Worship and Architecture Through the Ages

*[W]e have, after earnest and frequent calling upon the name of God, and after much consultation, not with flesh and blood, but with his holy word, resolved … and have agreed upon … all the parts of publick worship, at ordinary and extraordinary times. Wherein our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavoured to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the word of God; … there may be a consent of all the churches in those things that contain the substance of the service and worship of God;*

from Directory for Public Worship, 1645

In the above quotation, taken from the introductory remarks of the *Directory for Public Worship*, the Westminster Divines first seek to define worship before proceeding to teach how it is to be done. All must be derived from the Word of God.

The need of man to worship God did not arise until after the fall of Adam from grace. That is why our sin is always before us in approaching God and we are continually in need of His grace in Christ. It is always to be remembered, then, that our worship of God is always with this dichotomy: in this life we are fallen creatures, every thought, word and deed are tainted by the stain of that nature; but as believers saved by grace, we are uplifted by the sense that we have been renewed by the redemption purchased by Christ. When one side or the other of this dichotomy are out of balance, so is our worship. That explains why church history can be easily outlined according to the struggles back and forth of how God’s people worship God – how it is done and where it is done. To survey that here in a simple article is no small task. But let me attempt to do so by using large, significant chunks of history by which we can see this struggle.

The Early Church – A major point taught to the ancient church was how decentralized Christianity was to be. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s command of the Great Commission and His promise to always be with us, the early Christians understood they were not tied to a particular location such as a Temple or city. The two-fold emphasis of the church was clear – to be the people of God, cultivating, supporting and growing a spiritual family – and to carry forth a missionary task, taking the gospel message to the ends of the earth. Where the church gathered for worship was simply not important. And, mainly for that reason, the earliest places for church gatherings seemed to resemble the simple and plain synagogues of the Jews, which included meeting in private homes, simple rooms or houses, or even outside in the open air.

But soon, the courageous heroes of the faith began to die or be martyred and such historical sites began to be important, even sacred – the site of St. Peter’s martyrdom and burial being only one of them. And with that, power, even royal power, soon became attached to the church as early as 311. Christianity became not only the religion of the empire but the empire of the religion. Now, money was no object in providing places of worship for the one, true God. The glory of God was seen as His kingdom now on earth. Only the best would do – the best architects, the best designs, the best artists, materials and efforts.

The Medieval Church – Along with the growth of important and sacred sites and the political power they wielded, the worship of God also changed. Since the 4th century, worship had slowly come to mean only one thing: the celebration of the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper. With the rise of the office of priest in the church, the worship of God, now only being primarily the Eucharist or Mass, was also something that had become mechanically holy – in other words, something done, the act of which, in and of itself, was holy. As such, this was progressively relegated and left to the “experts”. They were the ones actually doing the worshipping. Those others who happened to be in the building at the time were free to watch and pray and come and go as they pleased.

The crowning glory of this is St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. In this church building, the meaning of Christianity has been completely reversed from its biblical direction: sacred rites were regularly done by sacred priests at a sacred place.

The Reformation Church – With the coming of the Reformation, both church polity and power were broken. The splintering of the church in the next centuries was ugly but necessary if the true worship of God was to be restored. Reformation priorities redefined the ordinances of worship as well as who it was that was to do them and thus participate actively in worship.

As a result, the church buildings also went through a radical change. The glorious was now suspicious and artificial. The simple, plain assembly hall or meeting house emphasized again the difference between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of Christ and the difference between a sacred site and a sacred people. Meeting houses were not only plain but emphasized the gathering of God’s people around the biblical priorities of preaching, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

But with the splintering of the church came a splintering of her unity as well. Voices urging different directions strained against one another in a tug of war – one side desiring to return to the notion that the church building was to be revered as a sacred site and should look like one and be regarded as such, and the other insisting that such a notion was blasphemy. And what should be the focus of true, biblical worship – should it be the preaching of the Word or should it be the celebration of the Lord’s Supper? These differences simply would not be laid to rest.

The Modern Church – In the last three centuries, such tug of war battles have still not been won or lost. Worship, and what it truly means, defined the nature and character of these differences among the various denominations that descended from the Reformation. The differences between Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists an Congregationalists were doctrinal, and doctrine effected worship and worship effected the construction of buildings.

With the coming of the 2nd Great Awakening, the value of the church itself as body of Christ was sidestepped and that changed Protestant worship and its buildings dramatically. The new emphasis was now squarely on the individual’s own, private relationship with God which became paramount and singular in the preaching and planning of services. Worship was no longer aimed at what glorified God and was according to His word; now, worship was to include whatever was pragmatically useful and necessary to get someone saved. This led to several changes in churches across denominational lines. In the effort to draw in and retain the unbeliever, musical performance was greatly enhanced with organ, choir and solo, dramatic preaching of an evangelistic as well as a moralistic nature were championed, and appeal to the emotions ran high. Likewise, in the effort to keep the believer, attention to the design and comfort of the building became important. Larger and grander auditoriums, clearly resembling concert halls, with ornate and polished refinery became necessary along with other amenities which began to be built into church buildings in the name of social ministry – children’s education and programs, libraries, parlours and lounges, kitchens and dining halls, gymnasiums and the like.

In churches of the late twentieth century, the buildings and the worship services were both moving toward a lack of doctrinal and practical distinctiveness that once easily characterized and identified the beliefs, worship and buildings of different denominations. As the room in which worship is done became more universal and utilitarian, the concept of sacred space seemed to be handily laid to rest. But the expense, too often, was to also jettison the concept of a sacred people. Meanwhile, more and more symbols of the ordinances that make Christian worship what it is – the pulpit, the table and the font – were set aside or eliminated altogether as trappings of “churchiness” that serve no purpose any longer. What was heralded still as worship was, in point of fact, too often nothing more than a musical pep rally followed by an inspirational message that spoke still only to the individual and not to the audience as the body of Christ – no matter how many thousands might be sitting in the auditorium at the time.

Pastor David Barker, April, 2009