

WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW (#WCSK) 2.2B: THE TABERNACLE

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The series What Christians Should Know Volume II (#WCSK2) provides Biblical instruction on everyday practices and basic concepts of the Christian faith. All Scriptures will be taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted. Biblical references are examples and are in no way intended to be exhaustive. Many of the ideas here will build upon the series [What Christians Should Know Volume I](#) (#WCSK), which provides education on core beliefs and doctrines in the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Psalm 119:105

The Tabernacle Proper

The walls of the tabernacle proper and its pillars were made of two distinct materials: acacia wood and gold. The gold was pure and refined and the wood was a very special type: acacia or shittim, an incorruptible form of desert wood. Gold represents deity. Acacia trees grew in the desert only under duress and extreme circumstances. The wood represents Christ’s humanity, “like a root out of parched ground,”¹ highlighting the virgin birth. The wood was overlaid with gold, yielding a uniform piece made up of two elements, which represents the perfect union of the human and divine natures inherent in Jesus.

Thus, the tabernacle was composed of 48 wooden boards that were overlaid with pure gold. Two projections on the underside of each board fit into the pure silver sockets underneath. Additionally, the boards were held together by five horizontal bars of gold-covered wood. Moreover, ropes were passed tightly over the roof of the tabernacle and secured into the ground with pins on each side. These indestructible ropes represent the love of Jesus: “I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love.”² It becomes clear that the tabernacle was very sturdy and was the most secure place in the entire Israelite camp.

¹ Isaiah 53:2

² Hosea 11:4

Hence, being *in* the tabernacle, or being *in* Christ made a person entirely safe and secure (c.f. Psalm 91:1-9).

Furthermore, the NASB translates Exodus 27:19 as “All the utensils of the tabernacle used in all its service, and all its *pegs*, and all the *pegs* of the court, shall be of bronze” (italics mine). It translates Exodus 35:18 as “the *pegs* of the tabernacle and the *pegs* of the court and their cords” (italics mine). The root of the word *pegs* in Hebrew, *yated*, can also mean nail, pin, or stake. All the pins were made of brass and were, therefore, resistant to rust and corrosion. They were buried in the ground (death) but a portion still rose above the ground (resurrection) in order to secure the ropes that anchored both the fence and the tabernacle. Hence, *in* Christ, we are held secure by the durable nail that *is* Christ: “I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house. So they will hang on him all the glory of his father’s house, offspring and issue, all the least of vessels, from bowls to all the jars.”³ Of course, the pegs being fastened into the ground also points to Christ’s body being nailed to the Cross.

*The roof.*⁴ The roof of the tabernacle was composed of four layers. We shall move from the innermost layer of the building (and therefore what could be seen while in the tabernacle) to the outermost layer (and therefore what could only be seen from the outside).

The first roof layer consisted of fine linen, representing perfect righteousness, embroidered with the colors of white, blue, purple, and scarlet. Cherubim, or guardians of God’s holiness, with outstretched wings were embroidered into the fabric of the ceiling and therefore “watched over” the priests as they performed duties in the tabernacle.

The second roof layer, placed over the linen, was made of goat’s hair. This represented Christ’s sin offering, as a goat was a clean animal that was offered on the Day of Atonement (in the Old Testament) as a sacrifice. One goat was sacrificed (to temporarily atone for sins) and one goat was led into the wilderness (to remove the guilt of sin away from the midst of the people).⁵ The fact that linen rested *under* the goat’s hair symbolizes that our righteousness in Christ is contingent upon His atoning sacrifice.⁶

The third roof layer consisted of ram’s skins that were dyed red. This speaks directly to the substitutionary atonement for sins by the blood of Jesus on the Cross. Figuratively, then, the one who is *in* the tabernacle is therefore under and totally covered by Jesus’s atoning blood sacrifice. The use of the ram looks back to Abraham, who was provided a ram *by God* to offer as a sacrifice *in the place of* his son, Isaac.⁷ In actuality, Isaac could *not* have been an acceptable sacrifice because he was a sinner. Something else needed to atone for sins. Hence, the ram is a symbol for the substitution of God for the sinner.

