

STEWARDSHIP AND THE MEETINGHOUSE

One area of excessive waste among many churches is the inefficient use of physical facilities. A study conducted by graduate students at Midwestern State University (Wichita Falls, Texas) revealed that the facilities of twenty-four different Churches of Christ were utilized “less than two percent of the time based on a ten hour day and a seven day week.”¹ A second study done by the same students showed the situation among non-restoration churches (i.e., about 100 churches in the same Texas city) to be about the same. “Of some twenty-five or thirty churches which were visited in gathering the data, all of them were basically idle and empty on week days.”² Given the total assets of those 100 churches (estimated at \$35,000,000), the waste is staggering! Another study by students of religion at Eastern New Mexico University concluded:

Christendom, including the church, has drifted into idolatry in erecting vast church structures that dominate the budgets of many congregations, and for some the major item over the entire history of the congregation has been for real estate, buildings, and general operating expenses.³

In light of such massive waste, the church needs to rethink its purpose, its priorities, and its stewardship. A good theology regarding meetinghouses is necessary. Conrad Massa rightly remarks, “We must build our churches from the inside out. . . . Theology is basic to church

¹These churches ranged geographically from Houston, Texas to Nashville, Tennessee with memberships of 350 to 3,000. Ralph Arceneaux, “Empty Cathedrals (1),” *Firm Foundation* 99 (November 2, 1982): 7.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

design.”⁴ This paper will discuss three theological foundations appropriate for efficient utilization of physical facilities. Practical alternatives to meetinghouse waste based on these biblical principles will be suggested.

Not Where, But What

Christians of the first century did not restrict their gatherings to one particular site for teaching, preaching, and worship. We find early disciples “day by day, attending the *temple* together and breaking bread *in their homes*” (Acts 2:46, ESV). These believers met together “from house to house” (i.e., in individual homes, see Acts 5:42, ESV) to praise God. The house of Mary, mother of John Mark, was one such place (see Acts 12:12), as were the houses of Aquila and Prisca at Rome and at Ephesus (see Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19), Nympha at Laodicea (see Colossians 4:15), and Philemon at Colossae (see Philemon 2). We are told that the brothers at Troas met in an “upper room” (Acts 20:7-8, ESV), and the Christians at Corinth came together as a church apart from their homes (see 1 Corinthians 11:18, 34). It is uncertain whether some of these meetings took place in private or public locations.⁵ The emphasis, though, lies not on the location of the gathering but *on the gathering itself*.

⁴Conrad H. Massa, “Architectural Implications in Recent Trends in Reformed Liturgy,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 54, no. 3 (reprinted by National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, n.d.): n.p.

⁵Archaeological finds at Capernaum in Galilee show how the private house of Peter, a plausible identification, was converted to a house church. See James F. Strange and Hershel Shanks, “Has the House Where Jesus Stayed in Capernaum Been Found?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 7 (November/December 1982): 31.

True worship, as Jesus said, is not determined by the place of worship but by the condition of the worshiper's heart (see John 4:21-24). This is because "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

Heaven is my throne,
And the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me,
says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?
Did not my hand make all these things?" (Acts 7:48-50, ESV)

God dwells today in the hearts and lives of his people. We, the church, are the temple of the living God (see 2 Corinthians 6:16). The place of worship, therefore, is secondary to worship itself and only an expedient in nature.

Since God's concern is for *what not where*, churches wishing to eliminate waste might: (1) sell existing property and start house churches; or (2) sell existing property and rent other facilities. The *house church*, while limited in space, has many advantages (e.g., intimate fellowship, growth through sharing, leadership development).⁶ Funds once gobbled up by the meetinghouse can be channeled into an effective and informal base for evangelism. Any church that cannot make use of its meetinghouse for more than five or so hours per week would do well to investigate *leasing other space* for its worship times. School buildings, another religious group's facilities, or municipal buildings can be rented and both parties will benefit mutually. In fact, churches could effectively integrate house churches (for small, frequent gatherings) and leasing larger spaces (for large, weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly gatherings). The effect of a well-organized program such as this on evangelism can be tremendous.

⁶See Philip Anderson and Phoebe Anderson, *The House Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975).

Is It Being Used?

An individual who manages or oversees the property or possessions of another is called a “steward.” The underlying Greek word, *oikonomos*, primarily denotes the manager of a household or an estate. By definition, therefore, a steward must be responsible, reliable, and dependable. This is because what he is in charge of is not his own. The steward is *required* to be *trustworthy* (see 1 Corinthians 4:2). The steward will *give an account* of his stewardship (see Luke 16:2). Paul strongly felt the need to be responsible, since as an apostle he was entrusted with the mystery of the grace of God (see 1 Corinthians 4:1; 9:16-17; Ephesians 3:2). In a similar way, shepherds are God’s stewards (see Titus 1:7) and need to be responsible and faithful men. And all Christians are called upon to “to serve one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10, NASB).

