

“Dwelling Place”

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Brian Watson

Exodus 25:8–9 (ESV)

⁸ *And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.* ⁹ *Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.*¹

What is the most special place on earth? What, in your view, is the most meaningful place on earth? What’s your answer? Perhaps it’s a place that you associate with a good memory. Maybe it’s a favorite vacation spot, or your childhood home. Maybe it’s a particularly beautiful spot: a mountain, a cabin in the woods or on the lake, or a favorite beach. Perhaps if you’re a sports fan, it’s Fenway Park or Gillette Stadium, where your favorite athletes play and where history is made. Or perhaps it’s a music venue, such as Symphony Hall or the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Or perhaps it’s the Museum of Fine Arts.

If you’re a religious person, perhaps the most special place on earth is a church, or a cathedral. Maybe it’s where you came to faith, or where you learned the most about God. Or maybe it’s Jerusalem or Israel.

I would argue that everyone is in some way religious. We all have believe that something is ultimate. And everyone has their own sacred space. I recently read an article titled “Are Apple Stores the New Temples?”² Apple Stores are the stores that sell Apple products: iPhones, iPads, MacBooks. The article begins with these words:

In more ancient times, when communal experiences were mediated by religion, crowds used to gather outside temples on feast days. In Biblical times, for instance, on pilgrimage holidays like Passover, Jewish people were supposed to travel to Jerusalem, to be present at the Holy Temple, where the High Priest would make a sacrifice to God.

Nowadays, we have Apple Release Day—the Feast of St. Jobs—when faithful customers gather outside Apple stores and await the renewal of a next generation iPhone.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² Sarah Laskow, “We Asked a Cultural Historian: Are Apple Stores the New Temples?” *Atlas Obscura*, September 25, 2015, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/we-asked-a-cultural-historian-are-apple-stores-the-new-temples>, accessed November 13, 2015.

We might say that Steve Jobs is the prophet, the tech guys who work at the Genius bar are the priests, iPhones are idols, and the Apple Store is the temple. That may seem silly, but I've actually seen two articles that have described the physical layout of Apple Stores in Manhattan as being temple-like.³

Well, no matter if you're into nature, sports, or technology, we all seem to have a sense that certain places are more special than others. You might even say these places are sacred. And if you are religious, you probably think that certain places are more holy. To you, God may be more present in some places than in others.

This was certainly true in the Bible. The Bible begins with God creating the whole world to be a sacred place. The Bible also describes the garden of Eden in terms of a temple. In that garden, God "walked" with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). But then something happened: Adam and Eve, the first humans, sinned against God and they were forced to leave the garden. They left God's temple. They had to leave God's direct and special presence. And we've been trying to get back to the garden ever since.⁴

Recently, as we've been making our tour through the big story of the Bible, we saw that God rescued Israel out of Egypt. He brought them out of slavery and to himself. And he made a covenant with them. He told them how to live by giving them his law. But that isn't enough. It's not enough that he rescues them and gives them commands. That wouldn't bring them back to the garden. To get them closer to that destination, God would have to walk among them. And so God tells Moses and the Israelites to build a tabernacle, which is a movable temple. A temple is God's dwelling place, where he meets with his people and where they worship him. This is a very important part of the story of the Bible. The tabernacle would be part of Israel's worship for almost five hundred years, until Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem. A temple in Jerusalem would be part of Israel's life for the next thousand years. Even in the book of Exodus, we see that there are seven chapters that deal with the instructions for how to build the tabernacle (chapters 25-31), and then there are six chapters that discuss its construction. These chapters feel very repetitive when you read them. But when something is repeated like that in the Bible, it's done for the purpose of emphasis. In other words, the tabernacle is a big deal.

³ See also Matt Buchanan, "Inside Apple's Newest Temple," Gizmodo, November 12, 2009.

⁴ The idea that we're not in paradise is pervasive. In her song, "Woodstock," Joni Mitchell sings, "we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." For her, that garden was the Woodstock Festival of 1969.

Let me first describe the tabernacle as it's described in Exodus. As we saw in the verses read before the sermon, the tabernacle was "a sanctuary" so that God could "dwell" in the "midst" of the Israelites. God revealed the pattern of the tabernacle and its furniture so that it could be made. (If you have a study Bible, it probably has an illustration of the tabernacle, which will help you get a picture of what I'm describing here.)

