

Preaching and the Arts

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The crisis mood within the Church facing Pentecost in 1987 reflects itself in prayers for international peace, for national political stability, for cures for outrageous viruses, and for personal courage and wisdom. On the face of it, these concerns may tempt the Christian pastor and lay person to discard as irrelevant a call for serious attention to the life of the visual arts for the life of the Church. In an age desperately in need of the Gospel, why should the prophetic and priestly pastor be concerned with the arts? Answer: Because they participate in the proclamation. The visit of the Spirit that we celebrate at Pentecost at times is manifest in the arts in the Church. That which we manifest in the art and architecture of our churches proclaims a gospel to the world. We in the churches are witnessing to the world around us through the language of the art and architecture that serves our faithful communities and faces our neighborhoods as symbols of our intentions and self-understanding. We are preaching through the forms that house our activities (architecture) and the symbols that articulate our creed (art).

I. Preaching through our use or abuse of art and architecture

The Church is present to the community in the lives and actions of its baptized believers. And it is present in the agencies that carry out its mission at a local, national and foreign scale. The Church is also present as a physical entity, and its physical presence is a mixture of symbols that present and represent the Church to its neighborhood. There is an ongoing sermon in architectural form visually and environmentally stated day in and day out at the physical location of one's church.

The language of form that is spoken by church architecture in its neighborhood relates to issues concerning beauty, scale, accessibility, availability, respect for its environment, clarity and inspiration.

Beauty is not expensive and it is not cheap. Any church's budget can respect the need for beauty. No church needs to be ostentatious, gaudy, pretentious or extravagant. None of these attitudes contributes to beauty. Every worship community can relate its standards of beauty to its architecture as well as respect the need for beauty without losing its vision or mission. No church needs to be ugly. Ugly architecture and inattentiveness to aesthetic qualities does not serve the call to preach the gospel in a lost world. There is a moral obligation for beauty to take its place in the life of the church whether it is lived out in a store front mission in an impoverished ghetto, or it is a national religious monument in a park.

The scale or size of a building in its setting speaks to the neighborhood. An overwhelming monument towering above its neighbors that dominates the

street or the community reflects magisterial notions and may contradict that congregation's mission. On the other hand, a church architecture that appears to squeak timidly amidst the principalities and powers may do the same. Scale is a statement.

Church architecture should invite participation and appear always to be accessible. Practical features like clearly marked doors and passageways for entrance invite participation as opposed to lost or hidden entrances or obscure and unmarked walkways. If a church building looks like a secret society or mausoleum, remote and aloof to the pedestrian, it denies its nature to welcome the stranger or to afford hospitality. Special attention must be given to provisions for handicapped persons who should be able to participate fully in every phase of the church's life. Parking is often a major factor in achieving accessibility. Parking must be planned to function optimally, without being allowed mindlessly to destroy the land.

Availability to the community is always a controversial point. Community organizations and citizens' groups often need facilities and borrowed spaces for their activities. Cooperating agencies, whose purposes compliment the mission of the Church can be served and hence the community served by the availability of the church's architecture.

The environment can be complimented and enhanced, or disrupted and polluted by church architecture. If a building tends to eliminate natural beauty, that is, landscape, foliage, openness to the sky and perspective views that relate the mass of a building to its setting, the environment is not served. If a natural setting is not enhanced, landscaped, and planted, but rather is insensitively paved over with parking lots, driveways, and walks, the environment is disrupted. If the building belches gases, odors, and pollutants, it offends and destroys. Insensitive installation of exterior lighting and the constant play of recorded bell tower tapes extend the message of the Church negatively into the neighborhood. A church can treat its site and its land in such a way as to enrich the entire community and to raise its standards.

The need for clarity in architecture for worship seems stronger today because of the rich pluralism of our society and the possibility of anonymity in a post-Christian age. A church ought to let people know clearly and without apology that it is a church. An anonymous structure among a wall of structures makes no positive religious statement. The special character of a church as a place of worship, service and sacred matters needs to be visible in the society it seeks to serve. It is not helpful to say simply that a church ought to look like a church. That would lead some congregations to copy the past in a nostalgic or perhaps heartless manner. Copy work is not meaningful church architecture. The style of a church may be contemporary or historic, however its statement as architecture to its community ought to be clearly its own unequivocal assertion that it is the Church.

These forms of architectural language work together to provide inspiration. When they are designed and constructed with the proclamation of the gospel in mind, they participate in the mission of the Church. A building for a worshipping community can be a constant inspiration in its neighborhood. It can embody and remind the passing, as well as the participating public, of an

alternative to a meaningless world.

II. *Every Corporate Act of Worship includes the Language of the Arts*

Having considered the public face of church architecture turned toward the world, consider the intimate business of the people, the body of Christ, at worship.

