

Church Architecture, A Representative Christian Art

Joseph H. Kimbel

Good art, music and drama have a distinct and rightful place in the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ. Men like Peter Paul Rubens, a Flemish artist of the sixteenth century, devoted their lives to the interpretation of the Word on canvas. Michelangelo, in particular, represented the concern of the Italian School for sacred portrayal.

Maynard James in his book *I Believe in the Holy Ghost*, relates the experience of an eye specialist in Kenya who visited a private exhibition of paintings in South Africa. He was impressed by the unusual beauty of the paintings and said so. The artist told him that becoming a real Christian had so revolutionized his painting that he was no longer "bound" by his previous concepts of modern art, but was now inspired to paint according to the concepts of *light, form* and *beauty* as he found these in God's handiwork. He confided that his new concept was very much frowned upon by his peers.

It is regrettable that theologians of the post-Reformation period, insensitive to the message of sacred art, tended to discredit the visual interpretations of the Gospel and at times even condemned them as pagan and unworthy of a place in biblical representation. This thinking has changed somewhat through the centuries.

The particular concern of the writer, however, has been in the area of church architecture. Truly insensitive is the heart that has not been thrilled

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by some of the marvelous examples of church buildings found in cities scattered across America. One hopes that worshiping in these magnificent edifices thrills the worshiper as well as the casual observer.

However, the great majority of churches today seem to have no architectural significance and little real beauty. Many times the design is conglomerate, borrowed from everything and everywhere, and it often detracts from, rather than adds to, its surroundings in the city or community. Many times these great stone structures have been paid for by a legacy from some benevolent city or church “father” who left the church as a monument, often bearing his name as a memorial to posterity.

The church building should be a thing of beauty, a work of art. A building for worship should be a place of “light and form and beauty,” a place of joy, of rest and repose. Often instead it is both costly and cold.

The writer remembers a consultation trip he made to a large city to one of the nation’s well-known churches. The entrance was right “on the front street,” dimly lighted, and filled with massive, locked, extremely heavy and fortress-like doors. His first reaction was probably that of thousands who walked by and never got inside: “Oh, if they would only get some flood lights out here, and get some doors with glass in them, so that we could see the joy and happiness on the inside!” The psychological effect of such a building was, I believe, exactly the opposite of what the congregation desired it to be.

In the opinion of many, most churches are too costly. Often, many of the costly items are unnecessary ones. Such things as an overpowering, massive tower, elaborate and extensive stained glass areas designed in a modern vein by non-Christian men detract from, rather than add to, the worship of God; such things as unusual and expensive shapes of buildings, odd roof systems, great heights of walls and roofs, are hardly in keeping with the philosophy of mission-minded, self-sacrificing Christians. The world sees this, and it has reason to wonder.

All the world sees is the outside and it is small wonder that it says, “The church is no longer relevant to our society.” God has blessed with affluence many in our churches. We now drive to church (very few walk over a block). We go into the building from the porte-cochere, protected from the elements—and the community—and leave an hour later in a similar way. The community is unaffected and often does not care.

Who is responsible? It would be kindest to say that “it just happens.” Earlier, our churches were often built without much rhyme or reason. “They weren’t born, they just grewed,” like Topsy. As Donald J. Bruggink says in the perceptive book *Christ and Architecture*,

A church that is interested in proclaiming the gospel must also be interested in architecture, for year after year

the architecture of the church proclaims a message that either augments the preached word, or conflicts with it. Church architecture cannot, therefore, be left exclusively to those of refined tastes, the aesthetic elite, or even the professional architect. If the gospel of Christ is worthy of accurate verbal proclamation week by week, it is also worthy of faithful architectural proclamation, when its message speaks year after year.

Some non-Christian architects have become known as church architects and are much sought after by Christian congregations. For example, one architect has almost divided congregations with his extreme ideas. He sometimes becomes very angry, after the contract is signed and the congregation has become quite involved with him, if they try to establish guide lines. Usually this dominating individual gets his way, to the eventual dismay of the congregation involved. Often the future of the church is hindered by the results.

Much planning and study should go into the building of a church structure. Hundreds of basic items must be considered and decided upon. The whole program should be bathed in much prayer. In many instances, denominational church building consultants should be called in for their ideas and recommendations.

Many fine churches are being built today. For the most part they are simple structures, stripped of ornamentation and unnecessary baubles. These are buildings that say to the people who go by, "Come in, you'll find peace and happiness here." These are "seven days a week" buildings, filled with the laughter of children and the glory of God. Certainly they have a place for worship, but they also have well planned and adequate areas for Christian Education, Fellowship, Service Activities, and Administration. There is a good and growing library, a carefully designed nursery, ample foyer space, a quiet place in which individuals or small groups may pray, an abundance of provisions for young people, and adequate facilities for good music. There must be adequate parking facilities and room for future expansion. To me, this is a work of art!

All this can be "simplicity personified." It should be done well, but as simply and inexpensively as possible. "Light and form and beauty" as expressed in the buildings of the Christian Church can be a wonderful witness in the proclamation of the Gospel.