

Baptist Places of Worship

IT is customary to dedicate a church building "to the glory of God." There are two ways in which that phrase may be understood. In the first place a building may be to the glory of God in the sense that *what goes on inside it* is His service and His praise. It houses a worshipping congregation and is the scene and headquarters of various church activities. There is, however, an additional possibility, not by any means opposed to the first but certainly distinguishable from it. *The building itself* may be so designed as to be a standing expression of our faith in God and our desire to glorify Him. It may minister positively and creatively to the activities of those who gather within it. It need not simply accommodate worshippers but may itself assist and evoke worship.

Generally speaking it is the first of these ideas which seems to be reflected in the churches which we Baptists have built. We have thought of them as places inside which the Gospel would be proclaimed, as accommodation for the Sunday School, Youth Work and other activities. If it were a case of either/or this emphasis is in the right direction. The "living stones" mentioned in 1 *Peter* are always more important than the bricks and mortar in which they assemble themselves together. Although we loosely use the word "church" for both the building and its occupants we know that its true meaning refers to the people not the place. But the two ideas I have mentioned are not mutually exclusive and I believe we can legitimately charge ourselves with some neglect of the second, the opportunity of using the very design of a church to the glory of God. There are exceptions, of course, both old and new, but we cannot claim that our churches as a whole reflect an inspired or inspiring tradition in architecture.

Historically, there are some mitigating factors but we should be wise to look for at least part of the explanation in ourselves rather than in circumstances which have been against us. We should not, for example, be too ready to blame the money problem, although it frequently imposes limitations upon us. Among our newer churches there are some which have been built to the tightest budgets and yet do credit to the denomination and to the function they are intended to serve. There are others, sometimes costing more, which do little for the worshipper, and some where one worships in spite of rather than helped by them. Of these the kindest thing one can say is that the opportunity of glorifying God in terms of architecture and design has just not been seen.

In two or three aspects we have paid dearly for a negative element in our Puritanism and architecture is one of the arts which has suffered. There has at least been some lack of interest in, if not actual distrust of, material forms. Of course we have built churches, sometimes very expensive ones. We have had to have premises for our church work. But we have not always been convinced that they could be more than just premises, do more than provide needed accommodation. We have been sure of the truth that it is possible to worship God in any surroundings but not persuaded of the positive part which surroundings can be made to play. I am keen to put this argument in right perspective. Environment does not have the last word in evoking the spirit of true worship any more than it does in the formation of character. But it has *something* to say. It exerts some influence upon us whether we are at work, or play, or worship, and to ignore this is to ignore sound psychology. Nevertheless my chief concern is that to ignore it is to lose an opportunity of glorifying God by the care we put into the design of our churches and by making them expressive of our faith.

Our relative immaturity in the sphere of architecture can be illustrated in two or three ways. Least important, perhaps, but quite significant in its own way, is our lack, even at this date, of an appropriate architectural terminology for the details of Baptist places of worship. Each part of an Anglican church is identifiable by a characteristic and descriptive name but although we have been building churches for three hundred years we still have to borrow words from other traditions. They are not always appropriate in our case. We talk in a rather clumsy way about "the pulpit end" of the church. If we want something less crude we call it the "sanctuary." Yet this is a borrowed term, by no means right for "the pulpit end." The main points in a dictionary definition of "sanctuary" are "a place for the worship of God; the part of a church round the altar; an inviolable asylum which gives protection to a criminal taking refuge there." Only the last of these could possibly be applied to the pulpit end! The second is no use to us at all. The first is serviceable enough though not for this particular purpose. It refers to the whole place in which we gather for worship, not just one part of it. Turning from the pulpit end and the criminal who takes refuge there we come to "the part where the congregation sits." They may be a knave in the pew as well as in the pulpit but are the pews in the nave? If nave is not acceptable dare we admit that "auditorium" might be only too appropriate? I turn to my dictionary again and find that this is defined as the reception room of a monastery, or, nearer to the point, the space allotted to the hearers. Are our congregations merely hearers? Some of us are afraid that they are becoming more and more

passive and leaving too much to the man in the pulpit but that does not truly reflect our tradition.