³ Isaiah 22:23-24

⁴ Exodus 26:1-14

⁵ Leviticus 16:15-22

⁶ Isaiah 53:6; John 10:18; II Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:28

⁷ Genesis 22:1-14

The fourth and outermost roof layer was the covering of porpoise skins. This represented the humanity of Jesus, the outer covering that an unregenerate person could see without coming to know the hidden beauty and depth within. This outer covering was exposed to the abrasive elements and was quite ordinary without any extensive decoration. Hides of porpoises yielded excellent, durable, and tough leather. In fact, several other verses from the Bible highlight that the Israelites wore shoes made of porpoise, which protected their feet from the harsh elements of the wilderness.⁸ Consider also Ezekiel 16:10: “I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk.”

*The Table of Shewbread (Step #3).*⁹ Now we have entered the tabernacle and are in the holy place. The table was made of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, and was placed on the north side of the holy place. Symbolically, this is the place of fellowship. Here, we have been regenerated and separated, and now we eat of the bread: Jesus.¹⁰ Other believers feed on the Bread of Life as the priests serving in the Tabernacle would consume the bread here as the center of their fellowship. What nourishes and sustains us is the bread. This also highlights why communion is so important: it is a sacrament performed in the context of believing community around a table where we remember Jesus, break bread (His body) as one body, and drink of the cup. The bread on the table had to be grounded and baked (pressure and heat), and thus tested¹¹ by fire. God is always looking down on my will, and as I yield to Him, my will becomes His will, and this yielded will feeds me.

The Bread is Jesus, Who is the Word. The Bible thus serves as *the* focal point around which fellowship happens in a community of believers. What this means is that it is the responsibility of each and every believer to seek out and establish themselves within a community of other believers tied together by the Bible, Jesus, and the proclamation of the Word of God. One *cannot* move close to God without being part of the community of God. And, because there were no chairs, no one ate sitting down. Hence, *fellowship was never meant to be an end in and of itself*. Fellowship was always ready and prepared to move, cognizant that fellowship was part of a process directed toward a higher end.

An important point here is the food of the priests consisted exclusively of bread. They ate it *daily*.¹² There were no condiments, dipping sauces, soda, chips, or desserts. Just bread. God is trying to tell us that all we need to feed on (figuratively) is the Word of God: Jesus. That’s it. In 2015, we live in a world of “God *and*” such as “God *and* rock and roll,” “God *and* politics,” “God *and* pluralism,” or “God *and* a spiritual experience.” Kill the *and*. All we need is the Word of God. The single focal point of the church *is Jesus*. Nothing else.

⁸ Deuteronomy 29:5; Nehemiah 9:21

⁹ Exodus 25:23-30

¹⁰ John 6:35, 48, 51

¹¹ Job 16:12

¹² Matthew 6:9-13

*The Golden Candlestick (Step #4).*¹³ This piece of furniture was made out of pure gold and was placed on the south side of the holy place. The light provided by the candlestick was critical because there was no natural light in the tabernacle. This, therefore, provided the only source of illumination inside the tent. The implication is that if one wanted to be illuminated by natural light, then you must step out of the tent and into the outer court, *further away* from God. Natural illumination represents human reason and all the natural theories and ideologies that stem from human reason alone. Naturalism is inherently incompatible with God.¹⁴

The seven lights on this stand are fed by oil, representing the Holy Spirit. Oil was also used for anointing the priests. Christ is the Messiah or the Anointed One,¹⁵ and He was anointed by the Holy Spirit¹⁶ for His ministry. Now that we have been saved, cleansed and drawn into fellowship, we allow the light of the Spirit to fuel our light, our testimony. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:14-16, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, *but on the lampstand*, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (italics mine).

