# BETWEEN TWO TEMPLES: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST TEMPTATION TO WITHDRAW

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***Abstract:*** *This paper argues that a biblical-theological framework rooted in the unfolding narrative of Scripture offers a corrective to the enduring temptation within fundamentalist circles to withdraw from cultural engagement. Tracing key themes from creation to new creation—especially the role of image-bearing, kingdom expansion, exile, and the presence of God—this study challenges the dualistic assumptions that often underlie cultural separation. While affirming the necessity of holiness and theological distinctiveness, it critiques reactionary postures that neglect the missionary and ambassadorial identity of God's people. This paper concludes by proposing a paradigm of "faithful presence" grounded in biblical theology that neither assimilates to culture nor retreats from it, but bears prophetic witness within it.*

***Keywords****: biblical theology, temple motif, redemptive history, ecclesiology, creation to new creation, cultural engagement, faithful presence, fundamentalism, separatism*

## Introduction

Christianity has a cultural engagement problem that has influenced Christians throughout the entirety of church history.[1] This problem revolves around the question of how Christians ought to engage with the surrounding culture or if they should even engage with the surrounding culture.[2] The answer to this problem has differed throughout church history, but is easily understood with Niebuhr's five paradigms of cultural engagement for the church—Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951), 2-3.

[2] Kevin Vanhoozer's definition, which draws on Clifford Geertz, of *culture* in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* serves as a basic definition of *culture* for the purposes of this paper. "Culture is best seen as webs of significance that human beings have spun, and in which they are themselves suspended. These webs are spun out of meaning: human interpretations of the world, other people, and themselves."

transformer of culture.[3] Of course, differing sects, denominations, and theological circles often fit in and move between the differing cultural engagement paradigms as the group assesses and reassesses what it considers proper practice concerning engagement; however, the fluidity of cultural engagement does not negate the fact that Christians need to determine how to engage.

While the conversation about culture is often framed in abstract or sociological terms, this paper approaches the issue of engagement on biblical and theological terms—asking not merely what posture Christians should adopt, but what the church is. The key assumption is this: what the church is determines how the church should engage culture. Ecclesiology must precede cultural strategy, and biblical theology must shape ecclesiology. In particular, the identity of the church is deeply shaped by the theological motif of the temple throughout Scripture.

In recent church history, a like-minded, but not formally affiliated group of Christians called *fundamentalists* has emerged in various denominational, non-denominational, and independent contexts. These Christians, while differing on secondary and tertiary doctrines, rally around primary doctrines and the pursuit of holiness, which has caused them to wrestle with cultural engagement differently than other groups of Christians.[4] Though not unique to fundamentalism, the desire to live holy lives results in both individual and ecclesiastical separation. This desire then causes Christians and local churches to separate from sin and false teachers.[5] What makes fundamentalism unique is the temptation of some fundamentalists to take on a posture of cultural withdrawal or what might be called extreme cultural separatism—the

[3] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

[4] Kevin T. Bauder, "Fundamentalism," in *Four Views on The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli, Collin Hansen, and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 29-40; Bauder calls this position of extreme cultural separatism part of hyper-fundamentalism.

[5] Ibid., 21-40.

push to completely withdraw from engaging culture.[6] Whereas most Christian organizations including fundamentalist organizations abstain from complete withdrawal, some fundamentalist churches, institutions, and organizations withdraw almost completely from cultural engagement.[7]

The issue is that while fundamentalism is correct in the need to separate from theological error and hamartiological concerns, the temptation for complete withdrawal from cultural engagement is antithetical to Christianity and the church's ontological reality as the temple of God.[8] This paper argues that the temple motif in Scripture offers a redemptive-historical corrective to extreme or "hyper-fundamentalist" tendencies of cultural withdrawal by grounding Christian presence in covenantal identity, holiness, and mission. Specifically, this study will trace the biblical theology of the temple from Eden to New Creation and argue that God's people, as His temple, are always meant to reflect both holiness and visibility. The presence of God among His people is never private. Thus, ecclesial withdrawal from culture undermines the very identity of the gathered church as a visible outpost of divine presence in the surrounding world.

## The Temple Motif in Redemptive History

[6] This posture fits Niebuhr's *Christ against culture* paradigm and Bauder's definition for *hyper-fundamentalism*. In addition, this paper refers to "hyper-fundamentalism" not as a pejorative, but as a technical description of forms of fundamentalism that elevate secondary or tertiary distinctives into doctrinal litmus tests, or that react to cultural decay by adopting an almost monastic withdrawal from the world. This is distinct from classical fundamentalism's emphasis on primary doctrines and biblical separation from sin and heresy.

[7] Madison Trammel, *Fundamentalists in the Public Square: Evolution, Alcohol, and Culture Wars after the Scopes Trial* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 127; Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020), 229.

