INTRODUCTION

Before I came back from Florida, I was engaged in a trans-local teaching ministry which meant that most months I was gone two or three weekends a month. I loved visiting fellowships and teaching the Word of God. The hardest part, of course, was being away from Shelly and the kids. I came to appreciate cell phones and emails and all the modern conveniences that we have that allow us to stay connected to the ones we love. But nothing, nothing compared to that moment each week when Shelly pulled up to the airport gate and I got into the car with her. (Sometimes she even brought our puppy).

There is something about “presence” that is irreplaceable. Technology helps, but nothing compares with being in the presence of the one you love. There is a parallel in this to the Christian life now in this world. Ultimately, you might say that living the Christian life now in this world is like living with cell phones, email, and Facebook. Our Lover Jesus has left us physically and we are presently separated from Him. One day, He will return to get us and we will be with Him forever. Think about it; we will literally “see” him on that day (two seconds of staring in his face and we will all say “it’s all been worth it”). But actually the analogy is somewhat flawed in that even before returning to his Church physically, Jesus is now “with” us in a very tangible way.

He told us that in apparently this last statement He made to these men before they began their earthly ministry (“behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”). If you look at what they just heard you would know how important these parting words were. He had just said the most frightening words they ever heard from his lips when he told them, “Little children; yet a little while I am with you” (John 13:33). They could not bear those words. They had come to love him and were deeply attached to Him. They couldn’t imagine life without Him. Yet He clearly told them that He was leaving. I can’t imagine what they felt like. No doubt, the best word to describe it is abandonment. Maybe another word for it is orphaned.

But he then said something on the heels of his announcement that is nothing short of amazing. “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth; it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” Earlier, He described him as “another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (John 16:7). Then he summarized all of this by telling them, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:8). I used to think that was a second coming verse but I no longer think this is the case.

After introducing them to the ministry of the Spirit, he wanted them to know that it was actually he himself that was returning to them. Our text this morning essentially says the same thing. First, the word
behold means to “look, to take notice of, to remember.” He is saying that this is something He didn’t want them to forget but keep in the forefront of their minds.

Secondly, the pronoun I included in the verse is very emphatic as if to say, “I, even I myself, am with you” I am not sending a facsimile of me but I myself am coming. Thirdly, He promises to be with us throughout the entirety of this age. There were two ages that the New Testament speaks of: this present age and the age to come. So throughout the entirety of what is called the Church Age, the Church has the assurance of fellowship with her Lord.

We are in a series entitled, “A Kingdom Culture.” We are looking at the culture that emerges wherever the Gospel of the kingdom is preached and believed. For the last three weeks, we have been parked at the Great Commission. We saw that it contains three things:

(1) A declaration to be believed (all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me). We saw there that he sends us after accomplishing a perfect work and receiving ultimate authority.

(2) A commission to be obeyed (go therefore and make disciples). We saw that this commission was a specific call to multiply themselves in others. But those two things are dependent on the last one:

(3) A promise to be embraced (“behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”). I don’t think this last promise is an addendum or a side note but the reason the disciples would be able to accomplish this incredible mission which God gave them. Think about it: eleven men stood on the mountain and heard Jesus Christ commission them to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (and start in Jerusalem where they just killed me). They had no resources, no money, no buildings, no PR people, no education, no plan for mass evangelism.

What assurance did he give them that they would be successful? What equipment and resources did he promise them that they could do this? Only one thing mattered and one thing alone—He would be with them! That’s the only thing He told these men. The same Christ that was with them in the beginning was still with them and would therefore assure them of their success. These men were Jews and shouldn’t have been surprised by this announcement. They would have remembered how Moses protested to God that he was a “nobody” when God called him to confront Pharaoh (“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”) Remember God’s simple response? “I will be with you.” Moses, all you need to know is that I am with you and therefore you will be successful. It’s kind of humbling. He doesn’t tell Moses that he can do it because he is talented or well-spoken or articulate or intelligent (it has nothing to do with Moses).

OMNI-PRESENCE VS. SPECIAL PRESENCE

What exactly does Jesus mean when He tells them that He will be “with” them? “Isn’t God with everyone in that He completely fills heaven and earth at all times?”

This is, of course, the doctrine of God’s omnipresence (that God is present at all times with all people). It is what David refers to when He says:
If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

Psalm 139: 8-10

Jesus could mean nothing more than that, that God is with everyone at all times and would therefore be with them. But that presents a problem. Why would he tell them that he was with them if in fact, He was with everyone? No; that is not what Jesus meant. His announcement that He would be with them to the end of the age is not just a reference to his omnipresence, but to the fact that he was giving his presence to them in a very definite and special way.

It is what Joseph experienced when he was at Potiphar’s house. It says that “the Lord was with Joseph and he became a successful man.” Later, when Potiphar threw Joseph in prison it says “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” By the way, Joseph demonstrates that God can be with a person even while difficulties and trials are their lot. This is what Jesus was promising his disciples and us as well.

The basic ministry of the Spirit in the new covenant is to mediate Christ’s presence to the Church in such a way that three things are constantly happening: personal fellowship with Jesus, personal transformation of character into the likeness of Jesus, and finally, personal empowerment to carry on the ministry of Jesus.

FELLOWSHIP, CHARACTER, AND MISSION

First, there is personal fellowship with Jesus

No one in this room has ever seen Jesus. Nevertheless, we presently love Him. How is that possible? Because Jesus himself drew us and called us into real, fellowship with Himself (“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ” 1 Cor. 1:9). Just think. I am now in personal fellowship with the Jesus of history, the Jesus of the Gospels, who walked and talked and performed miracles. I know Him! I don’t know Him perfectly and for that I will have to await his appearing, but I can truly say I now know Him. In fact, I can say He is more real to me than my best friend or my spouse. He walked and talked with men and women in Galilee and He is now walking and talking with you and I in Knoxville in 2014.

