

EXPOSITORY ESSAY: **Beauty, Architecture, and Money in the Church**

by David M. Coddington, Edited by Mel W. Coddington

Church buildings come in every shape and size: from small house churches to immense stadiums. No matter the size, it is typical of all churches to have a desire to build larger and better facilities. Churches want bigger parking lots, larger sanctuaries, more modern lobbies, and high tech television screens in every strategic spot of the church complex. All of these renovations are costly and require a “building fund”. Pastors beseech the congregation to give money towards the fund so that the facilities can be updated. There is a fine line between being good stewards of a house of God and turning a place of worship into a show. The church, as a place of worship, should showcase the beauty of God and provide a functional facility for ministry to take place. Church leaders need to be careful to not overindulge and make the facility beautiful for its own sake rather than pointing to the God we worship.

The Bible actually has quite a bit to say on this topic in both the Old and New Testaments. The idea of a place of worship for God begins with the Tabernacle in Exodus chapters 25-27 and the Temple in 1 Kings chapter 5. There are a couple of key points that need to be addressed in these examples. First, God commands for a building to be established specifically for worship and teaching. “Make a courtyard for the tabernacle” (Exodus 27:9), and “I intend, therefore, to build a temple for the Name of the Lord my God...” (1 Kings 5:5). Even in the New Testament with the priesthood of the believer, people are still to gather together to praise God and hear teaching in a specific place (Acts 2:42-44). This clearly indicates that God desires for His people to gather together in a meeting place. It is also in God’s will for the meeting place to be a specifically dedicated building like the Tabernacle or the Temple.

The second application that can be gleaned from the Tabernacle and the Temple is that God desires for His houses of worship in which His presence tangibly dwells to be beautiful and majestic. God himself commands for gold, precious jewels, and expensive wood and clothe to be used in the creating of the Tabernacle (Exodus 27:9-19). He also never objected to Solomon’s extravagant plans for the Temple (1 Kings chapter 6). The beautiful artifacts and workmanship serves a very specific purpose: they reflect the beauty, majesty, and holiness of God.

The atmosphere of majesty is for both God and the worshiper. God commands Moses to “...make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). God’s sanctuary should reflect his very nature. To do otherwise and desecrate His image is an abomination of the highest order (Matthew 24:15). The atmosphere of majesty is also for the worshiper, “One thing I ask of the Lord... that I may dwell in the house of the Lord... to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple” (Psalms 27:4). The temple should elicit awe and glory to God in the heart of the worshiper. The temple should not be used for self-serving purposes like the money changers in the temple that Jesus condemned in Matthew 21:13, “‘It is written,’ he said to them, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a `den of robbers.’”

The New Testament puts beauty in the house of God into a different perspective. In Acts 7:48, Stephen reminds his audience that God “does not live in houses made by men”. After Pentecost, every true believer has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit so that God dwells inside of every one of us. This does not negate the need for buildings of

worship or fellowship. As Matthew Anderson writes: "At the same time, this indwelling life of the Spirit needs external, visible support to flourish." The church building is the outward expression of our inward position of faith and should facilitate our inner growth and outer growth with other Christians.

The challenge then is to incorporate beauty and majesty into the modern church in order to reflect the nature of God and create an atmosphere of worship. We must first ask the question: What kind of architecture, or artifacts, in churches will reflect the nature of God and bring the worshipers into an attitude of worship? The answer to this is extremely subjective and cultural. What is beautiful and acceptable in one culture may not be in another. Each church must look at their context and demographic to determine what best serves the needs of the people. An urban church may use graffiti-art and murals to express the glory of God. A rural church could have a prayer garden that brings the wonder of God's creation into mind.

The heart of the issue is the human heart. What is the purpose of the artifact? Are the televisions in the waiting room truly to serve those who cannot be in the service, or are they there because other large churches have them? There are many pitfalls that church leaders can fall into when deciding on renovating and expanding a church's facilities. A common thought in churches today is to quickly incorporate anything that is trending or popular in larger churches. Church leaders want to do whatever successful churches are doing in order to be relevant and successful. A prime example of this, excluding technological examples, is a recent trend to have an artist paint a canvas on stage while a service is occurring. For some churches, this may just be an attempt to reach "hip" audiences and copy the techniques of a "hip" church, when in fact it may distract from the service and not glorify God in some contexts ("hip" means 'to adhere to the latest popular trends').

Some pieces of intended beauty may have unintended consequences. The worship service is a minefield for unintended consequences. Some churches have decided to install smoke machines, background lighting, and roving spotlights. The worship leaders might think that they give greater depth and feeling to the worship; however, that may not be the case for some people. Many people may find it distracting rather than beautiful or spiritual. Pieces of beauty need to be evaluated after they are put into practice. Is this piece of art having the intended effect or the same effect the leaders felt? This criterion applies for art, music, or technology.

Another common mistake is to give into the business and marketing mentality of: 'If you build it, they will come'. This approach is using art like free pizza in a youth event. The goal is no longer to bring glory to God, but increase attendance on Sundays. Churches sometimes get caught up in the idea that new and better facilities will automatically equal a larger attendance and a more spiritual community. This mistake goes back to the heart issue. God did not want the tabernacle or the temple in which His presence tangibly dwells to be rich and beautiful so that people would flock from the corners of the earth to see its majesty. He wanted the buildings to be glorious because He is glorious. All beauty should be focused on pointing to Him rather than increasing attendance.