A certain dependence in terminology is the least important of our problems, however. It is more disturbing when we find that some of those churches which we class among our better examples of architecture have leaned more heavily than in words. They have tried to adapt to Baptist purposes a ground plan which was designed for a quite different theology of the Church, the Ministry and the Sacraments. It is easy to account for these adaptations of the Anglican form. They represent an understandable revolt against the drab and the public-meeting-hall types of Baptist church. They reveal a longing for beauty, dignity and reverence. They therefore took over a pattern which gave these things. Aesthetically they are an improvement on the type they rebelled against but they contribute little to a distinctively Baptist or Free Church tradition in architecture. We need not seek to be slavishly different from others but if there is a distinctive Baptist ethos it should be capable of expression in the external forms we employ for our church work and worship. There should be a recognizable shape and pattern about the visible aspects of our life, a stamp and hallmark identifiably Baptist.

Walls have tongues as well as ears and in their own silent way they are constantly speaking to us and of us. They cannot of course proclaim the Gospel in all its range, as a living witness can, but within their limits they can reflect the faith of those who worship within them. "A church building," said Forsyth, "is the outward and visible sign of a local society." But if a church building can thus reflect the faith of a believing community it is also within its power to stimulate and encourage faith. There is truth in Sir Winston Churchill's words: "We shape our buildings but afterwards our buildings shape us." There are good reasons then why we should aim at a better and more consistent level of achievement in this field, thinking of our buildings not merely as so much accommodation for church activities but as themselves capable of declaring the glory of God. Ruskin was right when he said that every true line may tell forth God's praise.

That we have no grounds for complacency is evidenced by mistakes which are still being made in otherwise successful buildings. The mistakes I have in mind are those which suggest a lack of clear-cut purpose and clearly thought-out directives to the architect. If this seems unduly critical I may be pardoned for mentioning that such errors have either to be lived with for a long time or, if rectified, can prove extremely expensive. (A serious error in the setting of the pulpit in one new church may involve the introduction of a bull-dozer because, before the trouble can be put right, a backing of reinforced concrete will have to be demolished!) But

my chief concern is that the present moment is providing us with a chance to be creative in this matter of architecture and design. For one thing we are doing a great deal of building and that fact means architectural opportunity. For another thing, in these post-war years architecture in general has moved into a new phase. Buildings, like furniture, have begun to take on a new look. Not all that gets the name contemporary is pleasing. Some of it represents the exaggeration which commonly accompanies a fresh departure in style. But a new period is with us. We are breaking with the idea that a church must have little pseudo-Gothic touches here and there, in order to be a church. Denominations which commonly set more store on tradition than we do are launching out adventurously in this field, and we must do so too. We must ignore neither the true and characteristic elements in our tradition nor the fact that we live in the 20th century and are building for the future. The important thing, however, is to be clear about the basic considerations which should govern the design of our places of worship. And, with all respects to their profession, we cannot leave all the thinking to the architects. We have to provide certain pointers and even then to watch carefully that our general rules are not transgressed in small details.

For good historical and theological reasons we should inform an architect that the focal point of attention in his design will be threefold, pulpit, table, and baptistry. We should be wise to emphasize this *and to insist that no subsidiary feature be allowed to detract or distract from this composite central feature.* Good psychology reinforces good theology in this matter. One feature of our worship is that it demands a high degree of concentration, second only perhaps to that of the Society of Friends. By comparison, and for those who understand it, the Mass must be one of the easiest acts of worship to follow for it is dramatic, visible action. By its very form it is calculated to hold the attention. With us, on the other hand, the worshipper spends much of his time listening to words; apart from the hymns and Lord's Prayer not even saying or singing them, but just listening to them. Visual aids scarcely exist, apart that is from the two greatest—the sacraments themselves. To participate fully in our service, from beginning to end, involves a degree of concentration which is beyond many. Psychological considerations therefore combine with good architectural principles in demanding that there shall be a point of focus in the sanctuary and theological considerations settle what that point shall consist of.

