

Commentary — From the Margins

What Does It Mean to Dwell in Booths?

For the past three-quarters of a century, the tradition of the splintered churches of God has been to relocate one's physical self to a temporary dwelling where God has allegedly chosen to place His name during the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. These locations are inevitably near vacation meccas. Families have saved a second tithe (i.e., a second full ten percent of their annual income) that they spend at festival sites where they reside in temporary housing while attending church services, fellowshiping, and enjoying the geographical location chosen for the Feast. The justification for saving a full tithe and going to an exotic location comes from the assumption that Feast of Tabernacles commemorates Christ's millennial reign over humanity, that Feast-goers are to learn to live as if they were in the kingdom of God for that week. Thus, the tradition has Feast-goers enjoying the finer things of life during this week as a sample of how life will be lived during the Millennium.

The modern tradition of Christians observing the Feast of Tabernacles stems from Herbert Armstrong's reading of Leviticus 23:42–43: "You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (English Standard Version — used throughout). Although other Christian sects or fellowships might have continued observing the annual Sabbaths of God from their Reform or Puritan roots, the practice of such observance fell out of favor before the end of the 18th-Century. Thus, Armstrong had only his reading of Scripture and the practices of rabbinical Judaism with which to work when he established the customs of his Radio Church of God. His successors have since deemphasized or have quit observing annual Sabbaths, leaving only splinter sects that separated from his successors to continue the practices and customs he established.

The assumption that the Feast of Tabernacles commemorates the futuristic millennial reign of Christ begins correctly. However, the practice of living as kingly priests misses what will be the abiding characteristic of the Millennium, this characteristic being the lack of lawlessness from having the Holy Spirit poured out upon all flesh. Throughout the symbolic day of the Lord, human nature will be a changed nature. Even the nature of beasts will be changed: the great predators will become grass eaters; the lion shall lie down with the lamb. There will be no harm in all of God's holy mountain.

Again, human nature is a received nature as seen in Scripture when Nebuchadnezzar lived and thought as a beast for seven years. This statement cannot be substantiated by direct observation, but comes by revelation; hence, it is not an arguable premise. Presently, the spiritual king of Babylon as the prince of the power of the air reigns over the mental topography of all living creatures that have not mentally died to sin or lawlessness. At the end of this present age, this king will be toppled by the Son of Man. Then, for a thousand years the glorified Christ will reign as the prince of the power of the air. Human nature will become His nature. And even animals will experience peace from His cross-dimensional reign over mental landscapes.

To a non-Believer, the above paragraph is nonsensical. Even many Believers will struggle with the idea that human nature is something other than fixed with the specie. But through typology and considering what dwelling in booths represents, the concept of being dead to sin and of receiving a changed nature can be visualized. For the concept of living as kingly priests misses the significance of the first clause of Leviticus 23:43 — “that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.” Dwelling in booths for the circumcised nation commemorated liberation from bondage to Pharaoh and symbolized the period in that nation’s history when God led His first-born son (Exod 4:22) by a pillar of fire at night and from a cloud during the day.

The people brought out of Egypt did not enter God’s rest because of unbelief (Heb 3:19) that became disobedience when they tried to enter the following day (Heb 4:6 — compare with Num 14:39–45). Instead, their children entered the geographical land that symbolized God’s rest. Under the leadership of Joshua and Caleb, the children of the Israelites that left Egypt physically swung swords and defeated in battle the peoples that possessed the hill country of Judea. Hornets as promised under the Sinai covenant (Exod 23:28) didn’t drive out the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites. Rather, obedience to God that came with faith caused the children of the people who left Egypt to prevail militarily (Josh chptr 7).

The writer of Hebrews links the geography of Judea with the millennial rest of God, as did the Psalmist: “For forty years I [God] loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.’ Therefore I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest’” (Ps 95:10–11). Physical lawbreaking is done with the hand; spiritual lawbreaking is done with the heart. And the circumcised nation went astray in their heart. They went astray spiritually even though they had seen the many miracles done in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the Wilderness; even though they had heard the voice of God uttered from atop Mt. Sinai.

