

The background image is a photograph of a church interior. Sunlight streams through a large, high window on the right, creating a dramatic effect with rays of light. The church has wooden pews in the foreground, and a person is visible in the distance near the altar area. Stained glass windows are visible on the left wall.

Pagan Christianity? Chapter 2

The Church Building: Inheriting the Edifice Complex

“In the process of replacing the old religions, Christianity became a religion.” Alexander Schmemmann, Twentieth-Century Eastern orthodox Priest, Teacher, and Writer

“That the Christians in the apostolic age erected special houses of worship is out of the question....As the Saviour of the world was born in a stable, and ascended to heaven from a mountain, so his apostles and their successors down to the third century, preached in the streets, the markets, on mountains, in ships, sepulchers, eaves, and deserts, and in the homes of their converts. But how many thousands of costly churches and chapels have since been built and are constantly being built in all parts of the world to the honor of the crucified Redeemer, who in the days of his humiliation had no place of his own to rest his head!” Philip Schaff, Nineteenth-Century American Church Historian and Theologian





Many contemporary Christians have a love affair with brick and mortar. The edifice complex is so ingrained in our thinking that if a group of believers begins to meet together, their first thoughts are toward securing a building. For how can a group of Christians rightfully claim to be a church without a building? (So the thinking goes.)

The “church” building is so connected with the idea of church that we unconsciously equate the two. Just listen to the vocabulary of the average Christian today:

“Wow, honey, did you see that beautiful church we just passed?”

“My goodness! That is the largest church I have ever seen! I wonder what the electric costs to keep it going?”

“Our church is too small. I’m developing claustrophobia. We need to extend the balcony.”

“the church is chilly today; I am freezing my buns off in here!”

We have gone to church every Sunday this past year except for the Sunday when Aunt Mildred dropped the microwave oven on her toe.”

Or how about the vocabulary of the average pastor:

“Isn’t it wonderful to be in the house of God today?”

“We must show reverence when we come into the sanctuary of the Lord.”

Or how about the mother who tells her happy child (in subdued tones), “Wipe that smile off your face; you’re in church now! We have to behave ourselves in the house of God!”

To put it bluntly, none of these thoughts have anything to do with New Testament Christianity. Rather they reflect the thinking of other religions- primarily Judaism and paganism.



TEMPLES, PRIESTS, AND SACRIFICES

Ancient Judaism was centered on three elements: the Temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifice. When Jesus came, He ended all three fulfilling them in Himself. He is the temple who embodies a new and living house made of living stones-"without hands." he is the priest who has established a new priesthood. And He is the perfect and finished sacrifice. Consequently, the Temple, the professional priesthood, and the sacrifice of Judaism all passed away with the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ is the fulfillment and the reality of it all.

In Greco-Roman paganism, these three elements were also present: Pagans had their temples, their priests, and their sacrifices. It was only the Christians who did away with all of these elements. It can be rightly said that Christianity was the first non-temple-based religion ever to emerge. In the minds of the early Christians, the people-not the architecture-constituted a sacred space. The early Christians understood that they themselves-corporately-were the temple of God and the house of God.

Strikingly, nowhere in the New Testament do we find the terms church (Ekklesia), temple, or house of God used to refer to a building. To the ears of a first-century Christian, calling and Ekklesia (church) a building would have been like calling your wife a condominium or your mother a skyscraper!

The first recorded use of the word Ekklesia to refer to a Christian meeting place was penned around AD 190 by Clement of Alexandria (150-215). Clement was also the first person to use the phrase "go to church"-which would have been a foreign thought to the first century believers. (You cannot go to something you are!) Throughout the new Testament, Ekklesia always refers to an assembly of people, not a place. Ekklesia, in every one of its 114 appearances in the New Testament, refers to an assembly of people. (The English word church is derived from the Greek word kuriakon, which means "belonging to the Lord." In time, it took, on the meaning of "God's house" and referred to a building.)



TEMPLES, PRIESTS, AND SACRIFICES

Even so, Clement's reference to "going to church" is not a reference to attending a special building for worship. It rather refers to a private home that the second-century Christians used for their meetings. Christians did not erect special buildings for worship until the Constantinian era in the fourth century. New Testament scholar Graydon F. Snyder states, "There is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine." in another work he writes, "the first churches consistently met in homes. Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches."

Neither did they have a special priestly caste that was set apart to serve God. Instead, every believer recognized that he or she was a priest unto God. The early Christians also did away with sacrifices. For they understood that the true and final sacrifice (Christ) had come. The only sacrifices that they offered were the spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving (see Hebrews 13:15 and 1 Peter 2:5).

When Roman Catholicism evolved in the fourth to the sixth centuries, it absorbed many of the religious practices of both paganism and Judaism. It set up a professional priesthood. It erected sacred buildings. And it turned the Lord's Supper into a mysterious sacrifice.

Following the path of the pagans, early Catholicism adopted the practice of burning incense and having vestal (sacred) virgins. The Protestants dropped the sacrificial use of the Lord's Supper, the burning of incense, and the vestal virgins. But they retained the priestly caste (the clergy) as well as the sacred building.

FROM HOUSE CHURCHES TO HOLY CATHEDRALS

The early Christians believed that Jesus is the very presence of God. They believed that the body of Christ, the church, constitutes a temple.

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He made some radically negative statements about the Jewish Temple. The one that angered many Jews the most was His announcement that if the Temple was destroyed, He would build a new one in three days! (See John 2:19-21.) though Jesus was referring to the Temple that existed in the architectural sense, he was really speaking of His body. Jesus said that after this temple was destroyed, He would raise it up in three days. He was referring to the real temple-the church-which He raised up in Himself on the third day (Ephesians 2:6)

Since Christ has risen, we Christians have become the temple of God. At His resurrection, Christ became a “life giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45, niv). Therefore, He could take up residence in believers, thus making them His Temple, His house. It is for this reason that the New Testament always reserves the word church (Ekklesia) for the people of God. It never uses this word to refer to a building of any sort.

Jesus’ act of clearing the Temple not only showed His anger at the money changers’ disrespect for the Temple, which was a picture of God’s true house, but it also signified that the “Temple worship” of Judaism would be replaced with Himself. With Jesus’ coming, God the Father would no longer be worshipped in a mountain or a temple. He would instead be worshipped in spirit and in reality.

