

A Brief Reflection on Old Church Buildings

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I love old buildings and church architecture. I am drawn to them. With one exception, the churches in every Parish I have served in have been historic buildings. However, although beautiful to look at, these buildings were in constant need of work, expensive to maintain, inflexible, and an ecological nightmare when it came to heating and cooling. I understand why cash-strapped parishes feel that there are better uses for limited resources and want to divest themselves of these buildings. And, of course, we would not dream of constructing churches like this today. What place do they have? Let me share a few thoughts.

1. To the greater glory of God

Past generations built churches “to the greater glory of God.” These words are often inscribed on the foundation stone. A magnificent God resides in a magnificent building, and these are places where we can encounter the creator of everything. The soaring rooflines and spires lift our eyes towards heaven. The stained-glass windows challenge us to look at the world through God’s eyes. The quiet and tranquility gives us a place apart from the busyness of life to commune with our creator. These are sacred spaces.

In the Old Testament, God was instrumental in the design of a magnificent temple. Upon its completion, it was dedicated by Solomon. *‘When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple’* (2 Chronicles 7:1). This was the place where God dwelt was the place where the people would gather to commune with him. Throughout the Old Testament we encounter the repeated refrain, *‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths’* (Micah 4:2).

In the New Testament, however, Jesus took the functions of the temple on himself saying, *“‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body’* (John 2:19-21). God does not dwell in buildings made with human hands (Acts 7:48). Rather, all the fullness of God dwells in Jesus (Colossians 2:9) and through Jesus alone do we approach God (John 14:6).

In the light of this, what function do our traditional church buildings serve? Is God glorified in and through them? Do they bear testimony to the life-giving work of Jesus – crucified, risen, and ascended? Are we operating on an Old Testament rather than a New Testament model, focusing on the physical building rather than the spiritual reality it was intended to represent? In some cases, I suspect that it is the former. It is an easy segue to churches built, not for the glory of God, but for the glory of man, as people see this as a way to make a name for themselves or leave a lasting legacy.

That being said, architecture can and does evoke powerful emotions and create a sense of presence. In addition, we can have historical connections with a building formed over a lifetime or even over generations. All these can contribute to our feeling connected with God in these spaces in ways that we do not in a modern and less tactile building designed for practicality and flexibility. In modern buildings, those same emotions and sense of presence are no less important, but they must instead be evoked in different and more thoughtful ways, through

forms of worship and music rather than architectural ambience. Whatever the style of the building, the challenge is to think carefully about how we approach God rather than where we do it.

2. An explicit declaration of presence

Historically, churches were built in prominent locations in the town, often on high points, where they could be easily seen and where people would regularly pass by. There is great strategic value in this. Our buildings proclaim, in an undeniable way, that we are present and at the centre of community life. Jesus said, *“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden”* (Matthew 5:14).

The irony is that these impressive buildings are often home to small and elderly congregations. In some cases they stand empty or have been converted into homes or other businesses. In others, the surrounding community has ceased to exist. Given that the *“town built on a hill cannot be hidden,”* local communities are very aware of the dichotomy between the proclamation and the reality. Our buildings can, in practice, declare our absence from the life of our community and our irrelevance to it.

How can we change that perception? How can our buildings point to the presence of the living Lord Jesus in our midst? Only by ensuring that there is continuity between the building and actions that place the church at the heart of community life. To be relevant we must participate. Jesus continued, *“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:15-16).

3. An implicit expression of dominance and power

When these buildings were originally constructed, they often dominated the skyline. They were the biggest buildings in town and often situated on a high point. So, too, were the Rectories that accompanied them. I’ve lived in several towns where the Anglican Rectory, and sometimes also the Presbyterian Manse, were the only brick, two story buildings in a sea of single story, weatherboard houses. The implicit message was one of the wealth and power of the church and the status of the incumbent. The human desire for status and authority over others is as real within the church as without and our buildings can pander to this desire. The grander the building, the greater the illusion of our significance. How can we counter this implicit message?

Jesus addressed this in Matthew 20.

Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the

Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:20-28).

Greatness in the Kingdom of heaven is not measured by the exercise of authority. Rather, it is a correlate of sacrificial service. “...*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...*” (Matthew 20:26-27).

4. Assets or liabilities

Our beautiful old church buildings have their place, as do our new ones. When it comes down to it, a building is just a building. It can be either an asset to gospel ministry or a hindrance to it depending on how it is used.

First, our buildings are an asset when they provide a safe and accessible sacred space for people to engage in genuine communion with God. Second, they are an asset when they serve as a base of operations for a godly participation in the life of the wider community that truly glorifies God. Third, they are an asset when they are used to equip and empower the saints for lives of sacrificial service.

However, they become hindrances to gospel ministry when they glorify man rather than God and confuse our priorities so that we invest our energy and resources in buildings rather than the kingdom. Second, they are hindrances when they allow us to become so comfortable and complacent in our forms of worship that we cease to be challenged to think carefully about how and why we approach God as we do. Third, they are a hindrance when they declare our absence from the life of our community and our irrelevance to it. In such cases, we would be better off without them. Finally, they are a hindrance when they satisfy the human desire for status and authority over others and blind us to the reality and necessity of our true calling to be servants of all.