Before we look at the various parts of the tabernacle, it's important to know that it was basically a tent. It's sometimes called the "tent of meeting." This tent was in a courtyard, surrounded by a wall made of curtains. In the courtyard, besides the tent, there was an altar for sacrifices and a basin for washing. Inside the tent, there were two rooms or chambers. If you went into the tent, you would first enter into the Holy Place. There, you would see a table for bread, a lampstand, and an altar of incense. If you passed through this room and went into the second room, the innermost room, you would be in the Most Holy Place. There you would find the ark of the covenant.

In the book of Exodus, the description of the tabernacle and its furniture moves from the inside out. It starts with what is most important, or at least what is most holy. So it begins with the ark. You'll find the description of the ark in Exodus 25. The ark was a box of wood covered in pure gold. Inside the ark were the tablets that had the Ten Commandments on them (25:16; 1 Kgs. 8:9). The lid of the ark was called the "mercy seat," and on it were two cherubim made of gold. Cherubim were fantastical creatures with wings. If you remember, cherubim guarded the way back to the garden of Eden with a flaming sword (Gen. 3:24).

The key thing about the ark was that it symbolized God's special presence among the Israelites.⁵ Of course, God's presence can't be contained by the tabernacle (1 Kgs. 8:27), but the ark represented his special presence. God told Moses, "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel" (25:22; see also Num. 7:89). The ark represents God's throne. More specifically, the ark was God's footstool (1 Chron. 28:2; Ps. 99:5; 132:7; Lam. 2:1), while his throne remains in heaven (Isa. 66:1). God was King over Israel, and he ruled over them by his word, summed up in the Ten Commandments.

⁵ "[N]othing symbolized God's presence on earth as intensely as the ark." Tremper Longman III, *Immanuel in Our Place: Seeing Christ in Israel's Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 33.

The next piece of furniture described in Exodus 25 is the table for the bread of presence. A wooden table covered with gold was placed in the Holy Place. God said, “you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me regularly” (v. 30). Leviticus 24:5-9 further describes the bread. Twelve loaves of bread were supposed to be placed on the table every Sabbath day. The loaves were placed in two piles, and pure frankincense was placed on each pile. Aaron, Moses’s brother and the first high priest, and his sons were supposed to eat the bread. The twelve loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The high priest and the other priests represented the whole nation. Their eating of this special bread represented communion with God. They ate in the presence of God. Eating meals together is a very intimate thing, and this showed the close relationship God had with his people.⁶

The next piece of furniture is the lampstand, or the menorah (Exod. 25:31-40). This lampstand, made of pure gold, had seven lamps. If the cherubim on the ark reminded us of the cherubim guarding the way back to the garden of Eden, this lampstand may remind us of the tree of life. It had branches that resembled tree branches, and it brought light. Josephus, the Jewish historian, thought the seven lamps represented the planets and the sun, because those were the seven heavenly bodies visible to the naked eye.⁷ The lampstand was fueled by olive oil and it was to be lit at all times (Lev. 24:1-4).

The tabernacle itself consisted of curtains of linen that were blue, purple, and scarlet (Exod. 26:1). If someone were inside the Holy Place, and they saw the lights of the lampstand and the blue, purple, and scarlet linen, it might remind them of the sky.

There was also an altar of incense in the Holy Place. Like the other pieces of furniture, it was made of wood and covered with pure gold (Exod. 30:1-10). The altar was in front of the curtain that led from the Holy Place to the Most Holy Place. Later in the Bible, the incense offered up to God at this altar is linked to the prayers of God’s people (Ps. 141:2; Mal. 1:11; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4). So the incense represented prayers going up to God, who was seated on his throne, represented by the ark.

Outside the tent of the tabernacle, there was a bronze altar (Exod. 27:1-8). There, animals were sacrificed for sin. I’ll talk a bit more about animal sacrifice in a moment, but it’s worth

⁶ “[T]he loaves were a reminder of the intimate relationship the people of God enjoyed with their covenant Lord.” Ibid., 59.

⁷ Joseph, *Antiquities* 3.145. Apparently Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn are visible to the naked eye. Perhaps Joseph also had the moon in mind when he said there were seven planets (the five mentioned above, the moon, and the sun).

noting that the altar was placed in front of the tabernacle. If someone wanted to approach God's special presence in the tabernacle, he first had to offer up sacrifices for sin. There was also a bronze basin in the courtyard, between the tabernacle and the altar (Exod. 30:17-21). The priests had to wash their hands and feet before entering into the tabernacle. If they didn't do this, they would die (vv. 20-21). Anyone who approached God had to be clean.