Design and lay-out must be called in to assist here. The lines of the church must run to pulpit, communion table and baptistry so that the eyes of the worshipper will naturally rest there. This sounds obvious but apply it as a test to some of our churches. Too

often the lines instead of coming to a focus at "the pulpit end" splay out into apses on the right and left. Vestry doors instead of being discreet, to be noticed perhaps but immediately forgotten, are sometimes bold and intriguing features. One of the most common faults is to put the choir where every movement and whisper will invite the interest and speculation of the congregation. If our churches were intended mainly for the performance of sacred music there would be something to be said for putting the choir in a prominent position. In fact such performances are only occasional. Why then let the design suggest that they are the central feature? Why site the choir in such a place that it or individual members of it can so easily become a distraction from worship? Or again, there is that common error whereby a row of organ pipes is allowed to dominate the view. There are many churches where "dominate" is not too strong a word. By their number, size and position they make a commanding feature in a way which should only be allowed for those things which are of the *esse* of our worship, viz. Word and Sacraments. Such considerations have much to do with the matter of focus in church design. We have to know the primary purpose of the building, that to which it is dedicated, and once that is settled the design and lay-out must be made to serve it. Secondary things must contribute and conform to the supreme aim and not by any chance be allowed to become a distraction, much less to usurp the primary position. Incidentally another factor favours my comment regarding the choir for it is agreed by the acoustical experts that the best location for choir and organ is in a small, low gallery over the vestibule *opposite* the "pulpit end" of the church. (The fact that choir members would then be facing the same way as the rest of the congregation would also serve as a gentle reminder, occasionally necessary, that they are one with the whole company which is gathered for worship.)

We appear to be reviving an old and, in my view, rather pointless dispute as to which is the more important, preaching or sacraments, the pulpit or the table. I think this controversy pointless because preaching and sacraments are both central to our worship, and certainly both are fundamental to a denomination which reckons to draw its inspiration from the practice of the apostolic age. The unity of the Gospel which makes them what they are forbids us to range the one against the other. The argument frequently centres round the question of a side or central pulpit. Although I favour the latter as one of the most theologically consistent and characteristic features of our tradition and one which reflects the earliest Christian practice in architecture, I am not altogether convinced by the argument usually made against the side-pulpit, namely, that this necessarily relegates preaching to a secondary position. The important thing for pulpit, table and baptistry is

that they should be within, and in fact constitute, the area of focus, and though this is not so easy to achieve with a side pulpit, it is not impossible. Moreover, those of us who favour the central position need to realize that that alone does not secure our basic aim. While avoiding the mistake of creating a pulpit which is a parade ground it is necessary to design something suggestive of strength, stability and authority. It is no use making a fuss about a central pulpit if we then put in that position something like a match-box in strength and size. Certain pulpits greet the preacher with the text, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Some of them could do with another caption, "Fragile, with care." Others are so small that one dare not move a foot backwards. The price of survival is immobility. Such pulpits, like some of the newer baptistries, may look well as you first enter the church. They look the part and it is only when you get in them that you realize how non-functional they really are. Obviously the architect was pushed for space and perhaps economising on cost; the building committee took it for granted that he would know the elementary needs of these features in a Baptist church and left it to him. But surely the pulpit and the baptistry are among the things which *must* be done properly and no chances taken with them.

I have already alluded to another possible mistake, fortunately very rare. It is hardly credible that in a fine modern church so serious an error should have been made with the pulpit as to require the use of a bull-dozer to put it right. In this case the trouble is that the pulpit (in its setting of reinforced concrete) is so high that even in the fifth row from the front the worshipper has to get his head back in a most uncomfortable position in order to see the preacher. Compare that with our principle that the eyes should run easily and naturally to the focal point. In the same church, I am told, the baptistry cannot be seen from the back rows of the gallery, just the ones which are usually occupied by young people! If there is any difficulty or strain in seeing the preacher, the table or the baptistry, the architect has made a serious error and so has the building committee which approved the plans. Lighting comes into this too. Churches are still being built with windows directly behind the preacher's head so that, against the light, his face gets steadily darker and harder to watch as the service proceeds. The eyes have to fight against such windows for they cannot rest easily and naturally on the minister. As with windows so also the utmost care is needed in the positioning of artificial lights. Acoustics have a lot to do with the question of strain. The difference between lighting and acoustics is that with the former we can ensure that the preacher be seen but even the greatest care with the latter cannot guarantee that he be heard! As factors which aid or hinder physical comfort, ventilation and heating also play their part in assisting concentration; a drowsy or fidgety congregation may sometimes be

due to inadequacy in these arrangements and not always to our sermons.