This brings a rather interesting point to this analysis: How should technology be used in relation to beauty? When we think of beauty in the church, the first thing that comes to mind is high arches, cathedrals, beautiful paintings, or glass-stained windows. How

does technology such as lights and television fit into glorifying God? Can technology be beautiful, functional, or both? The answer is 'yes' to all of the above. When the new technology of the electric guitar and drums came out, some churches felt that they were not reverent. Today, these instruments are commonly a staple of worship. Another example is PowerPoint slide presentations and projectors. It was not that long ago that churches only used a piano and organ with worshipers using a hymnal. Technology can be used functionally to enhance worship and teaching, but it can also be a form of beauty.

A prime example for the beauty of technology is videos. There are people who specialize in putting together videos for churches. These videos go beyond being promotional and announcement centered. Video production has been used to share the testimony of people who are scared to talk in front of a live audience. Videos can also illustrate and bring an emotional message like "That's My King" by Dr. S.M. Lockridge, which has been played in almost every church in the United States of America. The modern churchgoer is accustomed to seeing beauty conveyed in video format like movies or television shows. Technology in a church can be just as beautiful and glorifying to God as a stained-glass window or a painting.

A large issue surrounding developing church facilities is the cost and sacrifice needed to accomplish the expansion. Art and technology do not come cheaply. Aging churches are very expensive to renovate and new churches are very expensive to build. Most churches either go into debt or raise extra money from their congregation to pay for the renovation or new building project. The question is if the money is spent better on beauty and facilities, or the needs of the poor. David Platt questions, "Why would we spend an inordinate amount of our resources on something that is never prescribed or even encouraged in the New Testament? Why would we not instead use those resources on that which is explicitly promoted in the New Testament, such as sharing the Gospel with the lost or helping the poor in the church?"

This is a very difficult question to answer. Beauty is a quality that cannot be quantified or put a price on. There is something very special in coming into the house of God and feeling a sense of awe and a connection with him. Using resources to create beauty in churches brings honor to God, but God has a more important purpose for the church. The Great Commission commands us to make disciples (Matthew 28:16-20). That should be the focus of the church and its resources. If 90 percent of a church's budget is given to building better facilities and only 10 percent to ministries, there is a serious problem.

A majority of the resources in a church need to go to furthering the cause of Christ. In a practical sense, a painting or lighting system cannot feed the poor around the church or fund missionaries in other countries. There needs to be a balance in focus; however, beauty in the church can be used as an outreach ministry. Many churches have hosted art conventions in their areas to reach out to the art communities. In another sense, a church's facilities should reflect the community around it. If a church is in an area that holds beauty as important, it is not wrong for the church to reflect that. In other cases though, there have been situations where a church wants to move into a less affluent neighborhood, so they build a grand beautiful building. Slowly, the church begins to worry about their facilities being destroyed and posts guards at the doors and

leaves the people they were supposed to be ministering to outside the doors. Beauty should never be held above ministry.

That brings us to an important tension in church buildings: functionality and beauty. When a growing church decides to expand their facilities, their intentions are to build an increase in their ability to do ministry. This could mean larger youth facilities, parking lots, and sanctuaries. This could even mean a new coffee shop, bookshop, or fellowship hall. These are all great avenues for ministry but the problem comes if a church gets caught up in making these things too extravagant. Is a lobby with a million-gallon fish tank necessary? A building can have facilities that are adequate for ministry and be beautiful without going over the top or beyond reasonableness. The beauty should enhance the functionality of a space without overwhelming it.

Culture is also a large part of a church's facilities. Matthew Anderson makes a great point in his online article, *Building Matter Because People Matter*, "Our physical environments subtly affect how we act in ways we usually do not consciously attend to or notice." The physical space greatly affects the culture in and around that space. A building like the Westminster Abbey church in London, England cultivates an atmosphere of reverence. It is unlikely that people are going to laugh and shout loudly in a cathedral. Buildings and objects do not force us to behave a certain way, but they make actions more likely or less likely. The physical facility plans of a church need to reflect a knowledge of culture. What does a stained-glass window make possible or impossible? What about a bookstore or certain kinds of architecture? Worship in a park is going to be very different than inside of a sanctuary. Evangelicals who want to hold to 'the priesthood of the believer' should not throw out or reject thoroughly considering the physical layout of the church facilities in respect to how it affects achieving the spiritual goals of the church. Where we worship can affect and be just as important as how we worship.

The culture outside of the church is just as important as the culture inside of the church when developing a church building. Societies of today are far different than that of 10, 20, or 10,000 years ago. Most societies today are much more focused on helping the needy, and are sensitive to wasted money in facilities. As Pastor J. D. Greear wrote, "Ornate buildings often end up being more of a distraction for younger believers than an aid. [They] question why so much money was spent on houses of worship when so many around the world are suffering." Art and beauty may be a distraction to this modern generation rather than creating an atmosphere of worship. It is then important to look for ways to create beauty and atmosphere in a church on a budget. There are many options, from having artists in the church donate their work, to using cheap materials in creative ways.

In conclusion, the church building is a reflection of the majesty of God and creates an atmosphere for worship and growth in the lives of the attending believers. Church leaders need to avoid the pitfalls and traps that come with developing a new and beautiful facility. The core values of ministry and moderation need to be present and properly expressed in every step of the process. When adding new artifacts to an existing building, each new artifact needs to be evaluated to see if it is serving its intended purpose or having unintended consequences. Technology in particular should be watched closely so that it does not detract from worship or create a distracted

atmosphere. Everything that we do should be to the glory of God, including how we use the space that God has provided.

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