[8] G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 23, 25-26; By *ontological*, this paper refers to the essential, covenantal nature of the church—not just what the church does, but what the church is in God's redemptive history and economy. The church is not merely a gathering of Christians but the locus of God's dwelling presence on earth—His temple.

## Defining *Temple*

Since the primary argument of this paper hinges on the idea that the church is ontologically the temple of God, it necessitates an overview of the temple motif throughout Scripture. However, before investigating the temple motif, defining *temple* is needed. In modern, Western Christianity, it is often assumed that the church building is the closest parallel to the Old Testament (OT) temple and its precursor, the tabernacle.[9] This mistaken ideology stems from a deficient understanding of what the temple actually is, and this mistaken ideology reflects the typically flattened definitions of *temple* in most secular resources. *Merriam-Webster* defines *temple* simply as "a building for religious practice."[10] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *temple* as "a building devoted to the worship of a god or gods."[11] Both *Merriam-Webster's* and *Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions provide a view of *temple* that lends itself to the deficient view that the church building is the closest parallel to the temple.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* in its first definition of *temple* relates the same concept; however, in its second definition provides a more biblical understanding for how the Bible uses the idea, "something regarded as having within it a divine presence."[12] In fact, a preliminary survey across several Bible dictionaries makes clear that temples in the Ancient Near East (ANE) were almost always understood to be the home of the deity or deities that were worshiped in that specific temple.[13] Scholarship concerning ANE temple ideology affirms that

[9] This idea is prevalent from a folk Christian standpoint—i.e., even though Christianity does not teach that the church building is the closest parallel to the OT temple, practically, many Christians do think this way.

[10] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* (2025), s.v. "temple."

[11] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2004), s.v. "temple."

[12] *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2022), s.v. "temple."

[13] See R.J McKelvey, "temple," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 806-811; Daniel O. McClellan, "Temples in the Ancient Near East," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*,

the average person during that time period believed that the gods they worshiped resided in the temples that the people worshiped the gods in.[14] The Bible utilizes the definition of *temple* that assumes the deity dwelt within the temple.

## Surveying Scripture's Use of *Temple*

The temple motif is a theme deeply rooted in Scripture. From the very beginning, the Garden of Eden is described in temple-like terms (Gen 1-2). Adam and Eve are called to "work" and "keep" the garden (Gen 2:15)—a phrase used elsewhere for the Levitical priests (Num 3:7-8; 8:26). The garden features rivers, precious stones, and in the garden, God was pleased to dwell among His creation—distinctly uncreated and yet, among His creation. Images utilized later in Scripture echo these ideas in temple language (Gen 2:10-14; Ezek 28:13-14). The garden, in other words, was a kind of proto-temple where God dwelled with humanity.

Biblical scholars like G.K. Beale and L. Michael Morales have observed that Eden served not only as a place of fellowship but also as a commission center—God placed humanity there to extend His glory outward. This creational commission sets the tone for how temple presence and mission are linked throughout Scripture. Beale states that "Eden is presented as a sanctuary and place where God dwells . . . even the seemingly casual mention of God "walking" in the Garden

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eds. John D. Darry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); M.G. Easton, "temple," *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers), 1893; and Allen C. Myers, "temple," *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

[14] See John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 113; G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 29; Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 14; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 60-62; and Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 63.

of Eden (Gen 3:8) is rich with connotations that suggest God's presence in the temple."[15] From the onset of creation, God dwells with His people in a garden that acts as a temple. After the fall (Gen 3), God's presence reappears in covenantal contexts, most notably in the tabernacle. The concept of His dwelling place amongst His people expands as He instructs His people to build the tabernacle (Exod 25-31; 35-40) for His dwelling among His people. Throughout the instructions for and construction of the tabernacle and temple, God emphasizes its holiness as His dwelling, models it in part after Eden—filled with lampstands resembling trees and crafted with gold and fine linen--and provides the requirements for proper worship and obedience. Despite the constant struggle of His people to keep the requirements for proper worship and obedience throughout the OT, the role of the tabernacle was for God to "dwell among the Israelites and be their God" (Exod 29:45).[16]

Eventually, the tabernacle gives way to Solomon's temple, a permanent structure meant to house God's presence. First Kings 6-7 depict a building overlaid with gold, adorned with cherubim, and structured in a tripartite fashion—an outer court, holy place, and most holy place—clearly evoking Eden's layered geography. At the dedication of the temple God's glory fills the house (1 Kgs 8:10-11), signifying His presence. The temple, like the tabernacle before it, serves a dual function: it is both a place of consecrated holiness and a beacon of visible witness. God's name dwells there (1 Kgs 8:29), and the surrounding nations are meant to take notice. Solomon even prays that "foreigners" who hear of God's name might come and worship there (1

[15] G.K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: A Biblical Theology of the Temple* (2014 repr. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 6.

