

# *The Felt Presence of God*

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Every successful business has a distinguishing symbol by which it is quickly identified in the public's mind. With some, it is a quickly recognizable logo; with others, it is a distinguishable physical trademark, such as the McDonald's Golden Arches. Without diminishing a great spiritual reality, but only by way a parallel, it's also true that God's people have a distinguishing mark. That mark is the very presence of God Himself. Moses recognized this when he said in his prayer to God concerning Israel; *"If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here ... Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people may, be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?"* (Exodus 33:15-16). Moses understood that the presence of God is what sets His people apart. This presence is often real and sensible, something that the people of God are conscious and aware of as a reality in their midst. This marked the early Church. Luke's words in describing it were, *"everyone kept feeling a sense of awe."* (Acts 2:43). Luke described God's presence as real and felt, something that produced a feeling of awe. The idea of a sensible, distinguishable presence of God is often ridiculed. It's viewed as a mystical tendency that reflects a spiritual immaturity and imbalance. To some the Spirit of God works in and through ordained means such as; preaching, prayer, and the Word, but He always works in a secret and gradual way so that His presence isn't clearly evident and distinguished from our own minds. Jonathan Edwards pointed out this tendency to deny or ridicule the sensible, felt presence of God. He said,

*"How great has the doctrine of the inward experience or sensible perceiving of the immediate power and operation of the Spirit of God been reproached and ridiculed by many ... They say the manner of the Spirit of God is to cooperate in a silent, secret and indiscernible way with the use of means and our own endeavors, so that there is no distinguishing by sense, between the influences of the Spirit of God and the natural operations of the faculties of our minds."*<sup>1</sup>

We believe the Bible teaches the reality of a sensible presence of God in and amongst His people. This is true both in the individual devotional life and in corporate, public worship. I say often because God's presence is true, even if it isn't at times as clear and evident. While it is not right to expect the Holy Spirit to operate apart from specific means, such as the Word of God and preaching, it is right and biblical to expect the Spirit to often operate beyond these means. In other words, God desires to bless His people with a sudden sensible, felt experience of His presence through the Word of God, whether read or preached, or sung in praise and worship.

The reality of God's supernatural presence is constantly affirmed in scripture. To begin with, it is seen in the supernatural nature of salvation and conversion. Salvation is

described as a *"making alive"*, a *"new creation"*, or a *"begotten again"*. (Ephesians 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 3:3, 5). In other words, a supernatural power external from ourselves acted upon us and made us new. In addition, the effects of preaching are described as supernatural and sensible. Paul, when speaking of his preaching said, *"And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."* (1 Corinthians 2:4, 5).

In other words, God so acted that hearers knew that God was there. In their experience, God Himself had spoken directly to them. The Spirit did indeed use the means of preaching and the Word, but he also went beyond the means to an experiential felt demonstration of the presence and power of God. Would not a supernatural power outside of us that acts upon us *"seem"* to have acted upon us? In fact, should not such a power be felt and experienced as such? Edwards said it this way,

*"But, if there is indeed a power entirely different from and beyond our power, or the power of means ... then certainly it is in no wise unreasonable to suppose that this effect should very frequently be produced ... as to make it very manifest and sensible that it is so ... why is it unreasonable to suppose it should seem to be so, to them who are the subjects of it? If persons tell of effects that seem to them not to be from the natural power or operation of their minds, but from the supernatural powers of some other agent, should it at once be looked upon as a sure evidence of their being under a delusion because things seem to them to be as they are?"*<sup>2</sup>

The fact that this is often ridiculed and belittled is again referred to when Edwards says,

*"They declare that what they are conscious of seems to them evidently not to be from themselves but from the mighty power of the Spirit of God, and others condemn them, and determine that what they experience is not from the Spirit of God, but themselves or from the devil. Thus unreasonably are multitudes treated as this day by their neighbors."*<sup>3</sup>

Along these lines also, is the fact that God's desire is to make Himself known in a conspicuous way. He doesn't act in such a way as to hide Himself. He acts and intervenes so that His people know it was Him Who acted on their behalf. This is seen in His deliverance of Israel from Egypt and in the account of Gideon. He stripped Gideon's army from 32,000 to just 300 lest, in God's words, *"Israel became boastful saying, 'my own power has delivered me.'"* (Judges 7:2)

It must be recognized that not all external actings upon believers are from God. Satan often works through impressions that don't originate in our minds. This is not an appeal for open-ended, blind acceptance of every experience. The Word of God must be the source and the means of such experience. However, having said that, a felt, sensible experience of God's presence is a reality clearly affirmed in Scripture. This reality is not to be the object of reproach. It is the birthright and heritage of the church. It is the

Church's birthright, both in preaching and corporate praise. May we seek it, for in so doing we seek the Lord Himself.

We have a God Who desires to intervene on behalf of His people. We have a God Who acts to make His presence known among His people. He acts to comfort, guide, instruct, deliver, or to discipline and judge. When He acts, He often, (though not always), acts so as to make His presence sensible and known. The church must not overreact to excesses and extremes so as to deny the very reality of the felt presence of our God. Abuses must be guarded against, and fabricated, self-induced substitutes must be rejected, but the supernaturally given sense of God's presence must be contended for, charges of imbalance or immaturity to the contrary. How much God's people, whether as His individual sheep or together as His corporate flock, need the sense of His presence through the Spirit and the Word. This we long for, and for this we will contend.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Works, Volume I, p. 248

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Works, Volume I, p. 248

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Works, Volume I, p. 248