

Redeemer Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis

Exploring the meaning and function of Sacred Space

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“WE HAVE NO TEMPLES; WE HAVE NO ALTARS”

MINUCIUS FELIX, 3RD CENTURY

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Intro:

Sacred Space is a field of study that explores the theology of space and structures and the practices of worship that flow out of them. For Christians it is a study of the buildings and edifices around which our pilgriming community gathers. For some this is the historically poignant ecclesial structure, for others a simple room in a house, and for others a tent revival. The important thing to note about our religion is that scripture reveals that the location is indifferent and the event is crucial! A religion of the incarnation has to have its feet planted firmly on the ground. God and humanity meet at a place, whether it is as casual as an ordinary desert bush or as magnificent as the Jerusalem Temple.

It is often difficult to discuss sacred space because the relationships between architecture and what Christians do when they worship are complex. Church architecture not only reflects the ways Christians worship but it also shapes worship or, not uncommonly, misshapes it. The data below are simply a few signposts to help and guide thinking about sacred space and how we can best interact, use, and reflect Christ at Redeemer with the space God has given us.

I. Biblical Data Concerning Sacred Space

Old Testament:

In the Old Testament we find a host of places and objects where the “glory of God” was seen to have dwelled. From the Garden to the Temple it is a consistent theme throughout the History of the Old Testament. God’s presence is a sign of God’s favor, promise and love and his absence a sign of the people’s sin and God’s disfavor.

The Garden: (Gen 3) God was said to dwell with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Yet when Adam and Eve sinned they were kicked out of the Garden and no longer allowed to return to this place in their state of sin. Here we see the first instance of God connected with a specific place. Sin was not allowed into the presence of God.

The Burning Bush: (Ex 3) When Moses approached the Burning Bush he was reprimanded to remove his shoes because he was on holy ground. Here we again see God connected with a space and that space in turn being connected to holiness.

The Tabernacle: (Ex 40:32-38) God commanded Israel to build a place that God would promise to dwell. This would be where the glory of God dwelled.

Jerusalem (the temple): (Eze 43) God commanded David, and later Solomon to build the temple, and there God promised His spirit would dwell with the Israelites forever. This was also the location that the tabernacle was brought. When the people were wholly disobedient God sent them away from his presence into the Exile.

New Testament:

From Stone to Flesh:

In the New Testament the physical Temple is ultimately destroyed by Christ and the spirit of God dwells no longer in the physical but in the hearts of the people. (Eze 36:26)

We see Jesus prefigure this in his conversation with the Samaritan Woman “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. (John 4:21)

The People of God as the New Temple:

Christians themselves become the living stones of the new Temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 2:4-10; cf. 1 Cor 3:16,6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16f; Eph 2:19-22). It becomes no longer important that the people worship in Jerusalem or any specific place.

II. Use of Sacred Space

Most Christian worship necessitates six different liturgical spaces where worship occurs and three or four liturgical centers (that is furnishings from which worship is led).

Gathering space – The Christian community needs to assemble in order to worship and this act of coming together may be the most important single activity of the congregation. This space marks the temporary separation of the community from the world outside.

Movement Space – Christians as a pilgrim people reflect this in their worship movements. Moving for music, processions, weddings, funerals, baptisms, offerings and receiving communion all have their own unique choreography. Movement is an integral part of worship, and aisles and cross aisles demand careful planning.

Congregational Space – “He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for he promised: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt 18:20). The space where the people are gathered to hear God’s voice and responds to God and to one another.

Choir Space – This is space that is dedicated for music leadership, whether it is for a choir or instrumentalists. It is important that this space bear careful consideration in terms of acoustics and the theology of worship leadership (i.e. a raised or level platform area).

Baptismal Space – Every baptism is an act of the whole community, not just because it adds to the body’s number but because it witnesses again and again to the fact that those who have gone through the waters of death and resurrection are united to Christ. Because a baptism includes both the large circle of congregation and the smaller circle of family, the space necessitates access and room so that both can be actively and comfortably involved.

Pulpit Space – God has always separated unto himself the unique space from which His Word would be uttered. From the Garden of Eden, the burning bush, the spirit-cloud, to the incarnate word it has been important that this liturgical space have a sense of proclamation centered on it. This means practically that it will be visible to all and demand a sense of visual attraction so that all may look upon and rejoice in the sharing of the good news.