[16] L. Michael Morales, while dealing with the biblical theology of Leviticus, spends a significant amount of time dealing with the ideas of temple, God's dwelling, Eden, and a longing for dwelling with God in his book *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*. It is worth reading for an overarching understanding of the biblical narrative concerning God's dwelling and how His people struggled to keep their focus and affections on dwelling with God.

Kgs 8:41-43). Thus, temple holiness and temple missionality are never in tension—they are mutually reinforcing.

The trajectory continues in the New Testament (NT). Though the physical temple still exists in a more grandiose form than before, there is a clear transition from an idea of a purely physical temple to a spiritual temple in both Christ and the people of God. Jesus refers to His own body as the true temple (John 2:19-21), signaling that the dwelling place of God is no longer tied to a structure but to the incarnate Son. As Jesus fulfills the typology of temple, He becomes the place where God meets man. This shift from physical structure to embodied presence marks a theological turn: the temple is no longer stationary but mobile—no longer seemingly hidden but public. Jesus, the true temple, walks among sinners, heals the unclean, and declares judgment on the old structure (Matt 23:28, 24:1-2). He is holy and missional in one body. In fact, while it is clear throughout the Gospels that many still have the concept of a physical place of worship in the temple and on the temple mount, Jesus teaches a more spiritual understanding of what it means to truly worship God. For instance, while speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, the woman understands worship that requires worshiping in a specific location—"The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.'" (John 4:19)[17] Jesus' response is to shift the location of worship from a physical location to a spiritual location—"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:23-24). The temple of God, while never truly limited temporally expands to include more than just the physical location of

[17] Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

the building in Jerusalem. As the Gospels conclude, Jesus' crucifixion tears the veil of the old temple (Matt 27:51), opening direct access to the presence of God.

In Acts, this temple presence is extended to the church through the Holy Spirit. Acts 2 depicts the Spirit descending on the gathered believers with wind and fire—both symbols of God's presence in Sinai and Solomon's temple (Exod 19:18; 1 Kgs 8:10-11). Peter, echoing OT language, calls the church a "spiritual house" and a "holy priesthood" (1 Pet 2:5). Beale highlights Pentecost as the inauguration of the new spiritual temple, and he traces different prophetic signs to their fulfillment on Pentecost to prove the validity of his claim.[18] It is notable that in Beale's understanding of the new spiritual temple, it is the indwelling Spirit *in* the people of God that make up the temple; and not just the Spirit of God or just the people of God. It is both the people of God and the indwelling Spirit that constitute the new spiritual temple. Beale traces this motif from Acts through the NT epistles in which he describes the new spiritual temple and expounds on the truths of living as a Christian as part of the new temple.[19] Paul reinforces the temple imagery in 1 Corinthains 3:16-17: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in. you?" The verb here (οἰκεῖ) connotes a settled, permanent dwelling. Paul's warning, that anyone who destroys God's temple will be destroyed, underscores how sacred this gathered, Spirit-filled community is. This passage in 1 Corinthians is not individualistic. Paul uses the plural "you" (οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ναὸς θεοῦ ἐστε) to describe the local church as a corporate temple. In context, he's addressing factionalism and immaturity within the

[18] Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 204; while Beale is not the only scholar who traces the temple motif throughout Scripture, he offers the most comprehensive treatment of the idea, which is why this paper utilizes his writings to survey the temple motif.

[19] Beale rejects the idea of the temple being metaphoric throughout the NT (particularly in 2 Corinthians in which he specifically calls out the concept that "the church is merely 'like' a temple." (253)). In fact, in Beale's understanding of temple ties into what he believes Paul does by relating the church and the temple together, i.e., the universal church and the temple are one and of the same.

Corinthian congregation. His point is profound: the way a church treats unity, purity, and witness is a matter of defiling or preserving the very presence of God.

Similarly, in Ephesians 2:9-22, Paul describes Jew and Gentile believers being "built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." The temple is not a building, it is the gathered, reconciled people of God, who now together reflect God's holy and visible presence. The language in Ephesians brings richness to the idea of the church being God's temple. Paul describes the church as being "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" with Christ as the cornerstone. The verse "being built together" (συνοικοδομεῖσθε) suggests an ongoing process. The temple is still under construction yet already indwelt, and what unites the parts is not Jewish or Gentile ethnicity or tradition, but rather the Spirit's indwelling. The church is the new temple of God, and its visibility, unity, and holiness are part of its very identity.