That last bit of information shows how holy God's presence is. When we say "holy," we can mean many things, include consecrated to God, or entirely "other," or transcendent. But it can mean "pure." God's special presence could not coexist with anything impure, or unclean, and that's why God's presence was limited to the innermost part of the tabernacle. I'll come back to that idea in a moment.

The tabernacle had a lot of meaning. As I said earlier, some features of the tabernacle point back to the garden of Eden. The cherubim and the lampstand in particular point us in that direction. When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, he decorated it with a lot of garden-like features, including palm trees and flowers (1 Kgs. 6:32, 35) and pomegranates (1 Kgs. 7:18, 20). The temple represented God's special presence with his people. Though all of us are outside the garden of Eden, the tabernacle (and, later, the temple) represented a way by which Israel could recover something of what was lost in Eden.

The tabernacle and the temple also represented the whole universe. It was a microcosm: literally, the universe in miniature. It was a shadow of the way God made everything to be. The courtyard represented the world where people and animals lived. At Solomon's temple, the wash basin was called the "sea," which represented bodies of water, and it rested on twelve statues of oxen, which represented animal life (1 Kgs. 7:23-26). The oxen faced north, west, south, and east, representing each point on the compass, and therefore the whole earth. Even the brim of the sea resembled a lily, and it was decorated with gourds. This represents vegetation. The Holy Place, the antechamber of the tabernacle (and later the temple), represented the visible heavens. (The lampstand represented the sun and moon and the planets we can see and the different colors of linen represented the different colors of the sky.) And the Most Holy Place represented heaven, God's dwelling place.⁸

⁸ That idea comes from G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 32-33. The idea is supported by Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.123, 179-187; *War of the Jews* 5.208-214.

There are other clues that the tabernacle was made to represent all of creation. The man who was commissioned to carry out the project of building the tabernacle was a man named Bezalel. We read this about him in Exodus 31:1-5:

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ²“See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, ⁴ to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵ in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.

Bezalel was filled with the Holy Spirit! We may remember that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit played a role in creating the universe, and he played a role in creating the tabernacle. Also, God gives Bezalel “ability and intelligence and knowledge.” Those three nouns are translations of the same three Hebrew nouns used in Proverbs 3:19-20 when it says that God created the world by “wisdom,” “understanding,” and “knowledge.” Here’s one more clue: After the tabernacle is built, Moses looks at it and blesses the people who did the work (Exod. 39:42). It’s as if Moses surveyed the creation of the tabernacle and called it “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

But the tabernacle was more than just the universe in miniature. It was also patterned after heaven. Three times in Exodus, God tells Moses something like this: “see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain” (Exod. 25:40; 26:30; 27:8). In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews says that the tabernacle was “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5). The tabernacle gave the Israelites a taste of heaven.

The tabernacle and the temple were also things of beauty. They featured fine and precious materials like gold and silver and beautiful linen. The beauty captures something of the beauty of God.

God delivered the people out of slavery in Egypt. He made a covenant with them. He them his word. And he told them to build a tabernacle, which was loaded with all kinds of theological meaning. Perhaps the most important thing is that God would dwell with his people. This is what God says to the Israelites in Leviticus 26:11-13:

¹¹ I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. ¹² And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. ¹³ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

God would walk with Israel just as he walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, while Moses was getting these instructions from God on the top of Mount Sinai, the Israelites became impatient and they asked Aaron, Moses's brother and the first high priest, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us" (Exod. 32:1). So Aaron took gold from the people and made a golden calf.⁹ A calf or a bull was used to represent false gods in the ancient Near East, and when Aaron completes the calf, he says, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (v. 4). Israel is committing idolatry in the worst possible way. They are even attributing their freedom to false gods.

When this happens, God becomes angry and he is ready to destroy all of Israel and make a great nation out of Moses alone (v. 10). But Moses intercedes. He steps in. He tells God that if he wipes out all the Israelites, the Egyptians would think poorly of him. He reminds God of the covenant that he made with Abraham (vv. 11-13). So God relents from his anger and doesn't destroy the Israelites (v. 14). But when Moses sees how the Israelites were worshiping the golden calf, he also gets angry, and he asks "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me" (v. 26). The Levites, the ones who would later serve at the tabernacle and guard its purity, come to Moses. And they kill three thousand Israelites.