FROM HOUSE CHURCHES TO HOLY CATHEDRALS

When Christianity was born, it was the only religion on the planet that had no sacred objects, no sacred person, and no sacred spaces. Although surrounded by Jewish synagogues and pagan temples, the early Christians were the only religious people on earth who did not erect sacred buildings for their worship. The Christian faith was born in homes, out in courtyards, and along roadsides.

For the first three centuries, the Christians did not have any special buildings. As one scholar put it, “the Christianity that conquered the Roman Empire was essentially a home-centered movement. Some have argued that this was because the Christians were not permitted to erect church buildings. But that is not true. Meeting in homes was a conscious choice of the early Christians.

As Christian congregations grew in size, they began to remodel their homes to accommodate their growing numbers. One of the most outstanding finds of archaeology is the house of Dura-Europos in modern Syria. This is the earliest identifiable Christian meeting place. It was simply a private home remodeled as a Christian gathering place around AD 232.

the house of Dura-Europos was essentially a house with a wall torn out between two bedrooms to create a large living room. With this modification, the house could accommodate about seventy people. Remodeled houses like Dura-Europos cannot rightfully be called “church buildings.” They were simply homes that had been refurbished to accommodate larger assemblies. Further, these homes were never called temples, the term that both pagans and Jews used for their sacred spaces. Christians did not begin calling their buildings temples until the fifteenth century.

THE CREATION OF SACRED SPACES AND OBJECTS

In the late second and third centuries a shift occurred. The Christians began to adopt the pagan view of reverencing the dead. Their focus was on honoring the memory of the martyrs. So prayers for the saints (which later devolved into prayers to them) began.

The Christians picked up from the pagans the practice of having meals in honor of the dead. Both the Christian funeral and the funeral dirge came straight out of paganism in the third century.

Third-century Christians had two places for their meetings: their homes and the cemetery. They met in the cemetery because they wished to be close to their dead brethren. It was their belief that to share a meal at a cemetery of a martyr was to commemorate him and to worship in his company.

Since the bodies of the “holy” martyrs resided there, Christian burial places came to be viewed as “holy spaces.” The Christians then began to build small monuments over these spaces-especially over the graves of famous saints. Building a shrine over a burial place and calling it holy was also a pagan practice.



THE CREATION OF SACRED SPACES AND OBJECTS

In Rome, the Christians began to decorate the catacombs (under ground burial places) with Christian symbols. So art became associated with sacred spaces. Clement of Alexandria was one of the first Christians advocating the visual arts in worship. (Interestingly, the cross as an artistic reference for Christ's death cannot be found prior to the time of Constantine. The crucifix, an artistic representation of the Savior attached to the cross, made its first appearance in the fifth century. The custom of making the "sign of the cross" with one's hands dates back to the second century.)

At about the second century, Christians began to venerate the bones of the saints, regarding them as holy and sacred. This eventually gave birth to relic collecting. Reverence for the dead was the most powerful community-forming force in the Roman Empire. Now the Christians were absorbing it into their own faith.

In the late second century there was also a shift in how the Lord's Supper was viewed. The Supper had devolved from a full meal to a stylized ceremony called Holy Communion. (For more on how this transition occurred, see chapter 9.) By the fourth century, the cup and the bread were seen as producing a sense of awe, dread, and mystery. As a result, the churches in the East placed a canopy over the altar table where the bread and cup sat. (In the sixteenth century, rails were placed upon the altar table. The rails signified that the altar table was a holy object only to be handled by holy persons-i.e., the clergy.)

So by the third century, the Christians not only had sacred spaces, they also had sacred objects. (They would soon develop a sacred priesthood.) In all of this, the second-and third-century Christians began to assimilate the magical mind-set that characterized pagan thinking. All of these factors made the Christian terrain ready for the man who would be responsible for creating church buildings.



CONSTANTINE-FATHER OF THE CHURCH BUILDING

While the emperor Constantine (ca. 285-337) is often lauded for granting Christians freedom of worship and expanding their privileges, his story fills a dark page in the history of Christianity. Church buildings began with him. The story is astonishing.

By the time Constantine emerged on the scene, the atmosphere was ripe for Christians to escape their despised, minority status. The temptation to be accepted was just too great to resist, and Constantine's influence began in earnest.

In AD 312, Constantine became Caesar of the Western Empire. By 324, he became emperor of the entire Roman Empire. Shortly afterward, he began ordering the construction of church buildings. He did so to promote the popularity and acceptance of Christianity. If the Christians had their own sacred buildings-as did the Jews and the pagans-their faith would be regarded as legitimate.

It is important to understand Constantine's mind-set-for it explains why he was so enthusiastic about the establishment of church buildings. Constantine's thinking was dominated by superstition and pagan magic. Even after he became emperor, he allowed the old pagan institutions to remain as they were.

Following his conversion to Christianity, Constantine never abandoned sun worship. He kept the sun on his coins. And he set up a statue of the sun god that bore his own image in the Forum of Constantinople (his new capital). Constantine also built a statue of the mother-goddess Cybele (though he presented her in a posture of Christian prayer). Historians continue to debate whether or not Constantine was a genuine Christian. The fact that he is reported to have had his eldest son, his nephew, and his brother-in-law executed does not strengthen the case for his conversion. But we will not probe that nerve too deeply here.

In AD 321, Constantine decreed that Sunday would be a day of rest-a legal holiday. It appears that Constantine's intention in doing this was to honor the god Mithras, the Unconquered Sun. (he described Sunday as "the day of the sun.") Further demonstrating Constantine's affinity with sun worship, excavations of St. Peter's in Rome uncovered a mosaic of Christ as the Unconquered Sun.

Almost to his dying day, Constantine "still functioned as the high priest of paganism." In fact, he retained the pagan title Pontifex Maximus, which means chief of the pagan priests! (In the fifteenth century, this same title became the honorific title for the Roman Catholic pope.)



CONSTANTINE-FATHER OF THE CHURCH BUILDING

When Constantine dedicated Constantinople as his new capital on May 11, 330, he adorned it with treasures taken from heathen temples. And he used pagan magic formulas to protect crops and heal diseases.

Further, all historical evidence indicates that Constantine was an egomaniac. When he built the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople, he included monuments to the twelve apostles. The twelve monuments surrounded a single tomb, which lay at the center. That tomb was reserved for Constantine himself—thus making himself the thirteenth and chief apostle. Thus Constantine not only continued the pagan practice of honoring the dead, he also sought to be included as one of the significant dead.