Beale expounds on the temple imagery throughout Hebrews as the author of Hebrews utilizes temple and sacrificial imagery as the basis of his argument before concluding his survey of the NT's temple motif with Revelation.[20] In Beale's chapter concerning the temple in the NT, he argues for a "world-encompassing" temple, which again, he equates with the universal church before showcasing the new temple's extension throughout the whole new creation:[21]

> What we have in Revelation . . . is the conception of God's saints being the true temple of God's presence in initial fulfillment of the Ezekiel 40-48 temple prophecy . . . and extending that presence throughout the earth by means of their witness. The new temple begins with Christ as the foundation "stone" and continues to be "built up as a spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:4-6) until it is completed on the last day of history . . . During the present age, the very being of the church as witnesses of an invisible temple conveys the presence of God to others, either in blessing or judgment.[22]

[20] Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission,* 293-334.

[21] Ibid, 313-320.

[22] Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 332.

In Revelation 21-22, the eschatological climax of redemptive history is described in temple terms. John sees the New Jerusalem descending from heaven, and exclaims, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev 21:22). Yet the city itself is shaped like the Holy of Holies (cf. 1 Kgs 6:20), and the presence of God radiates through it. John's vision reinforces the pattern of temple imagery throughout Scripture: God's presence is holy, radiant, and public. It transforms creation itself, and it is not a private retreat for the saved—it is the radiant dwelling of a Holy God that is visible to the nations (Rev 21:24). The implication is that the church today, as God's earthly temple, anticipates the eschatological reality by living as a foretaste of it.

If the NT universal church is the temple of God that is already inaugurated, then there are several practical ramifications that local churches need to consider in a balanced and nuanced method—particularly concerning how they interact with the surrounding culture. The biblical theology of temple identity reveals that God's people are always intended to be both holy and present—set apart and yet visible. The church, as God's dwelling place, cannot fulfill its identity while retreating from the world. Holiness is not achieved through absence but through faithfulness in proximity. To be God's temple is to be His presence-bearing people.[23]

## The Fundamentalist Posture of Withdrawal

While the biblical vision of temple identity offers a constructive framework for ecclesial presence, many churches have struggled to embody this identity consistently. This is especially visible in segments of twentieth- and twenty-first-century fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, at its best, has championed doctrinal clarity, personal holiness, and ecclesiastical fidelity. Yet, in its

[23] Ibid., 752; see Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 5:4-5, 11:27-29, Hebrews 10:25, Ephesians 2:21-22, Titus 3:10-11, 1 Peter 2:15, Revelation 1:13, 20.

more extreme forms, it has also been tempted toward cultural disengagement—not simply from sin or heresy, but from society itself. For clarity, it is important to distinguish between theological separation from sin, worldliness, and false teaching and cultural withdrawal from non-Christian people, institutions, or vocations. The former is a biblical necessity (2 Cor 6:14-18); the latter often arises from fear, reactionary posture, or misplaced identity. A church can and must reject sinful ideology without isolating itself from the public square or from its mission.

Fundamentalism, as a movement, traces its roots to the confluence of several different ideologies and events that all contributed to the development of fundamentalist ideology and core values. In a sense, fundamentalism as a movement is multiple reactions to culture's and the mainstream church culture's push towards liberal theology and secular humanism in general.[24] As the surrounding culture sought to live life apart from biblical truth, issues such as Darwinian Evolutionary Theory, the Scopes trial, a push against biblical inerrancy, and even the sexual revolution caused those affirming fundamental truths of Christianity to loosely band together as a reaction against liberalism and modernism.[25]

It is notable that in many critiques of the fundamentalist movement, one of the primary critiques is that of cultural withdrawal—the tendency amongst some fundamentalists to adopt Niebuhr's Christ Against Culture paradigm.[26] This paradigm views Christianity and the

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[24] See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1-7, 117136; Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Kevin T. Bauder, "Fundamentalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli, Collin Hansen, and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 19–49.

[25] See John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. Adams, *Church History: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, vol. 2, *From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 801-805; Tim Dowley, *Introduction to The History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 533-564; and Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 294-296.

[26] Ibid.; and Niebuhr, 82.

surrounding culture as so radically opposed to one another that faithfulness to Christ demands complete separation from all worldly systems, institutions, and values. Niebuhr identifies figures such as Tertullian, Tolstoy, certain monastic groups, and even fundamentalism as proponents of the Christ Against Culture paradigm. In Niebuhr's estimation, this viewpoint has one significant issue—that while the proponents of this view hold it with sincerity, the Christ Against Culture proponent rarely reforms culture:

> Not Tertullian, but Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, and Augustine initiated the reformation of Roman culture. Not Benedict, but Francis, Dominic, and Bernard of Clairvaux accomplished the reform of medieval society often credited to Benedict. Not George Fox, but William Penn and John Woolman, changed social institutions in England and America. And in every case the followers did not so much compromise the teachings of the radicals as follow another inspiration than the one deriving from an exclusive loyalty to an exclusive Christ.[27]

