

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 40

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 40 is the culminating chapter of the book of Exodus. Moses receives precise divine instructions for erecting and furnishing the tabernacle, anointing it with oil, and consecrating Aaron and his sons for priestly service. He executes every command with exact, repeated obedience — the phrase “as the LORD commanded Moses” appears seven times. The chapter closes with the glory of the LORD filling the tabernacle so completely that even Moses cannot enter, and with the pillar of cloud and fire taking up permanent residence as the visible guide for Israel’s ongoing journey.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two things simultaneously through this passage. First, He is demonstrating that He has successfully established His dwelling among His people — the entire project of Exodus 25–40, initiated by the divine command “let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (25:8), reaches its completion here. Second, He is assuring Israel (and all subsequent readers) that where perfect obedience meets divine grace, God’s manifest presence follows. The chapter is not primarily about architecture — it is about the God who keeps His promise to come near. The sevenfold “as the LORD commanded Moses” is not bureaucratic notation; it is the theological hinge on which the entire chapter turns. God wants His people to understand that His presence is not earned but invited, not forced but received through the consecration of a people and place set apart for Him.

Subject Sentence: The tabernacle’s completion signals God’s promised dwelling among His redeemed people.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His people that He will come to dwell wherever He has been obeyed and welcomed — the completion of the tabernacle is not the end of the story but the beginning of His permanent, guiding presence in their midst.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Significance of the Sevenfold Obedience Formula

The phrase “as the LORD commanded Moses” (or its equivalent) appears seven times in Exodus 40 (vv. 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32). Some readers treat this as literary filler or administrative record-keeping. This reading should be refuted. The sevenfold repetition is structurally deliberate — in Hebrew literary convention, the number seven signals completeness and covenantal significance. The closest analogue is Genesis 1, where the seven-day creation sequence culminates in divine rest and blessing. Exodus 40’s sevenfold obedience formula echoes this: just as creation was completed by God’s word faithfully unfolding, so now the new creation — the covenant community with God at its center — is completed by Moses’ word faithfully obeyed. The formula is the theological claim of the chapter, not its bureaucratic background noise. Preachers who skip past the repetition miss the point.

The Glory Cloud — Reformed vs. Charismatic/Experiential Readings

The filling of the tabernacle with God’s glory (vv. 34–35) has been read in Pentecostal/Charismatic traditions as a paradigm for corporate worship experiences — the “manifest presence” as something regularly re-invoked through Spirit-filled worship. This reading should be qualified rather than refuted outright. There is genuine insight here: the passage does establish that God’s presence is intensely real and transforming. However, the Reformed reading is to be preferred for its exegetical precision. The glory cloud here is not a model for experiential replication — it is a unique, unrepeatable act of divine covenant ratification, analogous to the Sinai theophany in Exodus 19. Its redemptive-historical significance is its primary force: it establishes the pattern that culminates in the incarnation (John 1:14, where the Word “tabernacled” among us) and the Pentecost filling of the new covenant temple (Acts 2). The glory is not primarily a feeling to be sought but a promise to be received — God dwelling with His people, which now finds its ultimate expression in the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Moses’ Exclusion — Moralistic vs. Typological Readings

The detail that Moses himself cannot enter the tent of meeting (v. 35) is sometimes treated moralistically as a lesson in humility or human limitation before God. This reading should be qualified. While the passage does reveal something about the awesome holiness of God, the more significant reading is typological and redemptive-historical. Moses, the greatest prophet of the old covenant, cannot enter where God’s glory fully dwells — this anticipates the new covenant reality that only the greater Mediator, Jesus Christ, could enter the true holy of holies (Hebrews 9:11–12). Moses’ exclusion is not a rebuke of Moses; it is a theological signal that the Mosaic economy is incomplete. The old covenant tabernacle is not the final word. Something greater is coming.