Constantine also borrowed from the pagans (not the Jews) the notion of the sacredness of objects and places. Largely due to his influence, relic mongering became common in the church. By the fourth century, obsession with relics got so bad that some Christian leaders spoke out against it, calling it “a heathen observance introduced in the churches under the cloak of religion...the work of idolaters.

Constantine is also noted for bringing to the Christian faith the idea of the holy site, which was based on the model of the pagan shrine. Because of the aura of “sacredness” that the fourth-century Christians attached to Palestine, it had become known as “the Holy Land” by the sixth century.

After Constantine’s death, he was declared to be “divine.” (This was the custom for all pagan emperors who died before him.) It was the senate who declared him to be a pagan god at his death. And no one stopped them from doing so.

As this point, a word should be said about Constantine’s mother, Helena. This woman was most noted for her obsession with relics. In AD 326, Helena made a pilgrimage to Palestine. In AD 327 in Jerusalem, she reportedly found the cross and nails that were used to crucify Jesus. It is reported that Constantine promoted the idea that the bits of wood that came from Christ’s cross possessed spiritual powers. Truly, a pagan magical mind was at work in Emperor Constantine—the father of the church building.



CONSTANTINE'S BUILDING PROGRAM

Following Helena's trip to Jerusalem in AD 327, Constantine began erecting the first church buildings throughout the Roman Empire, some at public expense. In so doing, he followed the path of the pagans in constructing temples to honor God.

Interestingly, he named his church buildings after saints-just as the pagans named their temples after gods. Constantine built his first church buildings upon the cemeteries where the Christians held meals for the dead saints. That is, he built them over the bodies of dead saints. Why? Because for at least a century beforehand, the burial places of the saints were considered "holy spaces."

Many of the largest buildings were built over the tombs of the martyrs. This practice was based on the idea that the martyrs had the same powers that they had once ascribed to the gods of paganism. The Christians adopted this view completely.

The most famous Christian "holy spaces" were St. Peter's on the Vatican Hill (built over the supposed tomb of Peter). St. Paul's Outside the walls (built over the supposed tomb of Paul), the dazzling and astonishing Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (built over the supposed tomb of Christ), and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (built over the supposed cave of Jesus' birth). Constantine built nine churches in Rome and many others in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Constantinople



The background image shows the interior of a large, ancient brick church. The architecture features high, vaulted ceilings with exposed wooden beams and large, arched windows with multiple panes. The walls are made of reddish-brown brick. In the foreground, rows of wooden pews are arranged on either side of a central aisle. At the far end of the church, a large cross is visible on the wall above the altar area. The lighting is warm and somewhat dim, highlighting the textures of the brick and wood.

EXPLORING THE FIRST CHURCH BUILDINGS

Because the church building was regarded as sacred, congregants had to undergo a purification ritual before entering. So in the fourth century, fountains were erected in the courtyard so the Christians could wash before they entered the building.

Constantine's church buildings were spacious and magnificent edifices that were said to be "worthy of an Emperor." They were so splendid that his pagan contemporaries observed that these "huge buildings imitated" the structure of pagan temples. Constantine even decorated the new church buildings with pagan art.

The church edifices built under Constantine were patterned exactly after the model of the basilica. These were the common government buildings, designed after Greek pagan temples.

Basilicas served the same function as high school auditoriums do today. They were wonderful for seating passive and docile crowds to watch a performance. This was one of the reasons why Constantine chose the basilica model.

He also favored it because of his fascination with sun worship. Basilicas were designed so that the sun fell upon the speaker as he faced the congregation. Like the temples of the Greeks and Romans, the Christian basilicas were built with a façade (front) facing east.

Let's explore the inside of the Christian basilica. It was an exact duplicate of the Roman basilicas that were used for Roman magistrates and officers. Christian basilicas possessed an elevated platform where the clergy ministered. The platform was usually elevated by several steps. There was also a rail or screen that separated the clergy from the laity.



EXPLORING THE FIRST CHURCH BUILDINGS

In the center of the building was the altar. It was either a table (the altar table) or a chest covered with a lid. The altar was considered the most holy place in the building for two reasons. First, it often contained the relics of the martyrs. (After the fifth century, the presence of a relic in the church altar was essential to make the church legitimate.) Second, upon the altar sat the Eucharist (the bread and the cup).

the Eucharist, now viewed as a sacred sacrifice, was offered upon the altar. No one but the clergy, who were regarded as “holy men,” were allowed to receive the Eucharist within the altar rails.

In front of the altar stood the bishop’s chair, which was called the cathedra. The term ex cathedra is derived from this chair. Ex cathedra means “from the throne.” The bishop’s chair, or “throne” as it was called, was the biggest and most elaborate seat in the building. It replaced the seat of the judge in the Roman basilica. And it was surrounded by two rows of chairs reserved for the elders.

The sermon was preached from the bishop’s chair. The power and authority rested in the chair, which was covered with a white linen cloth. The elders and deacons sat on either side of it in a semicircle. The hierarchical distinction embedded in the basilican architecture was unmistakable.

Interestingly, most present-day church buildings have special chairs for the pastor and his staff situated on the platform behind the pulpit (Like the bishop’s throne, the pastor’s chair is usually the largest of them all.) All of this is a clear carryover from the pagan basilica.

In addition to all of this, Constantine did not destroy pagan temples on a large scale. Neither did he close them. In some places existing pagan temples were emptied of their idols and converted into Christian edifices. The Christians used materials stripped from pagan temples and built new church buildings on pagan temple sites.

The background image shows a religious procession. In the foreground, a priest in white vestments holds a processional cross. Behind him, a group of people, some carrying lanterns, are visible. The scene is dimly lit, with the lanterns providing the main source of light. The overall atmosphere is solemn and ceremonial.

MAJOR INFLUENCES ON WORSHIP

The advent of the church building brought significant changes to Christian worship. Because the emperor was the number one “lay person” in the church, a simple ceremony was not sufficient. In order to honor him, the pomp and ritual of the imperial court was incorporated into the Christian liturgy.

It was the custom of the Roman emperors to have lights carried before them whenever they appeared in public. The lights were accompanied by a basin of fire filled with aromatic spices. Taking his cue from this custom, Constantine introduced candles and the burning of incense as part of the church service. And they were brought in when the clergy entered the room.

Under Constantine’s reign, the clergy, who had first worn everyday clothes, began dressing in special garments. What were those special clothes? They were garments of Roman officials. Further various gestures of respect toward the clergy, comparable to those used to honor Roman officials, were introduced into the church.