The fact that the candlestick was able to make light *because* of oil points to the fact that we, as members of the body of Christ, are to be the light of the world because of the Holy Spirit. And, because we are in the Tabernacle, the entire point of the journey through this building *is to be reconciled with God*. This succinctly means that as lights of the world, this is what Spirit-empowered lights are to do: to show people *the* Light: Jesus. Any other moral or admirable pursuit—whether it be social reform, environmental responsibility, or racial inclusiveness—is *not* what the Tabernacle was purposed to do. Accordingly, as M. R. DeHaan says, “The true church preaches REGENERATION; not reformation, not education, not legislation, but regeneration.”¹⁷ In fact, a person is perfectly capable of reforming, educating, and legislating *without God*. If you reform a sinner, educate a sinner, or legislate a sinner, you are still left with a sinner. They haven’t met Jesus, the only One can save them.

This is in no way, shape, or form meant to demean or belittle the efforts of others who, through their dignified works, demonstrate the love and light of Christ to their neighbors. It is meant for all of us to ponder the following: Christ came into this world to seek and save those who are lost.¹⁸ If, then, we are to be imitators of God¹⁹ and bring those who are lost to the door of the Tabernacle so that they can be “found” and reconciled to God

¹³ Exodus 25:31-37; c.f. Isaiah 11:1-3; Ephesians 4:22-24; Revelation 5:6

¹⁴ I Corinthians 2:14

¹⁵ Isaiah 61:1; Acts 10:38

¹⁶ Luke 3:21

¹⁷ DeHann, M.R., *The Tabernacle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1955), 101.

¹⁸ Luke 19:10

¹⁹ I Corinthians 11:1; Ephesians 5:1-2

through the Messiah, of what gain is it to them if they receive a temporal, earthy benefit and not gain the gift of God that is everlasting—eternal life?

Jesus is no longer with us on Earth. While on earth, He said, “While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.”²⁰ Now that He is ascended, we are to be the lights guiding others out of the darkness. In many cases, the only Bible other people will read is what their so-called Christian neighbors do as a testament to the Light.

*The Altar of Incense (Step #5).*²¹ This is the symbol of prayer and intercession and is the final step before we step beyond the veil and meet God face to face. The holy place as a unit represents our soul life, the seat of our worship, the seat of our affections, emotions, and fellowship.

This altar was made of wood and overlaid with gold. It was also the tallest piece of furniture in the holy place that speaks to the reality that prayer and intercession are the highest acts of [worship](#) and the highest priestly function a believer can execute. Worship thus serves as preparation for our service to God. Service without worship in actuality doesn't require God at all.²² On the altar burned incense, and the coals for this altar were taken from the fires of the brazen altar. The incense, and thus symbolically our prayers,²³ rise up to God as a fragrant aroma of love and sacrifice²⁴ before the Holy of Holies, God's throne. This was a special incense not to be offered in a secular setting. One must not offer holy incense in any other place or offer any other type of incense in the holy place. The penalty for strange fire, or adding something of our doing to God's perfect work, is death.²⁵ The point is that worship to God is sacred and orderly. THE LORD also offers specific prescriptions to worship Him, so people are not free to “do as they please” and worship as it is suitable to them. Because God is a Holy God, it logically follows that worship of Him follows specific guidelines.

Once a year, when the High Priest was going into the Holy of Holies he took incense from the altar and, with the blood of the sacrifices, went in to sprinkle the blood on the Mercy Seat and swing a bowl of incense, signifying to us that the way into God's presence was with the blood of redemption and the incense of praise. Just as the first altar speaks of death, this second altar speaks of the resurrection in its ascension of smoke.²⁶ Also, this altar is the last place one stops before entering into the Holy of Holies. In the Old Testament, the High Priest could not enter the Holy of Holies without stopping at the altar of incense after the blood sacrifice at the brazen altar. Thus, just as only Jesus could

²⁰ John 9:5

²¹ Exodus 30:1-9

²² For example, see Luke 10:38-42

²³ Psalm 141:2

²⁴ Ephesians 5:1-2

²⁵ Leviticus 10

²⁶ I Corinthians 15:3-4

intercede for us²⁷ because of His sacrifice on the Cross, our worship and prayer have worth only *because of* the sacrificial blood of Jesus.