Of course, regardless of the critiques, there are reasons for the fundamentalist position concerning theology and separation. While Niebuhr critiques the Christ Against Culture position, it is important to realize that doctrinal fidelity and separation from sin and false teaching matters. Jesus makes this abundantly clear as He emphasizes separation through church discipline and separation from false teachers, which is then expounded on in various passages by the authors of Scripture (Matt 18:15-17; 2 Thess 3:6, 2 Tim 3:5, Titus 3:10-11, 1 Cor 5:11-13). In fact, as a movement, fundamentalism is known for its strong desire to reject false teaching and for its proponents to live holy lives, both of which are commendable.[28] Separation itself is not the issue in fundamentalism, as the Bible commands separation.

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[27] Niebuhr, 67-68.

[28] As Marsden traces fundamentalism's history in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, he highlights holiness as a driving factor for fundamentalist separation.

However, a constant posture of separation often leads to unbiblical cultural withdrawal, where secondary and tertiary issues are elevated as grounds for separation, and cultural assumptions replace biblical truth as the foundation for doctrinal teaching.[29] This kind of cultural withdrawal then undermines the local church's ontological identity as God's temple—His dwelling between Eden and the New Creation.[30] As the local church isolates itself in the name of separation over increasingly narrower issues, it not only forgets its role as one expression of God's presence, but may begin to view itself as the only true expression of His presence. This posturing leads to disengaged ecclesiology, a diminished cultural mission, and an inability to recognize other faithful local churches as equally indwelt by God's Spirit—as another expression of His presence. John R. Rice once warned against "becoming so wrapped up in criticizing and opposing the sins of the world that we fail to win the world to Christ."[31] Yet many fundamentalist institutions and churches came to define themselves by what they stood against, often without a robust articulation of what they stood for. Bob Jones Sr., for example, declared, "It is not our job to reform the world . . . we preach the gospel and let the world go to hell if it wants to."[32] While his emphasis on gospel priority is commendable, this statement when stripped of context, captures the isolationist temptation that plagued many churches and institutions in fundamentalism. In many such circles, cultural engagement is viewed not as a redemptive opportunity but as a potential compromise. Missional presence can be caricatured as worldliness,

[29] Bauder, 34-40.

[30] Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 22-25.

[31] John R. Rice, *We can Have Revival Now* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1950), 38.

[32] Bob Jones Sr., quoted in George W. Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalist in America* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1973), 210.

and public theology is replaced with private piety. Churches then become safe, holy, and separated enclaves, but largely operate invisibly to the surrounding world.

This tendency often stems from the noble desire to protect the church from doctrinal drift or cultural contamination. However, when the protective instinct eclipses the church's missional calling, the body of Christ ceases to function as a visible dwelling place of God. Holiness becomes conflated with absence and presence, when it does occur, becomes combative and defensive rather than constructive. While fundamentalism is right to insist on separation from false teachers, false teaching, and sin, the emphasis on separation over secondary matters in some hyper-fundamentalist contexts has functionally undermined their identity as God's temple and hindered their ability to present themselves as a faithful expression of God's dwelling. Rather than reflecting the holiness and presence of God within a missional, covenantal framework, these churches—often with sincere motives—elevate culturally conditioned traditions in ways that obscure their theological calling. In doing so, they resemble the structure of a temple without embodying its representative function as a visible outpost of God's presence.[33] In doing this, fundamentalists retreat, and this retreat often undercuts the very logic of biblical separation. Second Corinthians 6:17 calls believers to "come out from among them," but Paul's next words, "I will dwell among them and be their God, and they shall be my people" invoke temple language. The church is called to be set apart precisely because it is God's dwelling place, but God's presence is always, by nature, radiant, noticeable, and manifest. His dwelling does not retreat into hiddenness, it draws near, exposes sin, and invites repentance. The

[33] See David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986), 247–250; Madison Trammel, *Fundamentalists in the Public Square: Evolution, Alcohol, and Culture Wars after the Scopes Trial* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 115–118; Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 13–16.

tabernacle stood in the midst of the camp, the temple stood on a hill, Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among us, the Spirit descends publicly at Pentecost. Every instance of God's presence in Scripture is engaged—never withdrawn. Of course, this does not mean that the church should embrace every cultural trend or seek influence for its own sake. But it does mean that withdrawal is not the biblical posture of God's people. The temple exists to manifest God's presence to the world. A temple that hides itself contradicts its design. The question then, is not merely whether hyper-fundamentalist withdrawal is unwise or ineffective. The question is whether it is consistent with the church's identity as the temple. To recover ecclesial presence, the church must recover its theology of presence.