And because we love Him, we are willing to follow Him, even if it means laying down our lives. J.I. Packer says that, “the Spirit presents the living Lord Jesus to us as Maker and Friend so that we may choose the part of sacrificial response to his love and call.” The heart cry of everyone who is in fellowship with Him is the cry of Paul, “Oh, that I may know Him.” The Weymouth translation of Matt. 28:20 is, “Remember, I am with you always, day by day, until the Close of the Age.”

I like that fact that this version captures the practical effect of this promise: day by day He promises me his presence, which means my fellowship with Him does not ever have to be interrupted. It’s not just on the Lord’s Day when I gather with hundreds of others to worship Him and hear the Gospel that I fellowship with Him (though his presence is given to us corporately in a special way). But each of my days, whether hard or easy, He is with me and therefore I can have constant fellowship with Him. Sometimes we are
surprised by the fact that He is with us and calling us to fellowship even while walking in darkness. The Psalmist alluded to this when he said, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” I am sure that Joseph went through many days when he wondered, “God, how is that you are with me, yet you have not delivered me from this situation?” But right there in the prison he had the assurance that God was with Him.

Second, Jesus promised to be with us in transforming our character into his own likeness. There is a simple reality: No one can fellowship with Jesus and remain the same. That’s why the New Testament makes it very clear what to look for when it comes to evidence that Jesus is with a person. Humility, love, meekness, patience, faithfulness, goodness, kindness. As I fellowship with Jesus, I am led to give myself to him in love and sacrifice so that I begin to bear fruit and my life becomes a burnt offering. In Revelation 14 John sees the Lamb standing on Mount Zion and with him 144,000 which are a picture of the Church. They have been redeemed by the Lamb and now have become like the Lamb.

It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

Rev. 14:1-5

Third, Jesus is with us to empower us to carry out his mission in the earth.

This promise that He is with us to the end of the age has special reference to the accomplishment of their mission. Can I remind you all of something we must not forget. These men had all denied Him some weeks before and ran for their lives. They were fearful, timid men who all purposed to follow the Lord to the end, but found out that human resolve alone will not cut it. They needed the Lord to be with them as a God of empowerment supplying them with supernatural enablement. In the power of the Spirit, these men exhibited the same boldness that Jesus did. In fact, when the religious leaders confronted the apostles and told them not to speak anymore in Jesus name the apostles exhibited such boldness that it says the authorities recognized that they had been with Jesus.

This is the funniest story in the entire Bible. The authorities killed Jesus and now there are twelve of Him! This is what Jesus had said to them (in Luke’s account): “Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” The Greek word for power here and 119 times in the New Testament is the powerful word “dunamis”. It is translated by the English words strength, power, or ability. It is where we derive our English words dynamite, dynamo, dynamic. Jesus gave to his Church his power so that the Church can carry on his work. “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

This power is supernatural in origin and though God uses our natural abilities and gifts, his dynamic power is the key to successful mission. Believers in the early church were expected to know this power personally. Paul prays for believers that they may be “strengthened with power through His Spirit in their inner being”. One area that God allows the Church to experience his power is in the area of “signs and wonders”.

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God enables the Church to carry on the ministry of Jesus through the operation of signs and wonders and displays of God’s power as He Himself did. In Mark’s account of the Great Commission special emphasis is laid on the signs that Jesus promised would follow those who believe. God still glorifies his Son by healing the sick.

Last year I was invited to visit a couple in Johnson City; she is a believer, her husband is Jewish. He had been recently diagnosed with terminal cancer having several tumors. I prayed for him and have visited and prayed with him on other occasions. His wife has prayed and her fellowship has prayed. Recently, he returned to his doctors who told him, “We have no explanation for this but you no longer have any tumors; there is no indication of cancer.” He has been completely healed. God has demonstrated his power and presence to reveal himself to this man, Terry. Keep Terry in your prayers that he would be open to hear the gospel and know Jesus not only as a miraculous healer but as his marvelous savior.

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*The questions below are provided by Ed Rosen to use during your House Church group discussions.*

1. Neil made three points out of Matthew 18:16-20 that became the titles of the last three sermons that he preached. The first was “A Great Declaration To Be Believed” based on verse18. Can you name the other two and the verse(s) that they were based on?
2. In what way are points 1 & 2 dependent on point 3?
3. What assurance are we given in verse 20b that the Great Commission will be successfully carried out?
4. Neil said, “The basic ministry of the Spirit in the new covenant is to mediate Christ’s presence to the church in such a way that three things are constantly happening, (1) Personal Fellowship with Jesus, (2) Personal Transformation into the Character of Jesus, and (3) Personal Empowerment to Carry out the Ministry of Jesus.”
5. Concerning Personal Fellowship with Jesus:
   a. Why is it to our advantage that the Lord Jesus went away?
   b. How does the Holy Spirit take the place of Jesus in your life?
   c. In what way is Jesus presence with us?
   d. Do you have a sense of the presence of the Lord in your life? Explain.
6. Concerning Personal Transformation into the Character of Jesus:
   a. What are the various ways or means by which we are transformed into the character of Jesus?
   b. If you were to grade yourself concerning godly character what grade would you give yourself?
   c. If your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ were to grade you what do you think your grade would be?
7. Concerning Personal Empowerment to Carry out the Ministry of Jesus:
   a. Why is the empowerment of the Holy Spirit necessary to carry out the ministry of Jesus?
   b. What is your understanding of the gifts of the Spirit?
   c. Is operating in the gifts of the Spirit something that is important to you?
   d. Do you regularly pray to be used by God?