The Roman custom of beginning a service with processional music was adopted as well. For this purpose, choirs were developed and brought into the Christian church(See chapter 7 for more on the origin of the choir.) Worship became more professional, dramatic, and ceremonial.

All of these features were borrowed from the Greco-Roman culture and carried straight into the Christian church. Fourteenth century Christianity was being profoundly shaped by Greek paganism and Roman imperialism. The upshot of it all was that there was a loss of intimacy and open participation. The professional clergy performed the acts of worship while the laity looked on as spectators.

As one Catholic scholar wrote, with the coming of Constantine “various customs of ancient Roman culture flowed into the Christian liturgy...even the ceremonies involved in the ancient worship of the emperor as a deity found their way into the church’s worship, only in their secularized form.

Constantine brought peace for all Christians. Under his reign, the Christian faith had become legitimate. In fact, it had risen to a status greater than Judaism and paganism.

For these reasons, the Christians saw Constantine’s rise to emperor as an act of God. Here was God’s instrument who had come to their rescue. Christianity and Roman culture were now melded together.



MAJOR INFLUENCES ON WORSHIP

The Christian building demonstrates that the church, whether she wanted it or not, had entered into a close alliance with pagan culture. As Will Durant, author of *The Story of Civilization* (a sweeping, eleven-volume work on world history that earned him a Pulitzer Prize), put it, “Pagan isles remained in the spreading Christian sea.” This was a tragic shift from the primitive simplicity that the church of Jesus Christ first knew.

The first century Christians were opposed to the world’s systems and avoided any contact with paganism. This all changed during the fourth century when the church emerged as a public institution in the world and began to “absorb and Christianize pagan religious ideas and practices.” As one historian put it, “Church buildings took the place of temples; church endowments replaced temple lands and funds. Under Constantine, tax exempt status was granted for all church property.

Consequently, the story of the church building is the sad saga of Christianity borrowing from heathen culture and radically transforming the face of our faith. To put it bluntly, the church buildings of the Constantinian and post-Constantinian era essentially became holy shrines. The Christians embraced the concept of the physical temple. They imbibed the pagan idea that there exists a special place where God dwells in a special way. And that place is made “with hands.”

As with other pagan customs that were absorbed into the Christian faith (such as the liturgy, the sermon, clerical vestments, and the hierarchical leadership structure), third and fourth-century Christians incorrectly attributed the origin of the church building to the Old Testament. But this was misguided thinking.

The church building was borrowed from pagan culture. Dignified and sacramental ritual had entered the church services by way of the mysteries {the pagan cults}, and was justified, like so many other things, by reference to the Old Testament.”

To use the Old Testament as a justification for the church building is not only inaccurate, but it is self-defeating. The old Mosaic economy of sacred priests, sacred buildings, sacred rituals, and sacred objects has been forever destroyed by the cross of Jesus Christ. In addition, it has been replaced by a nonhierarchical, nonritualistic nonliturgical ornaism called the Ekklesia (church).

THE EVOLUTION OF CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

Following the Constantinian era, church buildings passed through various stages. (They are too complex for us to detail here) To quote one scholar, "Changes in church architecture are the result of mutation rather than a steady line of evolution." These mutations did little to change the dominant architectural features that fostered a monopolizing clergy and an inert congregation.

Let's quickly survey the evolution of church architecture:

After Constantine, Christian architecture passed from the basilica phase to the Byzantine phase. Byzantine churches had wide central domes and decorative icons and mosaics. Byzantine architecture was followed by Romanesque architecture. Romanesque buildings were characterized by a three story elevation, massive pillars supporting round arches, and colorful interiors. This form of building arose shortly after Charlemagne became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas day AD 800.

Following the Romanesque period was the Gothic era of the twelfth century. Gothic architecture gave rise to the spell binding Gothic cathedrals with their cross-ribbed vaults, pointed arches, and flying buttresses. The term cathedral is derived from cathedra. It is the building that houses the cathedra, the bishop's chair.

Colored glass was first introduced to church buildings in the sixth century by Gregory of Tours (538-594). The glass was set into the narrow windows of some Romanesque churches. Sugar (1081-1151), abbot of St. Denis, took colored glass to another level. He adorned the glass with sacred paintings. He thus became the first to use stained-glass windows in church buildings, placing them in his Gothic cathedrals.

Great panels of tinted glass came to fill the walls of Gothic churches to emit brilliant, bright colored light. Rich and dark colors were also employed to create the effect of the new Jerusalem. The stained-glass windows effectively created a soulful sense of majesty and splendor. They induced feelings associated with the worship of a mighty, fear-inspiring God.



THE EVOLUTION OF CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

As with the Constantinian basilicas, the root of the Gothic cathedral is completely pagan. Gothic architects relied heavily on the teachings of the pagan Greek philosopher Plato. Plato taught that sound, color, and light have lofty mystical meanings. They can induce moods and help bring one closer to the “eternal Good.” The Gothic designers took Plato’s teachings and set them to brick and stone. They created awe-inspiring lighting to elicit a sense of overwhelming splendor and worship.


Color is one of the most powerful emotive factors available. Thus, the Gothic stained-glass windows were employed skillfully to create a sense of mystery and transcendence. Drawing inspiration from the grandiose statues and towers of ancient Egypt, Gothic architecture sought to recapture the sense of the sublime through its exaggerated heights.

It was said of the Gothic structure that “the whole building seems chained to earth in fixed flight...It rises like an exhalation from the soil....No architecture so spiritualizes, refines and casts heavenward the substance which it handles. It was the ultimate symbol of heaven joining the earth.

So with its use of light, color, and excessive height, the Gothic cathedral fostered a sense of mystery, transcendence, and awe. All of these features were borrowed from Plato and passed off as Christian.

Basilica, Romanesque and Gothic church buildings are a human attempt to duplicate that which is heavenly and spiritual. In a very real way, the church building throughout history reflects man’s quest to sense the divine with his physical senses. While being surrounded by beauty can certainly turn a person’s heart toward God, He desires so much more for His church than an aesthetic experience. By the fourth century, the Christian community had lost touch with those heavenly realities and spiritual intangibles that cannot be perceived by the senses, but which can only be registered by the human spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

the main message of Gothic architecture is: “god is transcendent and unreachable-so be awed at His majesty.” But such a message defies the message of the gospel, which says that God is very accessible-so much so that He has taken up residence inside of His people.