## Temple Identity as a Corrective Framework

The ontological identity of the local church as one expression of God's temple compels the local church to recover biblical truths concerning both ecclesiology and the mission. In other words, if the church is the temple of God where His presence is pleased to dwell on earth, then that identity must shape our posture toward the world. The NT consistently presents the church not merely as an institution or fellowship, but as a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5), a holy temple (1 Cor 3:16-17), and a dwelling place of God (Eph 2:21-22). This means that the church's primary calling is to be what it already is: the visible, Spirit-indwelt people of God. This ontological identity demands a corresponding mode of life. Just as the tabernacle was set apart by design but placed in the center of Israel's camp, so the church is set apart by grace and placed in the center of the world. It exists not to reflect the world but to reveal the holiness and presence of God within the world. To withdraw is to violate its nature. God's temple people are to be set apart (1 Cor 3:16-17, 2 Cor 6:16-18, Eph 2:21-22, 1 Pet 2:5, 9-10, 16); and yet, they are simultaneously commissioned to make disciples (Matt 28:16-20) in a manner consistent with God's redemptive

desire to dwell with His people. Just as God personally walked with Adam and Eve in Eden, intentionally dwelled in the midst of Israel (Num 2:17), and ultimately sent His Son to secure access for His people to dwell with Him (Heb 9-10), so now He sends His people, indwelt by His Spirit, as His temple presence in the world. Through the Spirit's work the church functions as a living witness—drawing God's people into communion with Him. Local churches are not merely gatherings, but temporal and spatial expressions of God's dwelling presence, pointing forward to the eschatological temple in the New Creation. God's temple has always existed not just for internal purity but for external witness. The temple is holy not so it can hide, but so it can shine. In Isaiah 2:2-3, the mountain of the Lord's house is exalted above the hills, and "all the nations shall flow to it." Ezekiel 47 portrays a river flowing out of the temple, bringing life wherever it goes.[34]

As such, God's temple presence has never been designed for total isolation from the surrounding world. While access to God's presence has always required cleansing, His dwelling has consistently carried a missional impulse even in the midst of non-believing Gentile people—whether in Eden, the tabernacle in Israel's midst, the incarnation of Christ, or the church as His Spirit-indwelt temple. The church, then, as the new covenant temple, is meant to radiate the glory of God by being both holy and present. It is not a fortress but a fountain. Its holiness should distinguish it from the world, and its presence should make that holiness visible to the world. The hyper-fundamentalist temptation to withdraw from the world entirely is antithetical to the local church's identity as an expression of God's temple. [35] God always pursues His people to

[34] Ezekiel's vision is particularly instructive. The water flowing from the temple increases as it moves away from the sanctuary—symbolizing the expansive, life-giving reach of God's presence. The farther it goes, the deeper it becomes. This is not stagnant holiness—it is a centrifugal, missionally charged holiness. The temple sanctifies and sends.

[35] Please understand that this does not mean that God's people as an expression of His temple are His presence. His presence can be experienced amongst His people, but His people are not His presence.

bring them into communion with Himself (Gen 3:9; Exod 6:7; Lev. 26:11–12; Jer. 31:33; Rev. 21:3), and part of Him drawing people to Himself is through His temple—the place where His presence is made known, now manifested through His gathered church.

As God's current temple, which is situated between Eden and the all-encompassing temple of the New Creation, the Christian church must be properly positioned to engage the surrounding culture. To live "between two temples" requires the local church not only to pursue holiness and separation from sin, but also to avoid a reactionary withdrawal from the world. Rather than isolating itself, the church must remain present in the world as God's dwelling—set apart but not removed. This means that while it is tempting for fundamentalists to adopt the Christ Against Culture paradigm critiqued by Niebuhr, biblically, Christians need to take a more nuanced view of James Davison Hunter's idea of faithful presence. This does not mean the church seeks cultural approval. It does not mean capitulation to trends or the loss of doctrinal clarity. Rather, it means a refusal to confuse purity with absence. Jesus' own ministry models this perfectly—He dwells among the impure without defiling Himself, touches the leper without becoming unclean, and eats with sinners without sinning. As the true temple, He embodies holiness and presence simultaneously—the church must do the same. When churches embrace their temple identity, they begin to see their gathering as more than a program—it becomes the manifestation of God's presence in space and time. Their ordinances are not mere rituals but signs of covenant communion. Their holiness is not withdrawal but witness. Their community life is not merely social but sacramental—tangible evidence that God is among His people.

