



Theology of Church Architecture

Developing a theology of church buildings

It is very interesting to be part of the Diocese of Christchurch's post-quake conversations about buildings. Here are some themes I am hearing in conversations: versatility, no more 'one day a week usage' buildings, safe, energy efficient (no more cold churches!), visible (do we need to shift to a new site because of changed traffic patterns?), share with other churches, serve great coffee if not build an actual cafe, what about a dedicated sacred space not one that gets shared with orchestras and hosts occasional parties? Even if the word theology does not appear in these conversations, there is something deeply theological in what is being said because people are thinking about how buildings might enable God to be proclaimed as well as worshipped, about how to best use the resources God provides us, and about what activities can be hosted in a sacred space.

Once we bring theology to the fore in thinking about buildings we strike an intriguing paucity of biblical building blocks for that theology. After two thousand years of Christian life and worship, approximately eighteen hundred years of which have involved gatherings in dedicated buildings we call 'churches', we take for granted that church buildings are intrinsic to the corporate life of Christians. Indeed the very fact that 'church' describes that corporate life as well as the buildings in which some activities of that life take place is evidence of the extraordinary commitment we Christians have had to buildings. Yet where is the mandate for that commitment? Neither Jesus nor his apostles ever said Christians should build a church building. For over a century the early Christian movement met in buildings not their own (the Jerusalem Temple, synagogues, houses). The lack of instruction to build a building is all the more striking because the people of God, before Jesus Christ, spent a considerable amount of time and energy building and rebuilding a central place of worship (the Jerusalem Temple) as well as dedicated meeting places (synagogues).

Digging into the New Testament I cannot find a positive theology of church buildings. By contrast I can find remarks of our Lord predicting the destruction of the Jerusalem

Temple; and remarks of Paul emphasising the body of Christ as the new temple of God. This is not to say that the New Testament is against buildings connected with the life of Christians as such. Rather it is to note the dynamic of early Christian mission which seemed too fast paced (spreading around the world) and too urgent (expecting the return of Christ at any moment) to expend energy and funds on buildings.

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Should we seek to recapture that dynamic in our world today? In a parish church with growing congregations and some hope of fund-raising, it is easy to believe that missional dynamism goes hand in hand with a new building programme. But what about when we do some hard assessments of data across the whole church and find declining attendance, costs of maintenance and insurance rising faster than offertories, and recognise some churches are badly suited for today's needs, should we sell our assets to fund evangelism and 'fresh expression' church plants? What would an apostolic mission without any goals to build buildings look like in the 21st century? These are radical ideas for a church which has made both emotional as well as financial investments in buildings, but I am also finding in conversation that friends are remembering times when non-Christians have pointedly said that the wealth of the Anglican church is a stumbling block to receiving the gospel.

Against thinking that future mission might be better off without buildings are some solid lines of arguments. If the New Testament Christians met in buildings so might we. If we have more

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people than can comfortably meet in a house, shouldn't we make provision for a larger group to meet? Hiring school halls is all very well, but it is an insecure way of life. Owning a church building both safeguards against termination of lease and provides opportunity for seven days a week ministry and mission. Church buildings, another argument goes, are not merely buildings, they are symbols located in a community full of buildings as symbols. Alongside buildings symbolising our dedication to drinking, learning, gambling, shopping, and sport, should there not be buildings dedicated to the living God, buildings which attest to the gospel of Christ through their shape, size and splendour? Very quickly, thinking like this, we have a theology of church architecture which may have no basis in what the New Testament positively says about buildings (because there is nothing said). But this theology has a strong basis in the gospel itself and its motivation of believers to witness in multiple ways to its truth about Jesus Christ.

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What we do not have, thinking in these ways, is immediate clarity about what shape, size and splendour churches should have, to say nothing of other aspects, which advance the work of the gospel. A church shaped like a cross, for instance, conveys an important message but might be less useful for congregational life centred on the Lord's Table for which a semi-circular shape might be apt. For a Sunday ministry centred on the pulpit, which shape is best? What suits a balanced ministry of Word and Sacrament? Raising questions such as these hopefully does not make the task of designing a great church difficult but rather stimulates creative energy towards brilliance in design. Along the way a theology of building is intrinsic: we want this particular design to express our commitment to the features of Christian worship we deem to be essential to our response to the God of Jesus Christ.

Something I appreciate as an evolutionary development in church life in my own lifetime

is a new emphasis on hospitality and fellowship being closely associated with worship. In concrete terms with respect to buildings, it is now desirable to remain in the same place for worship and for a cup of tea after the service. Some recent new churches, or additions to old churches have been outstanding in providing a space for hospitality and fellowship alongside the space for worship. Of course such spaces have had the double blessing of providing for meeting together during the week. While we understand such developments as practically useful, in fact a profoundly important theology is being worked out in concrete form: the God we worship and adore is the God who welcomes strangers into his family and who delights in our fellowship together.

So much for size and shape, what could we say about splendour and theology? It is an easy theological line from the beauty of God as Creator and Redeemer to seek to make our church buildings beautiful as well as functional. We honour God with the offering of our talents, both artistic and monetary. Yet there is a more difficult theological line to consider, the theology of justice and mercy. Where does the money come from to build extravagantly beautiful churches? It does not come from widow's mites but from the successes of businesses. Nothing wrong with making a profit, nor with the owners being paid more than their workers, but in a world of underpaid workers, unemployed, and hungry people, should the surplus wealth of capitalist endeavour be locked into beautiful churches or redistributed to the lowly paid and given away to the poor? Of course counter arguments are at hand, right in the heart of the gospels, where we read that Jesus did not forbid extravagant acts of love towards him with oils and ointments purchased with funds which could have been given to the poor. To coin a question, what would Jesus do if he were in charge of the post-quake churches of Canterbury?

But already these musings on theology and church architecture have placed us at a point of great temptation, to engage in never-ending debates over important things when the most important thing, according to the New Testament, is to spread the gospel of Christ. Perhaps that is a cue to the most vital question we can ask about church buildings for the 21st century, will this building hinder or help to spread the gospel?

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