THE PROTESTANT CHURCH BUILDING

In the sixteenth century, the Reformers inherited the aforementioned building tradition. In a short period of time, thousands of medieval cathedrals became their property as the local rulers who controlled those structures joined the Reformation.

Most of the Reformers were former priests. Hence, they had been unwittingly conditioned by the thought patterns of medieval Catholicism. So even though the Reformers did some remodeling to their newly acquired church buildings, they made little functional change in the architecture.

Even if the Reformers wanted to bring radical changes to the practice of the church, the masses were not ready for it. Martin Luther was quite clear that the church was not a building or an institution. Yet it would have been impossible for him to overturn more than a millennium of confusion on the subject.

The central architectural change that the Reformers made reflected their theology. They made the pulpit the dominant center of the building rather than the altar table. The Reformation was built on the idea that people could not know God nor grow spiritually unless they heard preaching. Thus, when the Reformers inherited existing church buildings, they adapted them toward that end.



THE STEEPLE

Ever since the inhabitants of Babel erected a tower to “reach to the heavens,” civilizations have followed suit by building structures with pointed tops. The Babylonians and Egyptians built obelisks and pyramids that reflected their belief that they were progressing toward immortality. When Greek philosophy and culture came along, the direction of architecture changed from upward and vertical to downward and horizontal. All of this suggested the Greek belief in democracy, human equality, and earthbound gods.

However, with the rise of the Roman Catholic church, the practice of crowning buildings with pointed tops reemerged. Toward the end of the Byzantine period, Catholic popes drew inspiration from the obelisks of ancient Egypt. As religious architecture entered the Romanesque period, points began to appear on the surfaces and corners of every cathedral built in the Roman Empire. This trend reached its pinnacle during the era of Gothic architecture with Abbot Suger’s construction of the cathedral at St. Denis.

Unlike Greek architecture, the characteristic line of Gothic architecture was vertical to suggest striving upward. By this time, all throughout Italy, towers began to appear near the entrances of church buildings. The towers housed bells to call the people to worship. These towers represented contact between heaven and earth.

As the years passed, Gothic architects (with their emphasis on verticality) sought to add a tall spire to every tower. Spires (also called steeples; spires is the British/Anglican term) were a symbol of man’s aspiration to be united with His Creator. In the centuries that followed, the towers grow taller and thinner. They eventually became a visual focal point from the architecture. They also reduced in number from the double towered “westwork” to the singular spire that so characterized the churches of Normandy and Britain.

In the year 1666, something happened that changed the course of tower architecture. A fire swept across the city of London and damaged most of its eighty-seven church edifices. Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) was then commissioned to redesign all the church's of London. Using his own stylistic innovations in modifying the Gothic spires of France and Germany, Wren created the modern steeple. From that point on, the steeple became dominant feature of Anglow-British architecture.

Later the Puritans made their church buildings far simpler than their Catholic and Anglican predecessors. But he kept the steeple and brought it into the new world of the Americas.

The message of the steeple is one that contradicts the message of the new Testament. Christians do not have to reach into the heavens to find God. He is here! With the coming of Immanuel, God is with us (see Matthew 1:23). And with His resurrection, we have an indwelling Lord. The steeple defies these realities.



THE PULPIT

The earliest sermons were delivered from the bishop's chair, or cathedra, which was positioned behind the altar. Later the ambo, a raised desk on the side of the chancel from which Bible lessons were read, became the place where sermons were delivered. The ambo was taken from the Jewish synagogue. However, it has earlier roots in the reading desks and platforms of Greco-Roman antiquity. John Chrysostom (347-407) was noted for making the ambo a place for preaching.

As early as AD 250, the ambo was replaced by the pulpit, Cyprian of Carthage (200-258) speaks of placing the leader of the church into public office upon the pulpitum. Our word pulpit is derived from the Latin word pulpitum which means "a stage." the pulpitum, or pulpit, was propped up in the highest elevated place in the congregation.

In time, the phrase "to ascend the platform" (ad pulpitum venire) became part of the religious vocabulary of the clergy. By AD 252, Cyprian alludes to the raised platform that segregated the clergy from the laity as "the sacred and venerated congregation of clergy."

By the end of the Middle Ages the pulpit became common in parish churches. With the Reformation, it became the central piece of furniture in the church building. The pulpit symbolized the replacement of the centrality of ritualistic action (the Mass) with clerical verbal instruction (the sermon).

In Lutheran churches, the pulpit was moved to the front of the altar. In Reformed churches the pulpit dominated until the altar finally disappeared and was replaced by the "Communion table."

the pulpit has always been the centerpiece of the Protestant church. So much so that a well-known pastor who spoke during a conference sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association claimed: "If the church is alive, it's because the pulpit is alive-if the church is dead, it's because the pulpit is dead."

the pulpit elevates the clergy to a position of prominence. True to its meaning, it puts the preacher at center "stage"-separating and placing him high above God's people.

THE PEW AND BALCONY

The pew is perhaps the greatest inhibitor of face-to-face fellowship. It is a symbol of lethargy and passivity in the contemporary church and has made corporate worship a spectator sport.

The word pew is derived from the Latin podium. It means a seat raised up above floor level or a “balcony.” Pews were unknown to the church building for the first thousand years of Christian history. In the early basilicas, the congregation stood throughout the entire service. (This is still the practice among many Eastern Orthodox.)

By the thirteenth century, backless benches were gradually introduced into English parish buildings. These benches were made of stone and placed against the walls. They were then moved into the body of the building (the area called the nave). At first, the benches were arranged in a semicircle around the pulpit. Later they were fixed to the floor.

the modern pew was introduced in the fourteenth century though it was not commonly found in churches until the fifteenth century. At that time, wooden benches supplanted the stone seats. By the eighteenth century, box pews became popular.

Box pews have a comical history. They were furnished with cushioned seats, carpets, and other accessories. They were sold to families and considered private property. Box-pew owners set out to make them as comfortable as possible.

Some decorated them with curtains, cushions, padded arm chairs, fireplaces-even special compartments for pet dogs. It was not uncommon for owners to keep their pews sealed with lock and key. After much criticism from the clergy, these embellished pews were replaced with open seats.

Because box pews often had high sides, the pulpits had to be elevated so as to be seen by the people. Thus the “wineglass” pulpit was born during colonial times. Eighteenth-century family box pews were replaced with slip pews so that all the people faced the newly erected high platform where the pastor conducted the service.

So what is the pew@ The meaning of the word tells it all. It is a lowered “balcony”-detached seating from which to watch performances on a stage (the pulpit). It immobilizes the congregation of the saints and renders them mute spectators. It hinders face-to-face fellowship and interaction.

