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“But Right or Wrong—My Architecture”

By GEORGE W. HOYER

WHO was it that referred to a recently completed building with the words “It looks as if it were designed by Frank Lloyd *Wrong?*” What is right in church architecture is always so much a reflection of a proponent’s subjective background and experience that comments such as these are like “My country—may she always be right—but my country, right or wrong.” A case made for church architecture is usually a case for *my* architecture.

These notes ricocheted as the reviews on the following three books were being prepared. Comments on the volumes will precede the comment on the issue.

THE CHANGING CHURCH: ITS ARCHITECTURE, ART, AND DECORATION. By Katherine Morrison McClinton. New York: Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1957. 144 pages. Cloth. \$7.50.

THE MODERN CHURCH. By Edward D. Mills. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1956. 189 pages. Cloth. \$9.75.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS FOR TODAY, ed. John Knox Shear. New York: F. W. Dodge Corporation, 1957. 183 pages. Cloth. Price not given.

If one picture is worth more than 1,000 words, these volumes are among the most economical tools building congregations can obtain. The photographs are marvelous, even if you do not agree with all the words. Mrs. McClinton’s *words* say that “the Lutheran Church places the font in

front of the altar” (p. 39), but she *pictures* the ebony and stainless steel font of Christ Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, which is at the end of the north aisle (as Mr. Mills illustrates with a floor plan, although *he* identifies the church as “Evangelical” [p. 43]). Mrs. McClinton’s volume asserts that the Lutheran rules for liturgical colors are “strict and clear” (p. 60), and meanwhile the Ashby printing firm proceeds to publish two calendars to illustrate the variations existing in American Lutheran rites.

The Changing Church is helpful more for pointing up the complexity of the problems involved in the art and decoration of the church than for its solutions. But this is, of course, the best help possible, since each situation needs its own specific solution. One problem, however, which she raises seems to require further comment. “If the minister is bald, the lighting must be regulated so that there are not too many highlights on the bald head” (p. 73). Involved here, one will readily see, is the entire question of ministerial tenure, both of the *pate* and of the *pastorate*.

The Modern Church by Edward Mills is somewhat less pertinent for the average building committee because his material speaks out of an English urban background. Thus he makes no comment whatsoever in regard to air conditioning and admonishes that “where a large number of young people are expected to use the buildings, a cycle parking space should be provided to prevent the random parking of bicycles. Provisions should also be made for the

parking of perambulators under cover" (p. 58). His volume is also filled with magnificent pictures of English, European, and American contemporary structures.

Further comment on *Religious Buildings for Today* will follow. The text is of particular value here. It stirs up consideration of points then beautifully illustrated.

All three volumes are excellent examples of the type of material building committees and entire congregations should study before entering upon a church construction program. But for a balanced diet and for some essential roughage, vitamins, and attitudes, committees should still beg, borrow, or buy a copy of Frederick Roth Weber's *The Small Church: How to Build and Furnish It* (Cleveland: J. H. Jansen, 1939). This is obviously another reflection of a personal bias and for reasons indicated in the comments which follow — but "My architecture," I still think she is right!

A major issue that involves the entire discussion of church building concerns the relationship between the architect and the minister. In *Symbolism in the Bible and the Church* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959) Gilbert Cope says: "Building a church is not just another architectural problem: it is not too much to say that an architect should not accept the commission to build a church unless he is a practicing member of the same communion and well versed in the liturgy which it is to serve" (p. 258). It is not too much to ask the same of any *minister* who engages in a construction program. The problem of a *ministry* that does not really understand the *leitourgia* a church building is to serve is further complicated by a blight that is more frequently discussed in polite architectural circles, a min-

istry that claims too much for its knowledge of architecture.

Otto Spaeth, writing in *Religious Buildings for Today*, says frankly (p. 38): "If our work today is to herald a new age in church building, the first step has to be an open-minded and modest clergy. In simple frankness, the architectural resurrectionism that blights our church plant today is the direct result of profound clerical ignorance of art and architecture, coupled with boundless clerical self-confidence."