The whole scene is a mess, but it shows that the Israelites were bent on sinning. Their hearts hadn't changed. Instead of loving the God who saved them, their hearts turned toward false gods. God's anger is just. It's right. He's angry not just because they were giving their worship to a false god. He was angry because idolatry is bad for people. It leads to death. It points people away from the source of life. Knowing and worshiping the true God is the best possible thing we can do. When we do what is bad for us, God gets angry because he loves us.

After this mess, Moses says to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin" (v. 30). So Moses asks God to blot him out of the book of life if that will make God forgive the people (v. 31-32). Moses is willing to lose his life—his eternal life!—so that the Israelites could live. But God tells him that the people who sinned will die (v. 33).

After that, in Exodus 33-34, Moses begs God to go with the people as they travel to the Promised Land. He also asks God to reveal himself. He says, "Please show me your glory"

⁹ See commentary on this incident in Ps. 106:19-23.

(33:18). God tells Moses that he can't see his full glory. He can't see his face. No human being can see God in his full glory. Why? God says, "man shall not see me and live" (v. 20). I believe that's because God is too holy, too pure, to dwell directly with sinful people. The purity of his radiance would overwhelm us. It would be like trying to walk on the sun. We would be consumed. In our current condition, we can't handle that. But God tells Moses that he will reveal a bit of himself. He tells Moses that he will proclaim his name. So God tells Moses who he really is. He does that with these famous words in Exodus 34:6-7:

⁶The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

One pastor, Mark Dever, says that this is the riddle of the Old Testament.¹⁰ How can God be merciful and gracious and forgive iniquity when he says he will by no means clear the guilty? How can God punish all guilt and forgive people? We might ask this question another way: How can a holy God dwell among sinful people? And these questions aren't just for Israel. We should ask these questions today. As you sit here, do you realize that you have often ignored God's existence? You've not done the things he's commanded us to do. You haven't done what you were made to do. You should realize, if you're being honest with yourself, that you haven't done things that you know to be right, and you also realize that you've done the things you know to be wrong. You've made your own little golden calves of entertainment, or money, or comfort, or sex, or family, or any number of god substitutes—things that you think are ultimate. What hope do you have to dwell with God forever? How can God forgive your sins so he doesn't have to destroy you?

Within the story of the Old Testament, the answer is animal sacrifices. The Israelites are instructed to offer up sacrifices for their sin. Here's the logic behind sacrifices: Because the Israelites sinned against God, they deserve to die (Rom. 6:23). Yet God graciously gives them the option of offering up a substitute. Instead of the Israelites being killed, they can transfer their guilt onto animals, and those animals can be killed. All of this is described in the book of

¹⁰ Mark Dever, *What Does God Want of Us Anyway: A Quick Overview of the Whole Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 33.

Leviticus. The blood of the animals is shed so that the blood of the Israelites doesn't have to be. Leviticus 17:11 says this: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life."

On of the biggest events in the life of Israel was the Day of Atonement, which is described in Leviticus 16. On that day, which occurred once a year, the high priest made atonement for the whole nation of Israel. The high priest represented the nation. He wore a breastplate with twelve precious stones, which represented the twelve tribes of Israel (Exod. 28:15-30). The high priest bore "the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD" (Exod. 28:30). On the Day of Atonement, he had to offer up a sacrifice for his own sins, then he sacrificed an animal for the sins of the nation, and he brought some of the blood of that sacrifice into the Most Holy Place. This was the only time that he—or anyone else—could go into the Most Holy Place. No one could enter into the special presence of God except the high priest, and he could only do that on one day of the year. And even when he did that, he had to bring with him a cloud of incense that filled the Most Holy Place. That smoke didn't allow him to see the ark clearly. It was God's way of saying, "I won't even let the high priest have full access to me."

If you've been following so far, I want you to imagine what it would be like to be an average Israelite. Only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place, and only on one day of the year. Only priests could go into the Holy Place. Though it seems that Israelites could enter into the courtyard, they could only do so if they were ritually clean. Generally, however, it was the priests and the Levites who were in the courtyard. So if you were an average Israelite, you probably didn't get anywhere close to the tabernacle, and you certainly didn't get close to the ark. All the curtains and those priests stood between you and God. Your relationship to God was mediated through priests, who did all the religious activity on your behalf.