The Reformed reading holds these three threads together: the sevenfold obedience formula signals covenantal completeness; the glory cloud is God’s unrepeatable, covenant-ratifying presence that points forward to incarnation and Pentecost; and Moses’ exclusion signals the incompleteness of the Mosaic economy that anticipates Christ. Each reading is grounded in the text’s literary structure and canonical context rather than in experience or imported category.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 25:8** — “*Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst*” — the divine commission that Exodus 40 completes; this verse establishes that the entire tabernacle project is about divine presence, not religious performance.
- **1 Kings 8:10–11** — The glory of the LORD fills Solomon’s temple at its dedication, precisely mirroring the Exodus 40 pattern; establishes that God’s covenant-ratifying presence at inaugurations is a consistent redemptive-historical act, not a one-time anomaly.
- **John 1:14** — “*The Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory*” — the Greek verb *eskēnōsen* directly echoes the tabernacle language; the incarnation is the ultimate fulfillment of what Exodus 40 inaugurates, God dwelling among His people in the fullest possible sense.
- **Hebrews 9:11–12** — Christ enters the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands; explicitly contrasts the Mosaic tabernacle with the new covenant reality Christ achieves, placing Exodus 40 within the trajectory the author of Hebrews is tracing.
- **Revelation 21:3** — “*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man*” — the eschatological culmination of the tabernacle promise; what Exodus 40 inaugurates in type, Revelation 21 consummates in reality; the entire canonical arc from Eden to New Jerusalem is the story of God moving toward His people to dwell with them permanently.

Aim: To demonstrate that the completion of the tabernacle is God’s covenant promise kept — His presence secured for His people — and that this promise finds its ultimate expression in Christ and its final consummation in the new creation.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
40:1–2	The LORD commands Moses to erect the tabernacle on the first day of the first month	Precise dating signals covenantal inauguration — a new beginning for Israel’s cultic life
40:3–8	Detailed instructions for placing the ark, its covering, the table, lampstand, altars,	The furniture is to be arranged in a specific order — spatial theology;

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	and the courtyard basin and screen	nearness to the ark = nearness to God
40:9–11	Moses is to anoint the tabernacle and all its furnishings to consecrate them	Anointing = setting apart for divine use; establishes the tabernacle as holy space
40:12–15	Aaron and his sons are to be brought to the entrance, washed, clothed, and anointed — “a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations”	Priestly consecration is covenantal and generational, not personal; points forward to Christ’s permanent high priesthood
40:16	“Moses did this; according to all that the LORD commanded him, so he did”	Summary statement before execution; establishes Moses’ full compliance before the sevenfold formula begins
40:17	The tabernacle is erected on the first day of the first month of the second year	Exactly one year after the Exodus (cf. 12:2); calendrical symbolism — the redeemed community now has a new center
40:18–19	Moses erects the frames, bars, and pillars and spreads the covering — “as the LORD commanded Moses” (1st)	Obedience formula begins; structural completion
40:20–21	Moses places the tablets in the ark, sets the poles, places the mercy seat, and brings the ark into the tabernacle — “as the LORD commanded Moses” (2nd)	The Law under the mercy seat — atonement covers the commandments; profound spatial theology
40:22–23	Moses sets the table in the tent of meeting and arranges the bread — “as the LORD commanded Moses” (3rd)	Bread of Presence = God’s provision and communion with His people
40:24–25	Moses sets up the lampstand and lights the lamps — “as the LORD	Light in the tabernacle = God’s illuminating presence; darkness has no place

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
40:26–27	commanded Moses” (4th) Moses places the golden altar and burns fragrant incense — “as the LORD commanded Moses” (5th)	where God dwells Incense = prayer and worship ascending to God; the altar of incense is the closest non-priestly approach to the Most Holy Place
40:28	Moses puts up the screen for the entrance to the tabernacle	The screen marks the boundary between common and consecrated space
40:29	Moses sets up the altar of burnt offering and offers the burnt offering and grain offering — “as the LORD commanded Moses” (6th)	Sacrifice is the basis of all approach to God; burnt offering = total dedication
40:30–32	Moses places the basin and fills it; Moses and Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet when they enter — “as the LORD commanded Moses” (7th)	Final obedience formula; washing = ritual purity required for entering God’s presence
40:33	Moses finishes the work	Deliberate echo of Genesis 2:1–2; Moses “finished” the tabernacle as God “finished” the heavens and earth
40:34–35	The cloud covers the tent and the glory fills the tabernacle; Moses cannot enter	God ratifies the covenant by taking up residence; Moses’ exclusion signals both God’s holiness and the incompleteness of the Mosaic economy
40:36–38	The cloud lifts when Israel travels and remains when they camp; the pillar of fire by night throughout all their journeys	The permanent presence of God as guide and companion; not merely for the inauguration but for every step of the journey