Altar-table space – In most buildings this is a focal point of the liturgical space where the Lord’s Supper is focused. Here we see the bread broken and the wine poured out. Here the words and prayers of the Lord Jesus Christ are remembered and rehearsed.

Elements of Christian Tradition in Building

If we believe that the church is both divine and human, then we can believe that the space that houses the church is both sacred and secular – two uses in one structure. The building that serves corporate worship can also serve community needs.

Church as *domus ekklesia*: A Church building is a place of human assembly, intended for community action. The Church building not a dwelling place of Divinity, but the dwelling place of God's people.

Church space reflects Unity of Christ: The place of assembly is one place as the body of Christ is one. The architecture of sacred space should not imply a hierarchy of holiness.

Church space as a place of Secular Ambience: Early Christianity was often accused of atheism because they had no recognized temples. The earliest meeting places were houses or public assembly halls. If we exist to serve others, then shouldn't our sacred space fulfill this meaning as well?

The Church space should be flexible in use: Ought to be a place of hospitality. Edward Sovik suggests that the notion that a good place of worship needs to have built-in ecclesial artifacts, symbols, and art is always wrong.

The place of assembly should reflect the ethics of Love: If we seek to worship in spirit and truth, there can be no value in artificialities, dissimulation, pretense, or imitation.

The place of assembly should be a place of Beauty: Beauty is the necessary symbol, because beauty is the infinitely variable and permanent mystery. Beauty reflects the images of the first and eschatological Temple that we see in Chronicles and Revelation. Our God is a god that that embraces beauty.

III. Brief Outline of Historical Data pertaining to Sacred Space

The Book of Acts:

Early Christians gathered in private houses for Eucharist 'breaking bread from house to house' (Acts 2:46), often in an upper room like that at Troas mentioned in Acts 20:7ff (cf. Rom 16.5; I Cor 16.19).

4th Century Constantinian Christianity:

"Christianity under Constantine had to find a new architecture of a higher order, public in character, resplendent in material and spacious in layout." (The Study of Liturgy, 474)

Eschewing pagan architecture, the Church adopted the basilica, an essentially secular form of an assembly hall. The Development of the Dome was initiated in the East; when churches began to imitate the architectural shell of Emperor Justinian's *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople. At first this hardly altered the ground-plan of the basilica but it tended to lead to a more centralized building. The sense of space and the upward 'pull' of the dome, accentuated by its elaborate mosaic decoration, gave a completely different feel to such a building from that in a Western basilica with its very strong emphasis on the horizontal perspective. Some theologians posit that this "undoubtedly contributed to the survival of a more corporate sense of the People of God in the East whereas Western architecture emphasized its hierarchical nature".

The Medieval Church:

The Medieval church grew from the classical one-roomed basilica with its single altar to many rooms each with its own altar. This grew out of various factors. The proliferation of individual masses, housing and space for the

monastic clergy, cult of relics, veneration of the saints, and the decline of lay communion all contributed to the segregation of the Church building. The Medieval church with its resplendent décor was a microcosm of the heavenly city. The rich symbolism of the carving, stained glass, frescoes, tapestries, etc all represented some portion of the religious life of the city of God. It's interesting to note that in the development of church architecture that churches were often built over the burial locations of famous saints and martyrs. The Vatican is said to be built a top the grave of St. Peter...with the altar directly over the spot.

Sacred Space after the Reformation:

The Medieval church buildings that the Reformers inherited embodied an understanding of the Christian community and its worship which they rejected. The Reformation represented a marked shift from the church building being *domus dei* (House of God) to church building as *domus ecclesiae* (house of the congregation). The Reformation, with all it was, was also a significant reformation of liturgical space.

The logic of the Reformers theology demanded a one-roomed assembly place. The point being a space primarily that functioned so that all present could both hear and see everything clearly. The primary architectural component of the 18th and 19th century which flowed out of the Reformation was the growth in statue of the pulpit.

Sacred Space during the 19th Century:

Architecturally the nineteenth century was dominated in Britain (and parts of America) by the Gothic Revival, an aspect of the contemporary romanticization of the Middle Ages.

Sacred Space during the 20th Century:

The Liturgical Renewal Movement (Catholic), with its rediscovery of the corporate nature of the Church's worship, has led to a revolution in church architecture. Churches built under the influence of the Liturgical Movement are again basically one-roomed buildings, much more centralized, some even circular, with the congregation on three sides of the altar. In some senses what we've seen in the democratization of church architecture. It also reflects the stress on functionalism in modern architecture and developments in the theatre world.

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