I have already pleaded that the baptistry should be thoroughly functional. In this the older churches frequently score over newer ones. I know more than one of the latter in which baptism is difficult because of insufficient depth and at least one in which candidates are liable to a banged head because the baptistry is not long enough. However the increasing popularity of the open baptistry seems to be a real advance. Is there any good argument for the closed type? The three things around which our worship gathers, the Word and the two sacraments, should be clearly and centrally in view. An open baptistry is preaching all the time, even when not in actual use. It is an abiding witness to all that wealth and range of truth which the New Testament associates with our new birth through the saving acts of God. Why then put it out of sight? Concerning the table and its setting I would mention one question which seems to need consideration. The familiar rostrum rail may be regarded as a safety measure. But is it in fact a survival from an alien theology? Most of us believe in "open communion," the invitation being given "to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." This is the one qualification and we almost invariably leave it to members of the congregation to answer the question for themselves. We set up no other "fence" around the table which is the Lord's not ours. Other Christian bodies may fence it on other grounds and I sometimes wonder whether the rostrum rail, as provided for by the architect (who may well come from another denomination), is a relic of those ideas even when it does not represent a fencing of the table to our Baptist minds. We have to watch architects for this kind of unintentional violation of Free Church principles.

An important theme to be impressed upon the architect is that of simplicity. We can occasionally admire the ornate, the subtle, the complex in designs and decorative features favoured by other communions, but they are not native to us and do not reflect our spiritual ethos. Simplicity has one mundane advantage—it is likely to help the bill—but I am thinking chiefly of its spiritual significance. It can speak incomparably of the beauty of holiness. In buildings as in human character it has a way of conveying dignity and peace and it will certainly reinforce the attempt to focus attention. In a place of worship it ministers on the side of the soul who is seeking to bring every thought into captivity to Christ. It is its nature to concentrate the mind and thus set it free for the adoration of God. Unfortunately simplicity can be confused with austerity or even downright ugliness. Austerity is sometimes forced upon us by the money problem but ugliness has nothing to justify or commend it.

Line, proportion, lighting and colour scheme can all contribute

not only to simplicity but to the qualities of life and gladness. Interior decoration is a specialist art nowadays calling for a knowledge of tonal values, surface textures and so on. Fortunately advice can be obtained, sometimes free of charge providing one uses the materials of the makers who give the advice! Some of our older churches have been transformed by colour schemes which combine the qualities of peace and light. Yet some of our new ones still conform to the authorized (Victorian) version of dull brown and varnish. Reverence and gladness are not alien to each other and a church can inspire both. Within the limits imposed by finance we should strive for buildings which will quicken the heart and spirit of those who enter them. It is possible to spend a lot of money for a result which is sombre and unwelcoming. Do we worship a gloomy God? Are we helping the task of evangelism if we let our churches suggest that we do? First impressions often count for a lot and young people are particularly susceptible to the impact of their surroundings.

It is in no contradiction of the plea for simplicity that I welcome the indications that we are increasingly ready for the use of Christian symbols and in particular the supreme one, the cross. During one period of my student days I occasionally worshipped in a Congregationalist College Chapel in which there was a cross on the Communion Table. When I had got over my first instinctive reaction against it I found that it called my thoughts to Christ and I came to see how irrational my prejudice against it had been. We preach about the cross, we sing about it, we gladly hear about it. Why then should we not look at it? Once again we have been needlessly depriving ourselves through the negative strain in our tradition. I am not pleading for the use of the cross as a magical talisman but simply as the most powerful single symbol there is in Christianity, with associations calculated to evoke penitence and praise. A minister newly settled in his church examined the symbols in the wrought-iron rostrum rail. He discovered them to be a motley collection obviously chosen at random from a catalogue by the architect or builder. Several were from pagan sources and one was the phallic symbol of an ancient fertility cult. Yet the members of that church would not have a cross inside or outside the building! Quite apart from anything so alien as pagan symbols what of those that are harmless but irrelevant? Look around the woodwork, stonework, ironwork, of almost any church and see the inoffensive but quite pointless little designs which are often used. The *fleur-de-lys* motif is an example. I am not aware that there is anything against it but is there anything to be said for it? If the *fleur-de-lys*, why not something distinctively Christian? Why not think all these details out so that if they are to say anything at all they may speak for Christ and for the Gospel?