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	40:1–15	The Divine Command: Erect, Arrange, Consecrate
2	40:16–33	The Faithful Execution: Moses Does All the LORD Commanded
3	40:34–38	The Divine Response: The Glory Fills the Tabernacle and God Leads His People

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The tabernacle’s completion signals God’s promised dwelling among His redeemed people.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His people that He will come to dwell wherever He has been obeyed and welcomed — the completion of the tabernacle is not the end of the story but the beginning of His permanent, guiding presence in their midst.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what obedience is for. (*Mind/Belief*) The sevenfold “as the LORD commanded Moses” is not a record of religious achievement — it is the condition for divine presence. Moses does not obey in order to earn God’s favor; he obeys because God has already redeemed Israel from Egypt and is now, by grace, making a home among them. This passage demands a fundamental reorientation of how Christians understand their obedience. Obedience is not the mechanism by which we attract God’s attention; it is the prepared space in which His promised presence is received. Where the gospel has done its work and we have been redeemed, God calls us to prepare — to consecrate our lives, our homes, our communities — not to earn His presence but to receive what He has promised to give.

2. Recognize that God always keeps the covenant He initiates. (*Mind/Belief*) Exodus 25:8 gave the command; Exodus 40:34 delivered the fulfillment. Every step between those verses was God holding Himself accountable to His own word. For the reader living between promise and fulfillment — which describes every believer in every age — this chapter is a declaration that God does not forget His promises. The tabernacle fills with glory not because Israel was especially faithful (they had just been catastrophically unfaithful with the golden calf in Exodus 32) but because God said He would come, and God’s word does not return empty. Christians waiting for final redemption, for the

restoration of all things, for the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21, are not waiting in vain. The God who filled the tabernacle will fill the new creation.

3. Grieve your distance from God and desire His nearness. (*Affections/Worship*) Moses cannot enter the tent because the glory of God is too great for him. This should produce not detachment but longing. The whole movement of Scripture from Exodus 40 forward is toward a day when God's people are not excluded from His presence but welcomed fully into it — through the mediation of Christ, who alone entered the true holy of holies. Where is your hunger for God's presence today? Not for religious performance, not for doctrinal correctness alone, but for God Himself — His nearness, His guidance, His light, His glory? This passage invites you to feel the ache of distance and to direct it toward Christ, who has torn the curtain.

4. Trust that God's presence — not your circumstances — determines your direction. (*Affections/Worship*) The chapter closes not with Israel settled in Canaan but still on the journey, still in the wilderness. And yet the final note is not anxiety about what lies ahead — it is the settled confidence of a people who travel under the cloud of God's presence. When the cloud lifted, they moved. When it settled, they stayed. The application is not “wait for a sign” — it is “live under the guidance of the God who has promised to lead you.” For the Christian, the indwelling Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of this cloud-and-fire reality. The question is not “where is God in my situation?” but “am I attending to the One who has promised to guide me?”

5. Order your life around the place where God has promised to meet you. (*Will/Behavior*) Israel's entire camp was organized around the tabernacle at its center (cf. Numbers 2). The tabernacle was not one feature of Israelite life among many — it was the organizing principle of everything. The new covenant equivalent is not a building but a person and a practice: the means of grace — Word, sacrament, prayer, and the gathered body of Christ — through which God has promised to meet His people. The concrete application is this: what actually sits at the center of your life this week? What is everything else organized around? This passage calls you to deliberately, structurally re-center your daily life around the means by which God has said He will be present with you.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 40 teaches that God is a God who keeps His word and who dwells personally among His people. His presence is not a metaphor or an abstraction — it is as real as the cloud that filled the tabernacle so completely that even Moses could not stand in it. This chapter also establishes that God's presence follows consecration — not as a transaction but as a pattern: God calls His people to prepare a place for Him, and when they do, He comes. The passage further reveals that God's dwelling is not static but dynamic — the cloud rises and leads; God's presence among His people is not a monument but a movement, accompanying them through every stage of their journey.

