

Rethinking Church Buildings

In spite of the fact that church buildings are as plentiful in most communities as gas stations, they are not mentioned in the Scriptures. It is evident that the earliest disciples met in the temple or temple grounds in Jerusalem, in Jewish synagogues, and in homes, but there is no mention in the Scriptures of a church owning property. Further, we may note that neither Paul nor any other evangelist ever converted a small group then sent an urgent appeal back to Antioch or Jerusalem pleading for help in providing a building for the new congregation.

Generally, we have not interpreted the silence of the Scriptures on this subject as a prohibition of church-owned meeting houses. In most congregations, real estate has claimed first or second place in the budget. Most of us recognize that disciples met together in serving the Lord. Since they assembled, we have reasoned, it was necessary that they had some place to gather. Public buildings were not always available or convenient for the purposes of disciples. So we have assumed that congregations constructed their own, and that we may do so also.

Unless you are a patternist, you probably agree that disciples may voluntarily give their money for collective use in any purpose that they consider to be promoting the will of God. That would include structures, homes, printing literature, television programs, caring for the poor, and the whole spectrum of useful activities. It would call for their wisdom in fulfilling their stewardship. This collective wisdom has led into two main concepts for church structures based on purpose and philosophy. Rethinking these concepts is in order as we approach a new millennium..

The medieval church was less evangelical, depending upon instruction to catechize their children and to bring in new converts. There was less emphasis on a personal conversion experience. The assemblies were for vertical communication with God rather than for evangelizing the unconverted. In accomplishing this, there was little purpose in having the entire membership in the same assembly, so smaller buildings could accommodate greater numbers of worshippers. For instance, in New Iberia, Louisiana where I lived years ago, there were 15,000 to 20,000 Catholics. Yet they had only two moderately sized buildings to accommodate them, with Masses scheduled at 4:00 a.m. and on through the day. They had schools and other buildings to use for instructing, most of which was done at times other than Sunday.

We in churches of Christ inherited the Protestant evangelistic concept in which conversion was expected to take place in an assembly motivated by appealing sermons by gifted speakers aided by crowd psychology and emotionally charged services. The larger the crowd, the more emotional impact was felt. We needed everyone to be in the crowd, so everyone was urged to attend our “gospel meetings.”

We did not depend upon those “gospel meetings” alone, however. Our assemblies were developed to fill dual purposes of vertical communication of disciples with God and evangelism to reach the unconverted. Inclusion of evangelism was in spite of the fact that there is no command or example in the Scriptures for evangelism in the assemblies. The disciples in the assemblies had already been evangelized and converted. Disciples who have long since obeyed

the gospel, have sat through those repetitions of the gospel message directed to 5% or fewer in the audience for twenty, forty, or more years. Our educational program of classes was for nurturing our children and upbuilding the disciples rather than for evangelism.

This general method worked well for us in generations past. But we are not living in the past. The days of the effective “gospel meeting” are almost history. We find it increasingly difficult to entice the sinner into our gatherings where they will be targeted for conversion. Other methods of outreach are being used, and still other methods need to be studied to reach this generation. Being out of touch with this generation myself, I do not have effective options to suggest. The current and younger generation needs to restudy and develop effective methods to reach their own peers. Until successful methods are developed, it is unwise to put big money into structures that served past needs but do not promise utility for new methods. For the believers, the trend now is to make the collective experience a vertical upreach to God. Some “unchurched” people may be in those services, but their main needs are not addressed in those assemblies for collective worship. Since these services are more for individual communication with God, is the emotional impact of a crowd as important as it was for evangelism in times past? Must a lion’s share of the budget be spent for gathering the entire congregation in one place for one to three hours per week? Or, can multiple assemblies requiring less building serve the need effectively? Again, I am not offering solutions. I am encouraging restudy of methods so we may construct buildings that fit them.

In the newer approach to the purpose of assemblies, there is still some lacking of clarity. They become a mixture of the vertical and horizontal. While the vertical concept is enhanced by a formal building with beautiful appointments, we are becoming much more informal in dress and in general conduct while participating, and we use our buildings for more informal “non-worship” activities all along which a multi-purpose structure may serve better.

In many congregations, I suspect, the most effective evangelistic outreach they have is their youth program. Recognizing this, the congregation would do well to provide suitable areas especially for their use.

In this high-tech age, the best of communicative equipment should be permanent fixtures in classrooms and assembly halls. The hymn book and printed handouts are rapidly becoming obsolete. Multi-media equipment should always be in readiness.

Now that we are no longer depriving ourselves of the instructive dramatic presentations and special singing groups, sound systems, larger stages, flood-lights, and lighting effects should be given much consideration in our construction projects.

Baptistries are probably the most expensive parts of our buildings yet, sadly, they are the least used. By our architecture we have exalted baptism above the Lord’s Supper, the message of the pulpit, and the worship led from the pulpit. Where others have had a cross as the focus, we have had baptism. Would it be blasphemy to consider relocation for practical reasons? For any who would not have a clear view of the baptism, it could also be projected on screen. (Horrors! Stone him!)

You wanted a nicer house so more people would visit you. You finally got the house. Did it draw more people into your home? Not likely. Not unless you did more inviting. But would any of them have refused your invitation simply because you were still living in your old house? You do not depend upon “drop-in” visits in your home or in the congregation.

I have seen people willing to meet in nondescript buildings, including school buildings, and to sit in folding chairs in crowded, uncomfortable conditions for years. They did this gladly because they were excited by great growth through evangelism which required their resources. Visitors could feel the excitement and expectancy. They were impressed with the urgency of the message rather than the display of ordered services in an accommodative building. Excitement is felt more keenly in a crowded gathering than in one where the building is sparsely filled. The message of empty seats is dulling.

That does not mean that a crowded and inconvenient arrangement creates excitement and growth, nor does it mean that an enthusiastic atmosphere cannot be had in a spacious, beautiful building. However, too often we have seen zeal settle into comfort when surroundings pleasant to the senses of the disciples were obtained. We have too many half-filled monuments to complacency and outdated methods around the country.

What I am saying is that the structure is not the determining factor. It can only be a proper tool employed by disciples of zeal for souls who involve methods effective in their time and locality. First must be the zeal, second must be the method, and third must be the facility to serve the need best. Patterns of the past are to be followed only if they are proven to be effective in this generation. []