*The Veil.*²⁸ This veil represents the body of Christ²⁹ that stood as a boundary between God and humankind. It was not crossed by any priest but *only* the high priest, and he was only allowed to enter once a year on the Day of Atonement. Passing beyond the veil at any other time meant certain death. The veil was made of heavy woven cloth, and there was no separation in the middle. Hence, the high priest had to go around it to get into the Holy of Holies. The veil was hung on pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold. The colors of the veil were blue, purple, and scarlet and had two cherubim with outstretched wings depicted on it. On the cross, when Jesus paid the full price of sin for all of humanity, He said, “It is finished!”³⁰ Resultantly, the veil (then in the Temple in Jerusalem) was torn from top to bottom,³¹ never to be put back together. Jesus is the One who forever opened up the way for humankind to access God.

*The Ark of the Covenant (Step #6).*³² Now beyond the veil, in the Holy of Holies, we are in the presence of God. Here, we surrender everything to Him. Only one person was allowed in here at one time, so it’s between you and God. Many priests could be in the holy place, but only one person, the high priest, was permitted here. The Ark was the most important piece of furniture in the Tabernacle, and this explains why God described it first of all the items in the Tabernacle. It looked like rectangular box, made of wood and then overlaid with gold, representing the dual human and divine natures of Christ.

This is the third ark in the Bible. The first—Noah’s ark—kept everyone inside safe and secure from death and judgment as all those outside perished. In the second—Moses’s ark—the innocent baby was kept safe from the death and judgment imposed by Pharaoh. Standing in front of the Ark of the Covenant was a place of refuge and safety away from judgment and death because when the high priest came into the Holy of Holies, he would place the sacrificial blood on the Mercy Seat that “covered” the Ark, which contained God’s broken law. When God looked down without blood on the Mercy Seat, all He saw was the broken law, which required death. When blood was on the Mercy Seat, this sacrificial offering “covered” the transgressions of the guilty, and God “passed over” the guilty.³³ The Ark with the mercy seat covered by the blood is an instrument of grace. The Ark without the blood is an instrument of judgment.³⁴

In addition to the 10 Commandments written on stone tablets, the Ark also contained a golden pot filled with manna, the divine food provided by God to Israel during their

²⁷ Hebrews 7:25

²⁸ Exodus 26:31-33

²⁹ Hebrews 10:20

³⁰ John 19:30

³¹ Matthew 27:50-51; Mark 15:37-38; Luke 23:45

³² Exodus 25:10-16

³³ Exodus 12:13

³⁴ I Samuel 6:19

wilderness journey. It also contained the rod of Aaron the priest. This rod budded and yielded fruit overnight. The 10 Commandments speak of judgment and death, since the Israelites broke these commandments. The manna³⁵ speaks of divine provision, and the rod speaks of the resurrection: something alive from something dead. All three taken together represent the redemptive power of Christ to redeem us all. Hence, Christ is the Ark Who keeps us safe and secure from judgment and death.

*The Mercy Seat (#7).*³⁶ Finally with God and under His divine protection, we have reached perfect peace, total victory, and complete rest. This was the safest, most secure place in the entire world.

The Ark was covered by a “lid” called the Mercy Seat, and it was of the same dimensions as the Ark, telling us that we are covered by the finished work of Christ Jesus. Upon this seat there were two golden cherubim facing each other with wings folded in the “worship” position: outstretched and bowed bodies signifying fellowship with each other in the presence of God. The Mercy Seat was made of beaten gold. Again, the blood upon the Mercy Seat was taken from the burnt offering where an innocent substitute had died and served as an atoning sacrifice. This blood paid the legal penalty for sin and “covered” the Law that the people had violated. Resultantly, the relationship between a sinful people and a Holy God had been restored, and God was able to dwell among His people. The whole point of all of this is to reconcile a sinful people back to God.