Properly understood, the temple motif highlights that the church's identity demands both holiness and engagement—two qualities that are often wrongly treated as opposites. As God's temple, the local church is called to live holy lives (1 Cor 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:5; Eph 2:21-22) in

covenantal distinctiveness while also engaging the surrounding world so that God's presence may be visible among the nations (Exod 19:5-6; Matt 28:18-20; Rev 21:3). Faithful presence, in this context, is not a missional tactic, it is the natural outworking of the church's identity. As God's temple, the church exists to manifest His presence, reflect His holiness, and mediate His grace through the ordinary means of worship, fellowship, and proclamation. The church cannot do this by hiding, it must be seen; and this vision both affirms the fundamentalist instinct to pursue holiness and challenges the tendency to equate holiness with distance. To embody the temple right is to draw near, just as God has drawn near to us in Christ.

The corrective, then, is not to abandon the pursuit of purity but to ground it in the Gospel's pattern of incarnation and mission. Christ, our temple, came to dwell among us. The Spirit, the sanctifier, came to fill us. The church, indwelt and empowered, is called to be among the world—not conformed to the world, but sent into it. The gathered church, then, becomes the visible outpost of God's Kingdom, the place where heaven touches earth, where Christ is proclaimed, where holiness is cultivated, and where the world sees what that redeemed community looks like. To retreat from the public square is to erase the signpost God has placed there for others currently outside the camp to see. It is in this context that we must reevaluate popular calls for "faithful presence." What kind of presence is faithful? What sustains it? And how can it avoid becoming either a buzzword or a banner for compromise? The answer lies in rooting presence in identity and not pragmatism; and that means grounding it theologically in the church's nature as God's people.

## Reframing "Faithful Presence" Through Temple Identity

In recent years, the concept of "faithful presence" has gained significant traction in theological and missional discussions through the work of James Davison Hunter. Hunter in *To*

*Change the World*, critiques both the fundamentalist temptation to withdraw and the social activist culture in theologically liberal churches. Instead, Hunter posits what he considers the "middle ground" position. That the "faithful presence" of a Christian who seeks the welfare of the city (Jer 29) while recognizing the incarnation is sufficient as a witness in the world today.[36] Hunter defines *faithful presence* as "the exercise of leadership in all areas of life, characterized by integrity, humility, and service that seeks the flourishing of others through the practices of faithful presence."[37] He grounds this model in God's covenantal faithfulness, particularly as seen in Jeremiah 29, where Israel is instructed to seek the welfare of the city during exile. However, though Hunter's model is compelling from a sociological framework, in recommending this position, he does little to ground it in Scripture.[38] Theologically, Hunter's "faithful presence" position is deficient because he does not root his faithful presence ideology in the redemptive-historical development of the temple motif or in the church's ontological identity. This omission is critical because faithful presence cannot be a mere strategy—it must be a consequence of the church's essence. If the church is the dwelling place of God, then presence is not optional or occasional. It is constitutive of who we are. We are not present merely because we choose to be, or because it might yield influence, we are present because God dwells in us and His presence in the world is now manifest through His church. Faithful presence, then is not a posture we adopt but a role we inhabit. It is not a missional tool, but rather a theological reality. The church, as God's temple, is the extension of His holy presence in a fallen world. The gathered body, filled

[36] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); see also James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 125–130; Carl R. Trueman, "The Rise and Fall of the Neo-Evangelical Vision," *First Things*, October 2011.

[37] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244.

[38] Hunter writes from a primarily sociological perspective.

with the Spirit, proclaims the Word, observes the ordinances, pursues holiness and lives publicly as a city on a hill (Matt 5:14). It is holy presence, not just private piety.

Hunter's faithful presence lacks an understanding of the local church as the temple of God and suggests that simply being in the world is sufficient for people to desire to know God. In reality, a faithful presence in the surrounding culture and world only works when God's people recognize that together, they are the temple of God and God's presence is amongst His people; and together, they work to fulfill the Great Commission—to make more disciples of every nation. This understanding of presence guards against another danger—reducing engagement to mere activism or cultural production. The temple exists not to wield influence but to reflect glory. Our task is not to build Christendom but to be Christ's body. Influence may come, but it is not the goal. Presence is the goal—a faithful, holy, visible presence. Moreover, rooting presence in temple identity corrects both progressivist and separatist errors. For the progressive, it reminds us that visibility without holiness is empty. A culturally engaged church that lacks theological clarity or covenantal integrity ceases to be a temple. For the separatist, it reminds us that holiness without presence is not holiness at all. A church that hides its light denies its nature.[39] The temple motif provides the theological substance that undergirds Hunter's faithful presence position while still rejecting unbiblical extremes of hyper-fundamentalist

[39] A clarifying application: A faithful temple-presence today might look like a small church in a declining town that gathers each week with joy and reverence, teaches doctrine clearly, sings with conviction, opens its homes to the lost, and endures in visible faithfulness even when ignore or opposed. It might also look like a church plant in an urban center that resists both cultural compromise and isolation, offering a vibrant, countercultural community rooted in Word and sacrament. In every case, the church's presence flows from who she is, not what she aims to accomplish. In addition, the concept of temple and faithful presence can and should be applied to every sphere of Christian life—for a Christian university, it might look like participating in activities such as ETS and EPS for the purpose of being a faithful presence in a sometimes-confusing evangelical academia. It might also look like participating in community events that are not necessarily Christian events simply to show students what it means to practice an incarnational ministry within the community itself. Each church and institution needs to allow their consciences to determine how best they can be the temple of God.

separation and the theologically liberal emphasis on social justice activism divorced from holiness.

