together. There have been different opinions – often strongly held – about how God does this. But the viewpoint that the sacraments are just an audio-visual aid to help us remember certain truths (in other words, there is nothing else “going on”) does not sit easily with the language of the New Testament. And even many disagreed with Roman Catholic teaching and broke away (the Reformation) the most influential Reformers continued to insist that the sacraments were more than visual aids. For example, in 1560 John Knox wrote:

“(we disagree completely with those who teach that the sacraments are) nothing else but naked and bare signs. No we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which are sins are covered and remitted, and also that in the Supper rightly used, Christ Jesus is so joined with us that he becomes the very nourishment and food for our souls.”

**Christopher Simpson
Meadowhead Christian Fellowship
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This is a picture of a life-sized replica of the tabernacle in the desert in Israel. You can see the open Courtyard with its altar and the covered section which contains the Holy Place, and then, further in, the Most Holy Place.

An artist's impression of the Ark of Covenant – a wooden box overlaid with gold which a lid (known as the mercy seat) with two figures of cherubim above it. The glory of the Lord was over the mercy seat – not inside the Ark itself.