Galleries (or church balconies) were invented by the Germans in the sixteenth century. They were popularized by the Puritans in the eighteenth century. Since then balconies have become the trademark of the Protestant church building. Their purpose is to bring the congregation closer to the pulpit. Again, ensuring that congregations will be able to clearly hear the preacher has always been the main consideration in Protestant church design.

CONTEMPORARY CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

Over the last two hundred years, the two dominating architectural patterns employed by Protestant churches are the divided chancel form (used in liturgical churches) and the concert stage form (used in evangelical churches). The chancel is the area where the clergy (and some times the choir) conduct the service. In the chancel-style church, a rail or screen that separates the clergy from the laity still exists.

the concert-style church building was profoundly influenced by nineteenth-century revivalism. It is essentially an auditorium. The building is structured to emphasize the dramatic performance of the preacher and the choir. Its structure implicitly suggest that the choir (or worship team) performs for the congregation to stimulate their worship or entertain them. It also calls excessive attention to the preacher whether he is standing or sitting.

In the concert-style building, a small Communion table may appear on the floor below the pulpit. The Communion table is typically decorated with brass candlesticks, a cross, and flowers. Two candles on the communion table have become the sign of orthodoxy in most Protestant churches today. As with so many parts of the church service, the presence of candles was borrowed from the ceremonial court of the Roman Empire.

Yet despite the variations, all Protestant architecture produces the same sterile effects that were present in the Constantinian basilicas. They continue to maintain the unbiblical division between clergy and laity. And they encourage the congregation to assume a spectator role. The arrangement and mood of the building conditions the congregation toward passivity. The pulpit platform acts like a stage, and the congregation occupies the theatre. In short, Christian architecture has stalemated the functioning of God's people since it was born in the fourth century.



At this point, you may be thinking of yourself, *So, what's the big deal? Who cares if the first-century Christians did not have buildings? Or if church buildings were patterned after pagan beliefs and practices? Or if medieval Catholics based their architecture on pagan philosophy? What has that got to do with us today?*

Consider this next sentence: The social location of the church meeting expresses and influences the character of the church. If you assume that where the church gathers is simply a matter of convenience, you are tragically mistaken. You are overlooking a basic reality of humanity. Every building we encounter elicits a response from us. By its interior and exterior, it explicitly shows us what the church is and how it functions.

To put it in the words of Henri Lefebvre, "Space is never empty; it always embodies a meaning." This principle is also expressed in the architectural motto "form follows function." The form of the building reflects its particular function.

The social setting of a church's meeting place is a good index of that church's understanding of God's purpose for His body. A church's location teaches us how to meet. It teaches us what is important and what is not. And it teaches us what is acceptable to say to each other and what is not.

We learn these lessons from the setting in which we gather whether it be a church edifice or a private home. These lessons are by no means neutral. Go into any given church building and exegete the architecture. Ask yourself what objects are higher and which are lower. Ask yourself what is at the front and what is at the back. Ask yourself in what ways it might be possible to "adjust" the direction of the meeting on the spur of the moment. Ask yourself how easy or hard it would be for a church member to speak where he is seated so that all may see and hear him.

EXEGETING THE BUILDING



If you look at the church building setting and ask yourself these questions (and others like them), you will understand why the contemporary church has the character it does. If you ask the same set of questions about a living room, you will get a very different set of answers. You will understand why being a church in a house setting (as were the early Christians) has the character it does.

The church's social location is a crucial factor in church life. It cannot be assumed as simply "an accidental truth of history." Social locations can teach good and godly people very bad lessons and choke their lives together. Calling attention to the importance of the social location of the church (house or church edifice) helps us to understand the tremendous power of our social environment.

To put a finer point on it, the church building is based on the benighted idea that worship is removed from everyday life. People vary, of course, on how profoundly they emphasize this disjunction. Some groups have gone out of their way to emphasize it by insisting that worship could occur only in specific kinds of spaces designed to make you feel differently than you feel in everyday life.



We Protestants have replaced some of the grander architectural embellishments with a specific use of music intended to achieve the same end. Consequently, in Protestant circles “good” worship leaders are those who can use music to evoke what other traditions use space to evoke; specifically, a soulful sense of worshipfulness. But this is disjointed from everyday life and is inauthentic. Jonathan Edwards rightfully pointed out that emotions are transient and cannot be used to measure one’s relationship with God.

This disjunction between secular and spiritual is highlighted by the fact that the typical church building requires you to “process” in by walking up stairs or moving through a narthex. This adds to the sense that you are moving from everyday life to another life. Thus a transition is required. All of this flunks the Monday test. No matter how good Sunday was, Monday morning still comes to test our worship.

Watch a choir don their robes before the church service. They smile, laugh, and even joke. But once the service starts, they become different people. You will not often catch them smiling or laughing. This false separation of secular and sacred this “stained-glass mystique” of Sunday morning church-flies in the face of truth and reality.



In addition, the church building is far less warm, personal, and friendly than someone's home-the organic meeting place of the early Christians. The church building is not designed for intimacy nor fellowship. In most church buildings, the seating consists of wooden pews bolted to the floor. The pews (or chairs) are arranged in rows, all facing toward the pulpit. The pulpit sits on an elevated platform, which is often where the clergy also sits (remnants of the Roman basilica).

This arrangement makes it nearly impossible for one worshipper to look into the face of another. Instead, it creates a sit-and-soak form of worship that turns functioning Christians into “pew potatoes.” To state it differently, the architecture emphasizes fellowship between God and His people via the pastor! Yet despite these facts, we Christians still treat the building as if it is sacred.

Granted, you may object to the idea that the church building is hallowed. But (for most of us) our actions and words betray our belief. Listen to Christians speak of the church building. Listen to yourself as you speak of it. Do you ever hear it referred to as “church”? Do you ever hear it spoken of as “God’s house”? The general consensus among Christians of all denominations is that “a church is essentially a place set apart for worship.” This has been true for the last 1,700 years. Constantine is still living and breathing in our minds.





THE INCREDIBLY HIGH COST OVERHEAD

Most contemporary Christians mistakenly view the church building as a necessary part of worship. Therefore, they never question the need to financially support a building and its maintenance.

The church edifice demands a vast infusion of money. In the United States alone, real estate owned by institutional churches today is worth over \$230 billion. Church building debt, service, and maintenance consumes about 18 percent of the \$50 to \$60 billion tithed to churches annually. Point: Contemporary Christians are spending an astronomical amount of money on their buildings.