Thus, Hunter's call for faithful presence finds its necessary grounding in Scripture when reframed through the temple motif. The church is God's dwelling place—set apart, indwelt, and sent. Its faithfulness consists in holiness. Its presence consists in visibility. And both are necessary if the church is to be the temple of the living God in the world. This biblical-theological reframing of presence has serious implications for how churches understand mission, structure their lives, and navigate cultural change. To explore those implications, we must now ask: what does it mean, practically, for a church to live as God's temple? And what are the dangers if it fails to do so?

## Implications and Conclusion

Of course, the implications for understanding the church as the dwelling place or temple of God extend in several aspects in life. As God's temple, the local church is the visible, covenantal space in which God dwells on earth (1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:21–22).[40] This means that local church life is not a secondary component to Christianity—it is essential for the people of God. It means that the church is not merely a means to individual growth or moral accountability. It is not optional or replaceable by online content, parachurch ministries, or personal devotion. The gathered church is the locus of God's presence in this age. It is where the Word is preached, the ordinances are administered, discipline is carried out, and Christ is made visible. Because God's temple is holy, the church must be set apart from sin and compromise (1 Pet 2:5; 2 Cor 6:16–18). However, that holiness must not be confused with isolation. Holiness is not measured by distance from culture but by fidelity to the character of God. A church may

[40] Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 265-269.

reject public sins and still harbor hidden compromise. Conversely, a church may remain publicly visible and yet walk in holiness. Holiness demands doctrinal clarity, moral integrity, relational purity, and reverent worship. But none of these are hindered by presence, in fact, they are revealed through presence.

The image of the church as a temple also amplifies the biblical call to unity and interdependence—no living stone stands alone (Eph 2:21-22; 1 Cor 12:12-27). Just as no part of the tabernacle or temple could be missing, out of alignment, or defiled without undermining the whole, so no local church can flourish while neglecting covenant community. Temple identity requires mutual commitment, accountability, and order. In other words, individualism really has no place in the theology of God's dwelling. The temple is not built of disconnected stones because to be the temple is to be gathered, joined, and built up together (Eph 2:21-22). This raises the stakes of membership, participation, and covenantal life.

Furthermore, the temple identity of the church means that local churches are missional by their very nature. [41] God's temple has always existed to make His presence known as His people worship, obey, and represent Him. The world is not changed by church programs, political activism, or branding, but by the visible holiness of Spirit-filled congregations—and to be missional does not require cultural mimicry. It requires covenantal integrity and public faithfulness. The temple never entertained the world, but it drew the nations. The church will not reach its neighbors by looking like them, but by being what people cannot find anywhere else: a people indwelt by the living God, marked by grace, truth, and joy.

[41] James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 475-478.

It also means that the gathering of God's people is an eschatological temple-in-progress, every local gathering becomes a kind of dress rehearsal for the New Creation (Heb 12:22–24).[42] When the church gathers, it declares that the true temple is coming. The Holy of Holies will soon descend, and the dwelling place of God will be with man (Rev 21:3). Every sermon, every meal, every baptism, every song, every act of repentance are all shadows of that glory. When we isolate and hide, we hide that glory. When we gather visibly in holiness, we announce that the city of God is near.

Christianity has long struggled with cultural engagement, oscillating between separation and integration. Between the extremes of cultural withdrawal and cultural assimilation lies a more nuanced path—what some have called "faithful presence." Yet that phrase, when untethered from biblical theology, remains vague.[43] The local church, rightly understood as the temple between Eden and the New Creation, provides a richer theological foundation for faithful cultural engagement. And this temple identity rejects the extremes of isolation and uncritical integration. If the church is the temple, then it cannot retreat—it must stand and shine God's glory. It must dwell among a crooked generation as the indwelt people of God. Faithful presence is not a strategy, it is a reality to be embraced; and the only way to be truly present is to be the church: holy, visible, indwelt, and sent. God has made His dwelling among us.

[42] Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 373-376.

[43] James K.A. Smith, "How (Not) to Change the World," *Comment Magazine*, Spring 2010.

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