Underlying all of this is the covenantal nature of God's nearness: He is near because He said He would be, not because His people have earned it.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: For Reformed theology, Exodus 40 is a critical node in the covenant of grace. The tabernacle is the Mosaic administration's answer to the question that has driven the entire Pentateuch: how can a holy God dwell with a sinful people? The answer is grace-initiated, obedience-shaped, and presence-culminating. The tabernacle system — with its sacrifices, its priestly mediation, its spatial gradations of holiness — is the scaffolding God erects until the true temple arrives in the person of Jesus Christ. Reformed theology reads Exodus 40 through John 1:14: the Word “tabernacled” among us, and we beheld His glory. The glory that filled the Mosaic tabernacle was a shadow; Christ is the substance. Furthermore, the new covenant inaugurated at Pentecost (Acts 2) is the antitype of Exodus 40 — not a building filled with glory, but a people filled with the Spirit, the living temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:21–22). Exodus 40 thus stands at the center of the Reformed understanding of the whole Bible as the unfolding story of God moving toward His people in covenant love, through mediators and means, until He dwells with them fully and permanently.

Main Takeaway

God has always been moving toward His people, not away from them. The cloud that filled the tabernacle, the Word that became flesh, the Spirit who indwells the church — these are not separate events but a single covenant kept across millennia. You are not waiting for a God who has gone silent; you are living in the company of a God who has already come, already dwelt, already led, and has promised to bring you all the way home. The tabernacle is complete. Stop living as though the glory is still far off.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as mere historical conclusion rather than theological claim.** Exodus 40 is often preached as “the finish line” of the tabernacle project — a wrap-up chapter. This misses the point entirely. The chapter is not the end of a building project; it is the beginning of a covenant reality. The glory filling the tabernacle is the theological center, not the postscript. Preachers who treat Exodus 40 as administrative conclusion rather than covenantal climax will produce a flat, informational sermon that leaves the congregation unaffected.
- **Moralizing the sevenfold obedience formula into a works-righteousness application.** The repeated “as the LORD commanded Moses” is not an invitation to

preach “be like Moses — obey completely and God will show up.” This reduces the chapter to performance-based religion. The obedience formula must be read in its post-Exodus 32 context: Israel has already catastrophically failed, and God is still fulfilling His promise. The tabernacle is completed by grace, not earned by Moses’ perfection. Applications must be rooted in gratitude and gospel reception, not behavioristic self-improvement.

- **Missing the connection to John 1:14 and the incarnation.** The single most illuminating canonical parallel to Exodus 40:34–35 is John 1:14, where the same glory-language and tabernacle-language converge in the person of Jesus Christ. A sermon on Exodus 40 that ends at the tabernacle has not yet preached the passage in its full biblical-theological force. The tabernacle is explicitly types and shadows — not the substance. Lead the congregation from the shadow to the Substance.
- **Overstating Moses’ exclusion as a lesson in human humility.** Moses cannot enter (v. 35) not primarily because Moses is proud or needs a lesson — but because the old covenant system, for all its glory, remains incomplete. Moses’ exclusion is a Christological signal. Preaching it primarily as a character lesson about Moses domesticates a typological pointer into a moralistic lesson.
- **Spiritualizing the cloud-and-fire away from the Holy Spirit.** The closing verses (40:36–38) describe God’s permanent, guiding presence — the cloud by day, fire by night. This is not merely historical color. It is the redemptive-historical precursor to the Holy Spirit’s guiding presence in the life of the believer. Preachers should make this connection explicitly (cf. Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18) so that the congregation understands they are not living in a less-guided era than ancient Israel — they are living in a more intimate one.
- **Treating the applications as primarily architectural or ecclesiological rather than personal and Christological.** Exodus 40 is sometimes preached toward a “build a better church worship environment” application — focus on order, beauty, and preparation in corporate worship. While there are secondary implications for corporate worship, the primary application is personal and Christological: the God who came to dwell in the tabernacle has come to dwell in you (1 Corinthians 6:19). The center of gravity is not the building; it is the Person.