The Seven Steps

Subsequently, the journey through the Tabernacle points to seven steps we all take in drawing closer to God:

- (1) *Everyone* approaches by the single door of the gospel. *Everyone* approaches the altar of sacrifice (The Cross). Without Jesus, and without the Cross, there is no salvation for anyone.
- (2) The Word of God sanctifies us, both cleansing us from defilement and therein separating us from the world. Literally, we remove the filth of the world in order to prepare to enter the holy place.
- (3) Now in a hidden, deeper area of our life, and in the context of a Jesus-focused, Bible-preaching church, we fellowship with other believers.
- (4) All of our activities are not guided by natural light, but are guided by the Holy Spirit fueled Light: Jesus. We walk in the light of the golden candlestick.³⁷
- (5) Prayer and intercession is the highest form of worship, and this is the final barrier before we stand face to face with God. Prayer and intercession is what separates those who have a close and personal relationship with God from the rest.

³⁵ John 6:51

³⁶ Exodus 25:17-22

³⁷ I John 1:7

- (6) In the deepest, most intimate part of our life, we enter the Holy of Holies and stand face to face with God.
- (7) Finally, we are at total peace and total rest under the full protection of God because of the atoning blood that covers the Mercy Seat. We stand before an Ark of grace and have total victory before God's throne.

Conclusion: What this all means

The Tabernacle reveals the three offices of Christ. Subsequently, this reveals the three offices in our Christian walk.

The goal of the Christian life is to reach beyond the veil and finally—and totally—submit to God as sovereign, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is a Spirit-led life in which we have sacrificed all fleshly things and have dedicated ourselves to worshiping Him in order to totally surrender. Everything that we do, say, and think stems from complete submission to God.

The Ark represented Christ the King, which is why the Ark wore a crown.³⁸ Here, there is victory and power because of total deference to Him. While still in the world, a believer is totally separated from the outside world and is in seclusion with God. The Holy of Holies is a place few Christians will reach during their natural lives as it represents humbling oneself regardless of the natural costs. To commune with God and submit to Him as King means you will take roads less traveled, have a far from normal lifestyle, and in some instances, be obedient to commands that are considered abnormal—living on the fringes of society being fed by birds³⁹ is just one example. This type of relationship cannot be explained by natural rules because it stems from a devoted spiritual bond with the King of Kings. As a servant of the King, you demonstrate to others what servanthood looks like.

The office of prophet is one of proclamation, offering to all who will hear the message of the Cross, the brazen altar. The prophetic office for the modern Christian means that you proclaim the good news to all those meandering outside of the Tabernacle and tell them about Jesus. God uses prophets as His instruments to draw people in by the gospel and bring them to the Cross, so that they may be born again and reconciled back to Him. This is where modern preaching and evangelism come into play.

In the holy place, the office of priest is executed just as Christ, as our High Priest, intercedes for us in heaven. Thus, in our prayers, we intercede for others and focus our efforts not exclusively on ourselves. Hence, the Table is meant for community. We feed on spiritual bread, are illumined and subsequently illuminate, and we offer incense at the altar. In the holy place, all activity, and therefore worship, is directed toward God. Indeed, we do not live by natural sustenance but by spiritual sustenance. What brings

³⁸ Exodus 25:11

³⁹ I Kings 17:1-6

light to all of our activities here is not ourselves but Christ, the One Who did not merely look out for His own interests, but for the interests of others—emptying Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross.⁴⁰

*The Tabernacle was burdensome. Jesus's burden is light.*⁴¹ Let's face reality: the Tabernacle in the Old Testament by no means represented fun or ease. The priests lived lives of constant toil without rest in a presumably thankless job with little to gain in the natural sense. And, if you were an Israelite, doing the “God thing” would have been a huge burden. Why? Because while the rest of the world was having fun, you were burdened with all these rules, and whenever you broke a rule and sinned, you were required to give up something of value to atone for your sins. It's no wonder Israel was unable to keep the Law—it was impossible to do so. But that is the whole point. The processes and exact prescriptions of the Tabernacle were so ridiculously burdensome, anyone in their right mind would have to say, “There *has* to be a better way, an easier way.” Yes, there is a better way, and His name is Jesus. Because of Him, the Law no longer burdens us, and He is the One Who reconciles us back to God. He has made our lives so much easier. Indeed, His burden is light.