What we have or possess as stewards should be used in an efficient way to build up the kingdom of God and to reach the lost with the good news about Jesus. Our resources, whether spiritual qualities, physical abilities, or material things, should be engaged in an efficient way to achieve these goals. Are we using our meetinghouses to edify one another? Do we use our meetinghouse as a tool for evangelizing the community? Is the meetinghouse an end within itself or a means to an end? Is it justifiable and a mark of good stewardship to maintain and operate at great cost and expense a meetinghouse when it is used relatively little as compared with most physical structures?

“Is it being used?” is a question of stewardship. Churches serious about their stewardship might use their expensive space more efficiently by: (1) beginning a day care, nursery, kindergarten, or even an elementary school; (2) encouraging local civic groups to use the

church's facilities for meetings or activities; (3) starting a ministry suitable to local needs (e.g., youth activities, meals for elderly, community information center, clothing or furniture outlet); or (4) renting the church's facilities to other groups. Uses like those described above could certainly enhance community outreach and would possibly help edify the members, but many church meetinghouses would require a radical transformation before some of the above solutions could be implemented. It is true that "far too few churches have provided facilities that will encourage the church to keep on growing."⁷ Perhaps a greater problem is the failure of churches to provide facilities that are suitable to *the total life* of the church. This leads us to the next section.

What Is It For?

The presence of Christ among mankind meant the end of all "holy places, "sacred rituals," and "priesthoods."

When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, he entered through the *greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands*, that is to say, not of this creation. . . . For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself" (Hebrews 9:11, 24, NASB).

No longer is one particular place or type of place needed for worship to God. God's perfect sanctuary and temple is his people (e.g., individual Christians gathered together in his name).

Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20, ESV). And Paul asks, "Do you not know that you [plural in the original Greek] are God's

⁷Roland A. Smith, *Operation Blueprint: A Plan for Growth and Outreach Through Church Architecture* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, n.d.), 1.

temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16, ESV). So from a biblical or a New Testament viewpoint, the meetinghouse is *not necessarily* a holy place; the meetinghouse is *not necessarily* a church.⁸ God's people are his holy place, and God's people are his church. The meetinghouse may become God's holy dwelling when the church is gathered for worship, but otherwise the physical structure itself is simply a meeting place for the people of God.

First century Christians met as a gathered family and celebrated their common life in Christ. This sharing of life included activities and events other than corporate worship (e.g., common meals, community benevolence, education, recreation). Any congregation would do well to adapt or plan their meetinghouse to meet the needs of the total life of the church. It is only reasonable to extract the greatest amount of use from the thing that often gobbles up the greatest amount of the church treasury. Since the meetinghouse is only a meeting place for people, it should be designed for more than one purpose, or else it possibly will be thought of as the "House of God." The structure should be economical, practical, and simple. This allows for variety.⁹ Many multi-million dollar facilities unfortunately are not multi-purpose.

The auditorium is built so that it can function only as a place of worship; seating is fixed permanently in place; and the deed may often specify who can use it and for what

⁸For a good treatment of the history of the meetinghouse as a "holy place," see E. A. Sovik, *Architecture For Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973), 9ff.

⁹For a good development of multi-purpose architecture, see Sovik, *Architecture For Worship*, 67ff. Compare Ralph L. Belknap, *Effective Use of Church Space: Church Buildings in a Time of Energy Shortages and High Costs* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978); T. Lee Anderton, ed., *Church Property / Building Guidebook* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1973); and Mildred C. Widber and Scott Truner Ritenour, *Focus: Building for Christian Education* (Philadelphia, PA: Pilgrim Press, 1969).

purpose it may be used. For all practical purposes it is destined to be an “Empty Cathedral” for ninety-eight percent of the time.¹⁰

Such is the material emphasis of many churches. Rather than focus on furniture, built-in features, and elaborate design, God’s people must focus on *people*.

Our purpose in the Christian life is to glorify God through our *bodies* not through our meetinghouses. The meetinghouse need not become an end within itself. It should serve the broader goals of the church as each group of believers lives out in its total life the principles of the kingdom of God. In light of the biblical teaching concerning stewardship, any elaborateness, structural inefficiency, or waste must be avoided.

¹⁰Ralph Arceneaux, “Empty Cathedrals (2),” *Firm Foundation* 99 (November 9, 1982): 7.

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