Now, in this system, there were problems. You might say God made this whole system with built-in obsolescence. It was never supposed to last forever. One problem is that animal sacrifices had to be offered repeatedly. They had to be offered over and over and over again. There was no end to the animal slaughter, because the people kept on sinning.¹¹ Here's another problem: How can the deaths of animals cover the sin of humans? If a human life is to be spared, it should be a human who is sacrificed in his or her place. The book of Hebrews says, "it is

¹¹ This is something that the books of Hebrews addresses. See, for example, Heb. 7:27; 10:1-3, 11.

impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4). And there’s one more problem that I’ve hinted at: How can priests mediate between God and people when they are just as sinful as everybody else (Heb. 5:1-3)?

Animal sacrifices were never intended to permanently solve the problem of sin. They couldn’t. And the tabernacle—a tent which kept everyone away from the presence of God—wasn’t the way back to Eden. The tabernacle wasn’t the answer. Animal sacrifices weren’t the answer. And Moses couldn’t atone for the sins of his people, so he wasn’t the answer.

But we know that Jesus is the answer. He is the sinless, once-and-for-all sacrifice, and our great high priest.¹² He is a man who died for the sins of other people. But he is also God, which means he’s infinite and eternal. His past sacrifice can pay for any sin of any time—past, present, and future. Because he’s God and man, he can be the mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

But Jesus isn’t just the high priest and the true sacrifice. In his body, he became the true dwelling place of God with men. John 1:14 says, “And the Word [that’s Jesus] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” That could be translated this way: “And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” The tabernacle and the temple were shadows, but Jesus is the substance.

Think of all the ways that the elements of the tabernacle pointed forward to Jesus. The tabernacle had the bread of presence, but Jesus is the bread of life (John 6:35). And we share a meal with Jesus when we take the Lord’s Supper. The tabernacle had a lampstand, but Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). The tabernacle had a wash basin, but it’s Jesus that makes us clean. At the tabernacle, lambs were sacrificed on the altar, but Jesus is the true Lamb of God who takes away sin (John 1:29). When he died on the cross, it was the final sacrifice for sin. We can’t add to that sacrifice and we don’t need to.

Think about what that means. We don’t need to go to a priest to have access to God. You don’t need to come to me and say, “Hey, Brian, can you talk to God for me?” All of us can go directly to God through Jesus. He gives us access to the throne of God’s grace (Heb. 4:16). When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple in Jerusalem was torn (Matt. 27:51). That means that we can have direct access to God.

¹² Again, the book of Hebrews makes this clear.

When people today come to faith in Jesus, they are given the Holy Spirit, the third person of God. He fills Christians the way that the glory of God filled the tabernacle and the temple. And the temple today is not a building on earth. It's not in Jerusalem. It's not a cathedral. It's not a church building. The temple is the church (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:22). That means you don't have to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. That's what the Israelites had to do three times a year. You don't have to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims are supposed to do that once in their lifetime. All you need to be is part of the church, and you are in a temple.

So, where can God be found on earth? He can be found in you, if you have a relationship with Jesus that is marked by love, trust, and obedience. If you have the Holy Spirit, God dwells in you! And God dwells in the church. The church is not a building. The church is people. If you want to be in the presence of God and his glory, spend time with other Christians.

Think about this: The tabernacle was a shadow of heaven. And just as the tabernacle was a shadow of heaven, our corporate worship is a shadow of heaven. When we come together to worship God through our high priest, Jesus Christ, you are getting a foretaste of eternity.

So where is the most glorious place on earth? Where is the most sacred space on earth? Where is the most special place on earth? It's where Christians gather together. And that speaks to the importance of the church. One of the major problems in America now is radical individualism. We think of ourselves as individuals, not as part of families or a society. And we find this within the church, too. So many people only think of themselves and what they get out of church. But that's not the way things should be. We should see that though we come to Christ as individuals, once we become Christians, we're part of something that's larger than ourselves. To use Peter's language in 1 Peter 2, we are living stones that are part of a spiritual house (v. 5). We are members of the same body, to use Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 12 (vv. 12-13). That means we should be committed to the temple that is the church. We should be committed to the body of Christ. We shouldn't just show up as consumers on Sunday; we should serve and we should do life together. That's how we see God's glory.

Let me end with Paul's words in Ephesians 3:14-21. Pay attention to where God dwells and where his glory is on display:

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that *Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*—that you, being

rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,²¹ to him *be glory in the church* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.