The Tabernacle reveals that being saved is the first step in the Christian walk. Yet, before someone even walks into the Tabernacle, they must recognize their sinfulness before Christ and the brazen altar. Christ came into this world *for sinners*,⁴² so if a person declares himself or herself righteous by their own works, then Christ cannot save them. He can only save a sinner, not a so-called “saint.” Entrance into the Tabernacle by itself is a tacit declaration of a person's self-recognition of wickedness and his or her own inability to achieve righteousness based on merit.

As we move from the outer court (place of sacrifice) to the holy place (place of worship) to the Holy of Holies (place of spiritual communion with God), there is a constant progression of our walk, and moving closer to God entails passing through defined stages. One can elect to never recognize the requirements of a stage, cognizant that this entails no forward progress. Hence, being saved is not the last step in your relationship with God; *it is the first step*. The life of a believer is always one of progressive spiritual maturation. The pattern of the Tabernacle also points to the fact that if you've ever felt “stuck” or stagnant in your walk, one of the first questions you have to ask yourself is where in the Tabernacle you're located and if you are executing the responsibilities of your particular stage.

First, of course, after hearing the gospel, you must accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. This entails having [faith](#) in Him, recognizing His sacrifice on the Cross, and sacrificing fleshly things. Second, you must be washed by the Bible, the Word of God. By becoming intimate with the Word daily and reflecting on it, God perpetually sanctifies you and removes the defilement of the world. Hence, recognizing the purity of the Word,

⁴⁰ Philippians 2:1-8

⁴¹ Matthew 11:30

⁴² Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32; I Timothy 1:15

you begin to separate yourself from worldly things in pursuit of spiritual things with a gaze focused on the tabernacle proper. If you still cling on to things of the world or live a life dominated by bodily appetites, then you remain in the outer court.

Third, before entering into the holy place, the next question to earnestly ask yourself is, What do you *really* worship? What is the thing that at the end of the day, when you earnestly think about it, you actually bow down, glorify, and sacrifice to? One cannot enter the holy place if they don't intend to *worship God*. The transition, then, from separating oneself from the world to having spiritual communion face to face with God is your worship, the seat of your soul and emotions. Worship involves fellowship with other believers, a life guided by the light of Jesus, and sincere prayer and intercession. And because prayer and intercession is the last thing that stands between the believer and God, it is *the* highest act of worship. It's not preaching. It's not evangelism. It's not how many people fill your church. It's not speaking in tongues. It's not miracle working. It's prayer. So if you want to be more obedient, if you want to be more humble, if you want to understand the Word of God better, if you want to be a better preacher, if you want to be a better evangelist, if you want a more Christ-centered family life, or if you want to reach more people and have a more powerful ministry, then you pray.

Finally, when you reach the Holy of Holies, there is little left for you to do or say because your preparatory steps have trained you to be in God's presence. In this intimacy, you simply submit and obey. Before God's throne, you are under His divine protection. Subsequently, not only are you at rest, but there isn't anything that can disturb your calm because you are in the direct presence of a Holy God.

The Tabernacle was exclusive. Jesus is inclusive. God *wants* to dwell in believers individually and the Church collectively. Hence, He wants us to open ourselves—body, soul, and spirit—so that we can live Spirit-empowered and Spirit-driven lives. Back in the Old Testament, God was exclusively available to the Israelites only. To be even more restrictive, only the Levites were able to manage the Tabernacle, and only the High Priest was able to speak to God. Jesus changed all that, and now God is not exclusive but totally inclusive. Now, we don't have a heavy burdensome Tabernacle to repeatedly dismantle and move around, but we, as believers, can go out to remote, distant areas of the world to spread the good news.

The Tabernacle shows us that everything in the Bible points directly to Jesus, and the only way to be reconciled back to God is through Christ. God has taken precise and painstakingly detailed steps for the benefit of His fallen creation, and the choice we now all face is whether or not to accept God's grace, to remain on the outskirts of the Tabernacle or to come to the brazen altar and accept Christ's atoning sacrifice—and then to steadily proceed beyond the veil in order to humbly submit and bow before the King.

Drs. C. H. S. and C. H. E. Sadaphal

For Further Study

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