All the traditional reasons put forth for “needing” a church building collapse under careful scrutiny. We so easily forget that the early Christians turned the world upside down without them (see Acts 17:6). They grew rapidly for three hundred years without the help(or hindrance) of church buildings.



In the business world, overhead kills. Overhead is what gets added on to the “real” work a business does for its clients. Overhead pays for the building, the pencils, and the accounting staff. Furthermore, church buildings (as well as salaried pastors and staff) require very large ongoing expenses rather than onetime outlays. These budget busters take their cut out of a church’s monetary giving not just today, but next month, next year, and so on.

Contrast the overhead of a traditional church, which includes salaried staff and church buildings, with the overhead of a house church. Rather than such overhead siphoning off 50 to 85 percent of the house church’s monetary giving, its operating costs amount to a small percentage of the budget, freeing more than 95 percent of its shared money for delivering real services like ministry, mission, and outreach to the world.

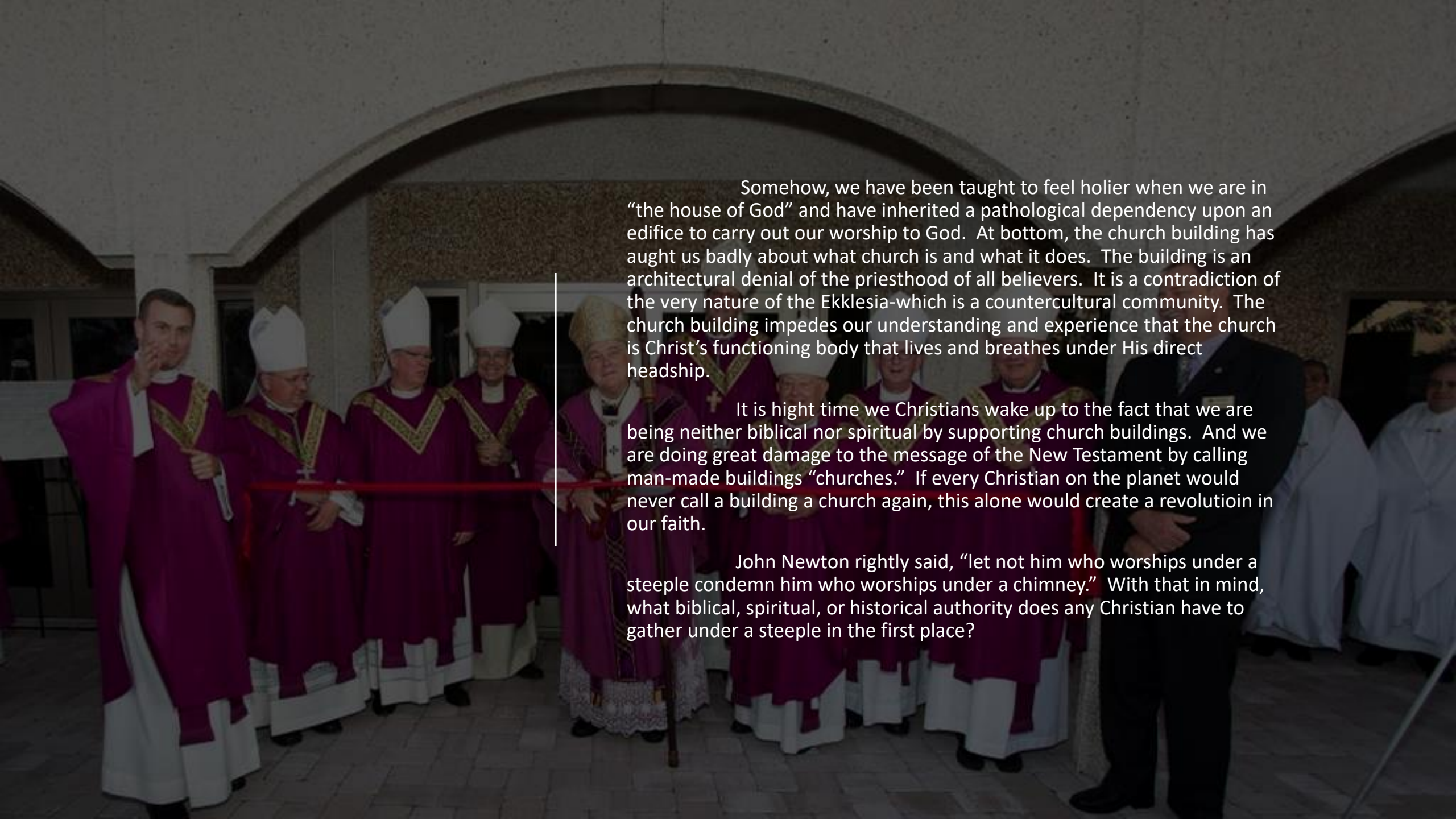


CAN WE DEFY THIS TRADITION?

Most of us are completely unaware of what we lost as Christians when we began erecting places devoted exclusively for worship. The Christian faith was born in believers' homes, yet every Sunday morning, scores of Christians sit in a building with pagan origins that is based upon pagan philosophy.

There does not exist a shred of biblical support for the church building. Yet scores of Christians pay good money each year to sanctify their brick and stone. By doing so, they have supported an artificial setting where they are lulled into passivity and prevented from being natural or intimate with other believers.

We have become victims of our past. We have been fathered by Constantine who gave us the prestigious status of owning a building. We have been blinded by the Romans and Greeks who forced upon us their hierarchically structured basilicas. We have been taken by the Goths who imposed upon us their Platonic architecture. We have been hijacked by the Egyptians and Babylonians who gave us our sacred steeples. And we have been swindled by the Athenians who imposed on us their Doric columns.



Somehow, we have been taught to feel holier when we are in “the house of God” and have inherited a pathological dependency upon an edifice to carry out our worship to God. At bottom, the church building has aught us badly about what church is and what it does. The building is an architectural denial of the priesthood of all believers. It is a contradiction of the very nature of the Ekklesia—which is a countercultural community. The church building impedes our understanding and experience that the church is Christ’s functioning body that lives and breathes under His direct headship.

It is high time we Christians wake up to the fact that we are being neither biblical nor spiritual by supporting church buildings. And we are doing great damage to the message of the New Testament by calling man-made buildings “churches.” If every Christian on the planet would never call a building a church again, this alone would create a revolution in our faith.