Warning disciples against “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away” (Heb 3:12), the writer of Hebrews says, “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (v. 13). It is the deceitfulness of sin that caused the nation that left Egypt to rebel against God. It will be the deceitfulness of sin that will cause the spiritual nation to rebel (2 Thess 2:3) when this nation is liberated from bondage to the law of sin and death that presently dwells in the members of disciples (Rom 7:25). The writer of Hebrews establishes the link between Judean geography and Christ’s reign over the heart (i.e., mental topography) of all humanity. Physical kings reign[ed] over physical landscapes, but spiritual kings reign over the minds and hearts of human beings. The circumcised nation was ruled by an old written code, inscribed by the finger of God on two tablets of stone. This law was always outside of the holy nation as were the houses in which this nation dwelt after it entered the promised land.

Except for Joshua and Caleb, the Israelites that left Egypt dwelt in booths or tents until their deaths; they never again dwelt in houses, nor possessed orchards or vineyards. They never again experienced a sense of permanence, or an attachment to “place.” Once they left Egypt, they were sojourners until they died in the Wilderness of Sin because of their unbelief, their hearts hardened from the deceitfulness of sin. And the correspondence between unbelief and lawlessness joins the rebellion in the Wilderness with the rebellion of the spiritual nation when the man of perdition is revealed.

Before the Israelites left Egypt, they dwelt in houses (Exod 12:7, 22–23). The holy nation again dwelt in houses that they did not build when they possessed the promised land. Dwelling in

booths, then, symbolizes that period of Israel's journey from physical bondage in Egypt to when Israel under Joshua possessed the promised land. Dwelling in booths does not symbolize living as rightful heirs in the promised land; it doesn't symbolize living as kingly priests. Rather, it symbolizes living by faith under the laws of God in a landscape named the Wilderness of Sin. And the nation that began this journey was replaced by an equally large nation: about 600,000 men on foot journeyed from Rameses to Succoth (Exod 12:37). When Moses numbered Israel on the plains of Moab forty years later, Moses found 601,730 men over twenty able to go to war (Num 26:2, 51). Thus, in the Wilderness of Sin, a first nation of liberated Israelites was replaced by a second nation of uncircumcised Israelites, both nations similar or identical in number.

The holy nation of Israel that left Egypt represented approximately half of the people then living in Egypt (Exod 5:5). Through the last seven plagues that struck Egypt, God made a division between the people then living in this nation that has come to represent sin, a division based upon genetics. A physical division. God liberated a physical people from physical bondage in a physical land. Then because of unbelief, this liberated nation of physically circumcised males dwelt in booths until their deaths. They were replaced by a like number of their uncircumcised children who also dwelt in booths until this second nation crossed the Jordan River and entered the promised land. Only then was this second nation of Israel circumcised (Josh 5:2–7). So this second nation of Israel had only dwelt in booths when the second covenant mediated by Moses was given—under this second covenant, Israelites were promised circumcised hearts and minds or souls [*naphesh*] upon returning to obedience to the laws of God (Deu 30:6). This second nation did not receive physical houses until after physical circumcision. Spiritual circumcision was only offered to this second nation upon them returning to obedience to God; spiritual circumcision required that this nation walk blameless before God as Abraham had (Gen 26:5).

The Apostle Paul introduces a law of faith (Rom 3:27) that becomes the righteousness that comes by faith. (Rom 10:6). Paul then cites the Moab covenant, or second covenant mediated by Moses (compare Rom 10:6–8 with Deu 30:11–14). The Israelite who walks blameless before God by having returned to keeping the laws of God has only to “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead” (Rom 10:9) to be saved. This spiritually circumcised Israelite will, upon resurrection, receive an incorruptible body in which to dwell, the meaning of *salvation*.

Upon crossing the Jordan, newly circumcised Israelites began occupying physical houses that these Israelites had not built. They didn't design the houses of the Hittites and Canaanites, nor did they plant the orchards and vineyards attached to them. Thus, although receiving already built homes and farms initially seems advantageous what any particular Israelite actually received was dependent upon the former owners' abilities, skills, and sense of style. If the previous owner was a careful builder, the home was sound, but if the previous builder did shoddy work, the Israelite inherited a disaster that required extensive remodeling. Likewise, the Apostle Paul's new creature or man that is created through receiving the Holy Spirit inherits the same body of flesh as was formerly occupied by the old man. If *the old man* had been a careful builder, the new creature receives a home that is in good order. If, though, *the old man* had been a sluggard or a drunkard, the new creature receives a house or tabernacle with the out-of-control appetites and addictions of the former occupant.