Our churches should be designed for fellowship. This is another characteristic of our life which should be mentioned to the architect. We strive, not without success, for the character of the church as a family. Though we make room for distinctions of function in our doctrine of the ministry, we have rejected anything approaching the caste idea which might put a gulf between minister and people. Here lies an opportunity for the architect to show his skill at reconciling two principles. There is on the one hand the authority of the Word and of its herald commissioned by Christ. The pulpit whether central or on the side, is meant for authoritative proclamation and we do not expect the preacher to be apologetic about either his function or his message. He is there to declare the Word of God and to lead the people in worship, and both position and style of the pulpit should indicate that. On the other hand he is also a fellow-member of the Body of Christ and we give a good deal of emphasis to the truth, One is your Master and all ye are brethren. A typical Baptist pulpit though it recognizes the authority of the Word and its herald, is not meant to create the impression of distance between minister and congregation. For this reason a long narrow building is to be avoided. A Baptist architect, Mr. J. J. M. Smith, who has looked into the various possibilities regarding shape, maintains that the simple rectangular plan (typical of the old meeting houses and, in origin, dating back to the Roman "basilica" form adopted by the early Christians for their first churches) is still the most suitable for contemporary ideas and needs. Perhaps there is yet room for experiment with other shapes but whether the plan is rectangular or not it seems to help if the length and breadth are not unduly disproportionate. Care in the disposition of the seating also has a lot to do with this problem. Mr. Smith states that theoretically the best plan shape to accommodate an audience listening to a speaker is the semi-circle. If this is unsuitable for church purposes at least we can go part of the way towards it. A number of our churches have the pews or chairs arranged in an arc-shaped pattern. This may suggest a people gathered together around the Word and table and it also contributes to the other principle which I have urged, for by this means all seats face towards the focal point. Worshippers do not have to turn their heads to look at the pulpit or the table. They have to turn to look elsewhere. Such a pattern readily accepts a central aisle which is virtually a necessity for ease of administration of wedding and funeral services. And here once again what is practical also contributes to the question of line. Immediately on entering the sanctuary the eye is led by a central aisle to the primary point of focus.

The church is a family and if we like dignity we are even more sure that we like warmth of spirit. We are not at home in the over-formal atmosphere. But a problem which confronts many ministers

is how to achieve reverence along with the usual homeliness. Friendliness and fellowship belong to the House of God but so do stillness and awe and the kind of quiet in which the soul may prepare to meet its Lord. We all know churches where there is what can only be described as a hubbub right up to the announcement of the first hymn and this is often resumed in subdued form during the offertory, breaking out again in full vigour within a minute of the benediction. (It is curious that some of the worst offenders would at least cut down their conversation to a whisper if they were in a parish church). Chatter hinders proper preparation for worship beforehand and disrupts the atmosphere immediately afterwards. On the other hand there is a value worth preserving in all this. What is the solution? It seems that we must cater for such fellowship in our planning and design. Some churches have found an answer by providing an extra large vestibule in which those who wish to converse can do so without disturbing others who wish to be quiet either before or after the service. Most churches have some accommodation which could be made available. Fellowship is not true fellowship if it is enjoyed at the cost of others.

I readily grant that some of the things I have mentioned would be difficult to apply in the case of dual purpose buildings though even here a little ingenuity can go a long way. I am not suggesting in any case that architecture and design hold the solution to all our problems. They come in a category of things to which we can apply the text: "These ought ye to have done and not to have left the other undone." We need to be more alive to the influence which they can exert, the more so because it is a silent influence at work on us though we scarcely realize it. In the worlds of industry, education and entertainment they are keenly alert to this and we dare not lag behind. We have to give our best thought to our churches while they are being shaped on the drawing board and the care we give will itself be an act of worship. Only the best is good enough for God.

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