

Temple and Tabernacle: Faith and Pilgrimage

Dr. Justo L. González

Dr. Catherine G. González



A Bible study on Acts 7: 44-47

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Acts 7:44-47

Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, who found favor with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

Justo: We have been discussing the Book of Acts. It is usually called “Acts of the Apostles” rather than Acts of the Spirit.”

It is really a book about the Spirit leading people in pilgrimage: Pentecost; the sharing of goods; structural readjustments; Samaria; the Ethiopian eunuch; Cornelius; Paul going to Damascus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Rome.

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This is exemplified in Stephen’s speech.

Our ancestors had the tent of witness in the wilderness, even as the One who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God thrust out before them. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked leave to found a habitation for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for God. Yet the Most High does not dwell in the houses made with hands.

This is one of the reasons why his listeners do not like what Stephen has to say. They wish to remain settled. They want final answers. Indeed, they have the final answer. To be told that the

answers that one has, comfortable as they seem, may be a betrayal of one's very nature is not a very happy experience. To be told, when one is comfortably settled, that it is time to remember the pilgrim God who goes before a people in pilgrimage, and to follow that God, is not an easy thing. And so, Stephen is stoned.

Catherine: We need to be careful how we hear this. It is not a matter that there is a Temple tradition that is wrong and a tent tradition that is right. Both can be misused—the Temple to avoid the continuing pilgrimage—as Stephen points out—and the tent to avoid any social and political engagement in our present situation. We cannot say—without doing great damage to our understanding of Scripture—that Israel was totally in error to build a Temple—that they had misunderstood God at that point. There is a whole strand of New-Testament use of the Temple tradition—to say that God had accustomed the people to the geographic “locatability” of God (not denying the universal presence of God)—in the Temple, and that the Incarnation itself is a continuation of the Temple tradition. The Book of Hebrews includes this. Mark 12: 58 does too (“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’”) and John 2:19 (Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”) If the Temple is destroyed, Jesus will raise up a new one in three days. In a sense, Jesus is the new Temple, destroyed but raised up in three days.

It needs to be mentioned in passing that this debate has not ended in the Christian church, for some of our ecumenical dialogue and debate has to do with the significance of place for

worship. Some of us come from traditions that maintain the tent motif, and dislike church buildings that seem to create “holy space” in any way. Others of us find great help, comfort, and strength in a place set aside for worship—a sacred space that aids in our worship. Some traditions—like my own—are divided between the Puritan, iconoclastic wing and the more “high church” branch that sees the value of such a set-aside place. We cannot short-circuit the discussion either in Scripture or in our contemporary church life without doing damage to the Word of God.

At the same time, Stephen’s speech is an accurate warning against those who would use the Temple tradition to avoid the constant insecurity and faithfulness that being God’s pilgrim people always demands.

Pilgrimage is not an easy matter, however. It has its high points and its long stretches of trudging on. The Book of Acts is quite realistic about this. In fact, some of the “high points” may have their own difficulties.

In this regard, there is another passage I would bring to your attention. To me it seems extremely appropriate for the end of a long and tiring—although hopefully also exhilarating—conference. It is from the 20th chapter of Acts. Paul has come to Troas for a very brief stay. The faithful there are very glad to see him—and they gather for what might be called a conference—their own “ecumenical moment.” They gather—young and old—in an upper

room—three stories up—for a meal or two and to hear Paul speak to them. There are a lot of people—and a lot of lights that make the room even warmer—and a long, long speech. Hear the words of Acts 20:7-12.

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

If some speakers on such occasions go on for a long time, they evidently have biblical warrant for it, but they would do well to block the windows or else be sure of their restorative powers!

On the other hand, if some of us get very sleepy when the talking goes on and on, we, too, have the assurance that such a happening occurred even when Paul preached in that supposedly model early church. Meetings are human occasions even when the Spirit is present! Our tiredness is to be expected. It may well be a prelude for renewed life and vigor. In one sense we ought to be thankful that there are long stretches of drudgery and monotony in our pilgrimage, for at least we don't run the danger of falling out of a window then.

Justo: When Paul takes his leave from these people, that is not the end of the story. Indeed, the book of Acts does not end. It simply quits. If you look at the end of chapter 28, the last chapter of Acts, it almost gives you the impression that something is missing. Here, for all those

chapters we have been following the ministry of Paul. Now he is at a crucial moment. He is in Rome, awaiting trial in front of Caesar. And the book ends. It is almost like one of those Batman episodes on television

Several explanations have been offered for this. One is that the author is writing to someone who knows that part of the story. Theophilus, whoever they may have been, knew the end, and he had asked for the background. Another is that this book is trying to portray the early church under the best possible light vis-à-vis the Empire. To go on to depict Paul as being tired and condemned by the authorities would have undone much of that argument.

Frankly, I do not find these explanations convincing. There is another possibility. The book is not about the apostles. The book is not about Paul. Just as in the first chapter, the Jerusalem church is the focus of attention, and then it disappears into the background, to move on to Stephen and Philip, then to Peter and Cornelius, and eventually to Paul, now it is time to move away from Paul. The book does not tell us what became of the Jerusalem community, nor of Peter, nor of Philip, nor of Paul.

The book is unfinished precisely because it is not about the acts of the apostles. It is about the acts of the Spirit. And those acts have not ended. At the end of chapter 28, Paul fades away. But we are now living in chapter 29, still in the age when the Spirit is active, still a pilgrim people, still discovering new dimensions of missions, even as we go about our daily pilgrimages. We do

find ourselves in the Book of Acts. We find ourselves because there is much in common with those early characters of whom we have been speaking these days. But in a certain sense, our place in Acts is also in the chapter that Luke did not write: Acts 29.

As Stephen reminded his listeners, Abraham set out, not knowing where he was going. We are still on the same pilgrimage. We are still a people of the temple and a people of the tent. The ecumenical movement is a pilgrimage. As people of faith, we follow God on that pilgrimage. Not always knowing where we are going, we follow the cloud and the pillar of fire.

Thus, as a final act of sharing, let us take a few minutes to write a few more verses to this book: Acts 29:1-3. Think about what has happened that is meaningful to you and to us; of the Acts of the Spirit since the times of Paul; of the Acts of the Spirit today. In your mind, or on a piece of paper, write those two or three verses. And then, if you wish, do speak them out loud.