Even though the average cleric acknowledges that "the laying on of hands has done nothing at all for his knowledge of air conditioning or central heating" and admits that he is an "architect only by self-confidence," he would protest the judgment were it not for Mr. Spaeth's addition (p. 40):

The architect is in a position to say one word in this struggle. The word is *no*, said with absolute finality. For if an uninformed clergy is the source from whom the blessings of ersatz Gothic flow, in every case there has been an acquiescent architect to provide a canal where he should have placed a dam. With great travail, architecture has lifted itself from the brutish trades to professional status. Does that status mean anything at all? What do we think of a doctor who substitutes for his honest diagnosis the sweet words he knows his patient is longing to hear? Is the architect of wedding-cake churches really any different? The architect is indeed an interpreter, the instrument through which his client's dreams are made incarnate. But if those dreams are nightmares, professional honesty requires that they be shown up as such. When the architect has the courage to say no, more and more ministers of religion

will find the courage to say yes to his working where he wants naturally to work, in the spirit of the present moment.

What is Mr. Spaeth's solution? For the clergy he recommends the introduction of courses in art and architecture on seminary curricula. Mrs. McClinton seconds the idea—"It is easier to train one clergyman in art appreciation than to try to change the tastes of a whole congregation" (p. 132). But should the church architect not also be expected to include courses in theology, worship, and liturgy in his curriculum? Alwin L. Rubin, who was the pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Portland, Oreg., when Pietro Belluschi was selected as architect, is quoted as follows:

There are architects and architects and choosing between them is not easy. There are some—I sometimes think there are too few of them—who are truly creative. In interviewing architects, pay particular attention to whether a man understands such things as devotional quality and whether he indicates such an understanding without your prodding him. He should firmly believe that this devotional quality will emerge from space, light, color, texture; the right one will quickly and definitely disagree with you if you suggest otherwise. (*Religious Buildings for Today*, p. 34)

In the midst of an actual situation, who is to be responsible for solutions to obvious needs of a parish, and who is to make choices in architecture, art, or decoration? Certainly one ought to lean in the direction of the man who has been trained to qualify. The odds in favor of a successful building operation on this basis are much higher than would be the case if these details and decisions were turned over to the type of building committee of which we read:

"Most building committees are concerned with four things: cost, seating capacity, social rooms and washrooms" (Webber, p. 1). But there are architectural offices that sometimes seem to give no attention to washrooms. There is an eastern sacristy lavatory of recent architectural inspiration whose length seems to indicate it was designed for purposes of meditation like the cloister walks of an old monastery. On the other hand there was the architect in a northern state who insisted that he had "been a member of Grace Church for 35 years and had never been inside the church washroom" and who therefore insisted that there was no necessity for designing one in the building under consideration. Is Mrs. McClinton right in saying: "A building is a work of art and as such must be the work of the artist and not of a committee. Yet the committee and not the architect must take the blame for such practical mistakes (as) . . . no closets for the clergy's vestments" (*The Changing Church*, p. 14). It would seem that a reasonable architect would not insist that his artistry excuses him from a concern for cupboards, and if a committee would suggest that he include them, he ought readily to accede.

But this is not always true. (I speak as a fool—because Mr. Spaeth started this.) At one of the Valparaiso liturgical institutes a question in this area was posed to a silversmith from the Cranbrook School who had addressed the meeting. The point made was that an architect, insisting that every aspect of the school building he was designing be functional, would not accede to the building committee's suggestion that the open-fin radiation which he had designed for the school classrooms be covered

to conceal dust and various things that school boys are wont to hurl. Whose opinion was to decide the issue? The silversmith, speaking for artists and architects, insisted that the architect's opinion should prevail. Are all architects infallible? There are some who can frankly copy a good design and yet manage to develop an interior that seems to be in all things like the original and yet is without everything that the original had in atmosphere and texture. The editor of *Religious Buildings for Today* comments (p. 1):

Our buildings are the expression of our interest in certain fragments of experience, in selected stimuli. At best it is difficult to treat with the whole of any problem. Architects are not alone in their tendency to overlook the evidence of man's total experience in favor of working with those experiences and ideas which happen to be particularly stimulating at the moment. Dealing with parts of experience and parts of ideas is easier. Moreover, by changing periodically the particular set of motivations the illusion of progress may be achieved. . . .

Ralph Adams Cram wanted us to shut out of sight and out of mind all our experience since Gothic. Today's architects are little different from yesterday's. We are simply motivated by a different set of exclusive stimuli. It is a rare architect today who is able to resist the fascination of concentrating his interest on a favorite material, shape or system of construction. Too often it is a predominantly intellectual fascination and as such necessarily fatal for the total interest of the people.