When I went to seminary in the 1950's, an inter-denominational, university-related seminary, we had no courses in liturgy. We read Evelyn Underhill on *Worship* in courses on parish work. Today those concerns are wrapped in the larger study of liturgical sources, traditions, and practices. As has been often noted, the social activism of the Church in the sixties has opened to include the liturgical activism of the Church in the eighties. All Christian traditions, high church, low church, evangelical and charismatic, are self-consciously reclaiming the centrality of corporate worship. We are called upon by the Church to go out into the world to live our faith actively from a starting point, a center; from the worship center where the Word is proclaimed and the ordinances or sacraments are administered. As we center ourselves regularly in worship, there is obviously more at stake than listening to the sermon. The entire occasion participates in the matter of our meeting God in Christ through the Word and in God meeting us. How we gather, what we do and say, what we see and feel, what we sing and sigh, informs and feeds us for the task of being the Church in the world. Gospel-centered worship signals its message to the world through its formal elements, its liturgical context and its explication of scripture. The formal elements include the worship place of the people and its focal center. The people locate themselves in pews or chairs. If they are locked into a static seated position simply to listen, the signals to the people suggest that they are to be passive observers. If the leaders of worship are lifted to exaggerated heights, walled off, or visually obscure to the people, the signals separate clergy and lay leaders. If the pulpit appears to be a reading desk or large box from which a black-robed lecturer makes religious speeches, the arrangement signals to the people that the room is set up for an academic lecture where reasonable and enlightened notions about God are to be considered. If the table looks like a pagan altar, a slab for sacrifice or a decorated buffet, the signals obscure the need for a table of the Lord that invites worshippers to the feast. If the baptismal vessel looks like a serving bowl, an ashtray on a stand, or a birdbath, the mode of our entrance into the Kingdom of God is trivialized.

Other formal elements that relate to our proclamation include light, sound, and symbolic elements. A well-lighted, welcoming environment signals hospitality and acceptance. No one should have to worship in the dark unless it is intentional for all. Natural light should be sensitively available. Everyone should be able to hear as well as he or she is able. Accoustical qualities are directly related to proclamation.

Consideration of symbolic elements involves the whole range of the visual arts and their participation in worship. Every act of corporate worship has its visual component and includes a vocabulary of symbolic references. Intentional care for the selection of appropriate symbols and their role in worship can

serve the faithful community. Inattentiveness can obscure or contradict the message. Fixed symbols should be avoided. The cross is always appropriate. Moveable works such as banners, program covers, flower arrangements, and pictures of various types should be used for obvious purposes and for meaning rather than as mindless decoration.

Bad art is never appropriate. More often than not a very good artist should be commissioned to create special works for special events in the church. Local amateur art should never be permanently installed and should only be used for stated purposes for a limited time. Pandering to local sentiment through the arts as a means to another end is to violate a legitimate role for the arts in the task of proclamation. Great artists should be creating for the church and, for the most part, need only be asked. Every church can be honest through its own indigenous forms, symbolic and otherwise, and can commission good art for everything from the graphics on stationery and envelopes to the total complex of buildings. Catalog art should be totally avoided if possible because there is likely to be someone in your vicinity who can do a comparable or better job for a similar price.

The church is not a museum. Although art exhibits and special displays can always be appropriate within a stated context, the visual material introduced into the corporate experience of worship should be present for obvious reasons. It should be beautiful, well made, clearly visible, and understood as a referent to a higher order than merely art itself. Self-serving works of art introduced into a worship space as though the sanctuary were a museum contradicts the role of the arts in the total proclamation enterprise.

The liturgical context will be shaped in large measure by one's denomination and the local practice of the people. Note, however, how liturgically structured all traditions tend to be. For instance, Free Church denominations have developed orders of worship that follow regular patterns. Those traditions that offer free and spontaneous prayers, avoiding written sources and worship books, very often find themselves with established patterns and even though the prayers are spontaneous they tend to repeat the same phrases and petitions. Nearly all denominations follow some aspects of the Church year, some more rigidly than others. In this regard, works of art, decorations, and symbolic elements are introduced. A church that is self-conscious about its seasonal arts, among others, will find an opportunity to preach in and through the arts. Mindless decorations that appear to compete with the local department store are always out of order.

Within the environment for worship and the liturgical context of the tradition the sermon is a moment of verbal proclamation among many other aspects of symbolic proclamation. In the Church there are many sermons in various forms occurring before and after the sermon is preached.

III. Pastoring with the arts and architecture

A fully integrated program of the arts within the church, whether the medium is architecture, painting, sculpture, textiles, video, music, drama, film, dance, or preaching, means maintaining the arts as an extension of the pastoral

ministry. The history of Christianity is full of instances where the pastoral function of the arts is their reason for being. When in ministry, the ministry of clergy and laity alike, the arts are a creative expression of the Church's role in the world, an integrated life of proclamation and worship for the community is achieved. The arts can be pastoral, prophetic and priestly. They are already, naturally, a part of every worship experience; therefore ministry can be intentional through the arts in achieving the best expression of the gospel possible for the world.