John Newton rightly said, “let not him who worships under a steeple condemn him who worships under a chimney.” With that in mind, what biblical, spiritual, or historical authority does any Christian have to gather under a steeple in the first place?

➤ Delving Deeper

1. Church buildings enable a large number of people to gather together for worship. How did the early church manage to worship in homes with so many people and still see themselves as a single body of believers? Practically, how do organic churches today maintain every-member functioning as they grow in size?

Today Christians often assume that the early churches were large like many contemporary institutional churches. This, however, was not the case. The early Christians met in homes for their church gatherings (Acts 2:46; 20:20; Romans 16:3,6; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). Given the size of first-century houses, the early Christian churches were rather small compared to today's standards. In his book *Paul's Idea of Community*, New Testament scholar Robert Banks says the average-sized church included thirty to thirty-five people.

Some first-century churches, such as the one in Jerusalem, were much larger. Luke tells us that the church in Jerusalem met in homes all throughout the city (Acts 2:46). Yet each home gathering didn't see itself as a separate church or denomination but as part of the one church in the city. For this reason, Luke always refers to this church as "the church at Jerusalem," never as the "churches at Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1, 11:22, 15:4). When the entire church needed to come together for a specific purpose (i.e., Acts 15), it met in an already existing facility that was large enough to accommodate everyone. The porch of Solomon outside the Temple was used for such occasions (Acts 5:12).

Today, when an organic church grows too large to gather in a single home, it will typically multiply into separate home meetings throughout the city. Yet it will often still see itself as one church meeting in different locations. If the home groups need to congregate together for special occasions, they often rent or borrow a large space to accommodate everyone.

1. I'm not sure I understand the problem with church buildings. Are you saying that they are bad because the first ones were modeled on large public buildings or promoted by an emperor with suspect theological grounding? Is there anything in Scripture that prohibits the body of Christ from meeting in them?

The answer to the first question is no, that is not what we are saying. By detailing their origin, however, we are showing that they developed apart from any scriptural mandate, contrary to what some Christians believe. Furthermore, we believe they detract from a proper understanding of the church as the body of believers.

Although Scripture never discusses the topic specifically, church buildings teach us a number of bad lessons that run contrary to New Testament principles. They limit the involvement of and fellowship between members. Often their grandeur distances people from God rather than reminding them that Christ indwells each believer. As Winston Churchill said: "First we shape our buildings. Thereafter, they shape us." This has definitely been the case with the church building.

The idea that the church building is "the house of God" and is constantly referred to as "church" is not only unbiblical, it violates the New Testament understanding of what the Ekklesia really is. We believe that this is why the early Christians did not erect such buildings until the era of Constantine.

Church historian Rodney Stark says, "for far too long, historians have accepted the claim that the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (ca. 285-337) caused the triumph of Christianity. To the contrary, he destroyed its most attractive and dynamic aspects, turning a high-intensity, grassroots movement into an arrogant institution controlled by an elite who often managed to be both brutal and lax.

...Constantine's 'favor' was his decision to divert to the Christians the massive state funding on which the pagan temples had always depended. Overnight, Christianity became 'the most-favoured recipient of the near limitless resources of imperial favors.' A faith that had been meeting in humble structures was suddenly housed in magnificent public buildings-the new church of Saint Peter in Rome was modeled on the basilican form used for imperial throne rooms."

3. Just because Plato, a pagan philosopher, was the first to articulate how sound, light, and color influence mood and elicit splendor, awe, and worship, why is it wrong for churches to consider how to maximize these factors when designing their buildings? Isn't it appropriate to employ these to the fullest in Christian worship? After all, Scripture makes clear that we are to remember God's holiness and righteousness?

Our point in that brief discussion on Plato was simply to show that pagan philosophy had a hand in engineering sacred buildings to create a psychological experience in those who occupy them. To our minds, psychological experience ought never to be confused with spiritual experience.

4. Since believers are in a church building only two to three hours a week, how can you say that these structures stymie the functioning of God's people?

Most Christians equate church services in a church building with “church.” Church leaders often quote Hebrews 10:25 (“not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together”) when telling members they should “go to church” on Sunday mornings. This reinforces the misconception that when the New Testament writers talk about church, what they had in mind is passively sitting through a service in a special building once a week.

But the fact is, the New Testament vision of the church meeting is one in which every member functions and participates in the gathering. And as we have established, the church building defeats this purpose by its architecture.

Case in point: I (Frank) have met a number of pastors who came to the conviction that the New Testament teaches that church meetings are to be open and participatory. Shortly after making this discovery, these pastors “opened up” their church services to allow members to freely function. In every case, it did not work. The members were still passive. The reason: the architecture of the building. Pews and elevated floors, for example, are not conducive for open sharing. They obstruct it. By contrast, when these same congregations began meeting in homes, functioning and every-member participation flourished.

To put it another way: If we equate church with sitting in a pew and taking a mostly passive role, then church buildings are appropriate for the task (but we still cannot claim that they are biblical since the New Testament knows nothing of church buildings).

On the other hand, if we believe that God's idea of a church meeting is for every member to participate in ministering spiritually to one another, then church buildings as we know them today greatly hinder that process.

5. Wasn't the concept of "sacred space" a Jewish idea as well as a pagan idea?

Yes, the Jews believed in sacred spaces (the Temple), a sacred priesthood (the Levites), and sacred rituals (the Old Testament sacrifices). However, these things were done away with by Christ's death, and the New Testament Christians knew nothing of them. Later, the Christians picked up these concepts from the pagans, not the Jews. This chapter supplies evidence for that statement.

6. Do you think it's always wrong for a group of Christians to use a building for worship or ministry?

Not at all. Paul rented a building (the Hall of Tyrannus) when he was in Ephesus, and the church of Jerusalem used the outer courts of the Temple for special gatherings. What we are establishing in this chapter are five key points: (1) it is unbiblical to call a building a “church,” “the house of God,” “the temple of God,” “the sanctuary of the Lord,” and other similar terms; (2) the architecture of the typical church building hinders the church from having open participatory meetings, (3) it is unscriptural to treat a building as though it were sacred; (4) a typical church building should not be the site of all church meetings because the average building is not designed for face-to-face community; and (5) it is a profound error to assume that all churches should own or rent buildings for their gatherings. It is our opinion that each church should seek the Lord’s guidance on this question rather than assume the presence of a building to be the Christian norm. Tracing the history of the “church” building helps us to understand why and how we use them today.