

Buildings

by Colin Anderson

We should be careful not to think that our church buildings contribute to God's glory, but rather see them as conveniences for His people.

Topics: "Spiritual Worship", "Godly Stewardship"

Description

Colin Anderson discusses the concept of glorifying God through various means, such as through acts of service, giving, and even mundane activities when done with the right intention. He delves into the history of church buildings and how they have evolved over time, emphasizing that no earthly building can inherently contribute to the glory of God. Anderson highlights the importance of simplicity and avoiding materialism in the construction and furnishing of places of worship, pointing out that our focus should be on spiritual worship rather than ornate structures.

Transcript

To glorify God is to acknowledge and make known His character, or give credit to Him. There are a variety of ways in which we may do it. The sight of a man lame from birth leaping and walking and praising God awakened a crowd to glorify God (Acts 3:1-9; 4:21). According to Peter, those who speak or serve appropriately in church meetings glorify Him (1 Pet. 4:11). We may cause the recipients of our gifts to glorify God (2 Cor. 9:13) and, if we are filled with the Spirit, even mundane activities like eating or drinking can bring glory to Him (1 Cor. 10:31). My question is, Can we build a hall or chapel that will glorify God?

In Old Testament times, God decreed that a tabernacle and later a temple should be erected to display His character and provoke Israel and the surrounding nations to acknowledge His glory. Accordingly, the builders were told to follow exact specifications (Ex. 25:40).

Church buildings today cannot pretend to fulfill that function. God may be glorified by His saints in a building, but the structure itself cannot contribute to His glory. Indeed, its design and appointments may actually conceal the glory of the God in whose Name it has been erected. This is true of magnificent cathedrals, as we shall presently see. But it may also be true of less imposing structures--and this despite the fact that many a church building has "To the Glory of God" etched on its cornerstone. The inscription may reveal the serious intent of those who financed the project, but in contrast to Old Testament times, architecture can no longer claim to display His character or glorify His name.

The book of Hebrews was written to show that the system of types and shadows was inadequate and had grown obsolete. It was old and ready to disappear (Heb. 8:13). It was to be replaced by better things, things which drew God's people near to Him in truth and reality. Not even in typical fashion could Jerusalem or Samaria lay claim to house the living God. (See Jn. 4:23-24.)

In the measure in which we adopt Old Testament language or even think in Old Testament fashion, we obscure the very truth we seek to maintain. In the first centuries of Christian testimony, buildings set apart for Christian worship did not exist, yet churches flourished as believers met in homes of wealthy patrons or in secular buildings. The gospel was carried to the man in the street and Christians generally had neither the resources nor the inclination to build temples. To have done so would have made it easier for their adversaries to find and persecute them.

With the Emperor Constantine, that changed. Money flowed into the coffers of the once despised Christians, and meeting places--which in increasingly mimicked pagan temples--began to appear everywhere. Believers lost sight of the true sanctuary and their buildings became "sacred." This was not to the glory of God. Rome went to the extreme in her buildings, but later on, Protestants were also guilty of perpetuating the myth that the Most High dwelt in temples made with hands.

All this is well known and a matter of history, but we should also reflect on the fact that "early brethren" saw these things much more clearly than we often do. Truths as to the nature of worship had been wonderfully revived. Believers were conducting their lives in the light of things that were unseen and that which represented the eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). That which appealed to the eye or had an aesthetic beauty of its own was therefore depreciated by them. They opted for great simplicity in their meeting places.

Today, building codes mean that we have to spend much more than we would like when erecting a facility. But we are often tempted to go far beyond what is required and many of our buildings are not only lavish in their appointments, but the time and money spent on them shows that we are again thinking that the way we erect and furnish our chapels and halls reflects in some way upon the glory of God. Of course, we often spend more on our own homes than is appropriate or necessary. Does our ecclesiastical materialism help justify our absorption with domestic comfort? "After all," we say, "we all have nice homes. Should we not similarly care for the house which is for His glory?"

But there is no building on earth, however wonderfully designed, that can of itself contribute to the glory of God. Such buildings at their best are for the convenience and comfort of His people. This is not necessarily an evil thing. Sitting on a backless wooden bench will not make us more spiritual or help us to praise him without distraction!

Yes, our architecture and our furnishings should be sensible--but not sacerdotal, for we exercise our priesthood in heaven. When our plans include an earthly "sanctuary" we deny that truth. And how easily we may fall into the trap of doing what Christians did in the days of Constantine--erecting facilities that make pagans feel comfortable because they are somewhat similar to their temples.

The writer has often observed how "churchy" furnishings may restrict the free-flow of worship among us. If we entertain in our minds to the smallest degree that our building is a holy place on earth, it is not surprising that we have difficulty drawing near to God in heaven. Ornate communion tables, stained glass windows, vaulted ceilings and even fancy pews all carry the same subliminal but not insignificant message--this is a hallowed place. Reverence is required not so much because we recognize the presence of the Lord when we gather in His Name, but rather because we see ourselves as being in some

kind of sanctuary.

In the early days of an assembly, the believers may meet in a home or school. The furnishings may distract in a different way than we have described, but at least they do not tell religious lies. All things being equal, there is often a refreshing reality about the praise, and an earnestness in the prayers of the saints. But move them into a "sanctuary" and what happens? Worship tends to greater formality and deacons approach the table to dispense the bread and wine with a precision that would gratify an undertaker. No, I do not advocate a careless attitude or sloppy service, but beware of the sensuous appeal of religious architecture and furniture, and the unwanted formality that is induced by them. Not by such things do we minister to the living God or contribute to His glory.

Some readers may be in an assembly that has fallen heir to a "church" erected years ago, or for other reasons find themselves gathering in a facility that has some of the undesirable features mentioned above. Can they do anything to counteract the influence of their surroundings? We believe so.

First, they can avoid using the words "church" or "sanctuary" when referring to their meeting place, and use these terms in the way they are used by the Holy Spirit.

Second, they can use wisdom when any building additions or improvements are planned, so that the sacred appearance may not be further emphasized.

Third, and most important of all, they should make sure that regular teaching is given concerning Christ's appearing in a greater and more perfect tabernacle than that made with hands (as outlined in Hebrews 9 and 10).

Such steps would do much to dispel the fog in the minds of those who come to fellowship with us from places where these truths are unknown and untaught. Also, the coming generation may be preserved from being unduly influenced by humanly designed and earthbound sanctuaries.

Finally let us remember that we always detract from God's glory rather than minister to it when we try to impress the world or conform to its expectations.

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