The Apostle Paul's new man doesn't get to design his (or her) dwelling as he (or she) would like to have the dwelling constructed. Rather, this new creature takes over an existing corruptible body, and has to make war against the law of sin and death that resides in the flesh.

Paul writes, “We know that our old self was crucified with him [Christ Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin...Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions” (Rom 6:6–7, 12). And this juxtaposition of inner life and outer life lies at the center of understanding the new spiritual creation that lives within the physical body or dwelling of the old creature that died with Christ. The new creature lives with Christ. Death no longer has dominion over this new creature. Yet the dwelling in which this new creature resides will die, or will be changed in the twinkling of an eye.

A visualization of the Israelites who crossed the Jordan and occupied Canaanite houses has these houses firmly anchored to the geographical landscape of the promised land, but has their occupants coming and going at will. Jesus told Nicodemus, “That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6–8). Likewise, Paul’s new creature who has been born of spirit is to the person’s body [*soma*] as the Israelites who occupied Hittite houses where to those houses. These Israelites lived in these houses, but they had not built them. They fought to occupy them because the first nation that left their Egyptian houses refused to believe that the nation could cross the Jordan and occupy the promised land behind swarms of hornets.

With birth-from-above (being born again or born anew), the old creature dies as did the first nation that left Egypt—and the new creature born of spirit begins replacing the old creature as the second, uncircumcised holy nation replaced the nation that left bondage to Pharaoh. The transition from one nation to the other took forty years of dwelling in booths in the Wilderness of Sin. The transition from old creature to new requires sufficient time to allow for the spiritual maturation of the new creature. And it is the forty years spent in the wilderness and this transition from a circumcised holy nation to an uncircumcised holy nation that is to be commemorated by dwelling in booths during Tabernacles.

The nation that left Egypt and the uncircumcised nation that replaced that first nation were not free to come and go as they wished while they were in the Wilderness of Sin. During the forty years spent in booths, both nations of Israel experienced little freedom of movement. Whereas Israelites, once they occupied the promised land, could journey throughout that land, when in the Wilderness, these same Israelites only ventured outside their camp to gather manna. Jesus identifies Himself as the true manna that came down from heaven; so by comparison, disciples when dwelling in booths only venture outside of camp far enough to daily gather in Christ.

Dwelling in booths represents the death of the old self and the spiritual maturing of the new creature. Dwelling in booths isn’t about learning to live as kingly priests, or to appreciate the finer things of this physical life. It is about learning to walk blameless by faith before God. It is about putting into practice the second covenant made at Moab now that better promises were added to this covenant when the glorified Christ replaced the man Moses as its mediator.

Returning now to human nature being a received nature: with spiritual birth as a born-from-above disciple the lawlessness present in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2:2–3) which produces the passions of the flesh, the desires of the body, and the mind and nature of humanity dies. But it doesn’t die immediately. It dies as did the physically liberated, circumcised nation that left Egypt. It dies because of its unbelief. And it is replaced by a nation that will fight to receive incorruptible tabernacles, just as did the uncircumcised children of the nation that left Egypt.

This second Israel was a nation born in booths, a nation that had no permanent home and would never have permanence if it hadn't crossed the Jordan and fought to occupy a promised land.. Likewise, the new creature that comes and goes as the wind today dwells in a booth of flesh, with the law of sin and death still dwelling in the members of this booth.

Physically dwelling in booths for the seven days of Tabernacles commemorates the maturation of the new creature, uncircumcised outwardly but circumcised inwardly under the better promises of the spiritual second covenant. This new creature will enter the promised land of glorification because the old man that was liberated from sin at Calvary never believed that he (or she) could defeat the giant of obedience to the laws of God. This old man, like the circumcised nation in the Wilderness, was ever ready to return to a spiritual Egypt or Babylon. And when that nation did try to enter the promised land, it did so on the day following when God said to enter His rest.

Living in booths during Tabernacles commemorates the agonizing slow death of the old man, and the growth towards righteousness of the Apostle Paul's new creature. Living in booths commemorates the development of a new nature within every disciple who will be glorified.

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