This seems to me to be essentially a fairer attitude toward the position of the architect in the planning of a church. His work, too, needs the judgment and balance which not every architect possesses.

Since this review was initially directed toward those who would prefer to look at pictures rather than read, there are possibly enough still with us who look at the pictures in *Der Lutheraner* and see the record of new church construction in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod which the editor has been preserving for posterity. Many of the designs are somewhat tragic—both in the area of attempted contemporary and in buildings of imitated Gothic. But having seen again in the past summer the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul abuilding in Washington, D. C., and having stepped once again into Trinity Episcopal Church at Piney Branch and Dahlia in Tacoma Park (pictured in Luther Reed's recent volume, *Worship*, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), designed by the Cathedral architect Philip Hubert Frohman, I would protest against the premise that says:

It seems to me that the first requirement of a church or temple today is that it be of today, contemporary, a structure embracing the total life of the parishioner. That parishioner drives a streamlined car to work in an office or factory where everything has been designed for maximum efficiency and comfort. He travels in streamlined trains and jet-propelled planes. Yet every Sunday he is asked to hurl himself back centuries to say his prayers in the pious gloom of a Gothic or Romanesque past. The queer implication is that God does not exist today; He is made out to be a senile old gentleman dwelling among the antiques of His residence, one whom we visit each week out of sentiment and then forget, since He obviously has no relation to the normal part of our lives.

This comment of Mr. Spaeth in *Religious Buildings for Today* (p. 38) is exem-

plified by his comments on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York and the National Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. He says (p. 38):

These two, the one Protestant and the other Catholic, are anachronistic before they are finished. The Catholic shrine, indeed, is only now moving off the drawing board. [Dedicated in 1959]. Plans drawn up 25—30 years ago are now being put into effect. This outmoded conception will be "completed" with a maze of Byzantine towers and Romanesque domes absolutely meaningless to the twentieth century. It is true that modifications are being made, but why take half measures? Why not start over? Why not make it a living expression, a building which will command respect?

St. John's in New York is in slightly different dilemma, though the essential albatross is the same bird: a sentimental and expensive dedication to the dear, dead days of long ago. Despairing of ever raising enough money to finish the Cathedral in the fifteenth century style to which they'd hoped to become accustomed, the authorities are casting about for ways to solve the insolvable. St. Bernard's line in a letter to Abbot William of St. Thierry on the subject of over-ornamentation in churches is relevant: "For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?"

The reverse of this precise point, however, is one that is most troublesome about much of the promotion of contemporary architecture. The argument quite prominently advanced is that economy of construction demands a contemporary approach. Or "since it is necessary for us to have seating space for 600, obviously

we can only choose. . . ." In very few of the comments in these three books can one find the proper premise for church construction—God. Much of the construction tends to begin with the pew or the "ancillary accommodation," even though the importance of the chancel is stressed for architectural effect. "The building should be shaped by worship and not worship by architecture. But for some time Protestants have been erecting buildings designed to achieve a 'mood' in which an individual might have a 'worship experience' rather than a setting for the activity of the church in showing its Lord in worship before the world" ("On Getting Good Architecture for the Church" by Marvin Halverson in *Religious Buildings for Today*, p. 4). Here at least God is given a place on the building committee's agenda. Something of the nature of God Himself, some expression of our evaluation of His greatness and goodness and love should be involved in the consideration of the type of building which we construct for Him. Something of the value we put on His redemptive activity toward us should be involved in the budget which we set for the construction of a building to do Him honor.

Ralph Adams Cram still deserves to be quoted at length, even though he deals with problems of a "contemporary" architecture of another generation, an architecture less worthy than that of our day.

What then are the qualities of a church, and their order of precedence? It seems to me that they are four, and that they stand in the following order of importance:

First of all, a church is a house of God, a place of His earthly habitation, wrought in the fashion of heavenly things, a visible type of heaven itself. From the day when God gave to Solomon the plan and the

fashion of the temple down to those wherein our own forefathers lavished their scanty wealth and toiled with devout hands to raise the awful fabrics of the mediaeval cathedrals and abbeys, this thought has lain as the cornerstone of every one of the great and splendid churches that brighten Christendom with the memory of devout and reverent times. They were building a house of God, and the treasure and labor lavished so abundantly were consecrated as they might never be on any other structure. All the wonders of art, — the handmaid of religion, — all the treasures gathered from many lands, were lavished here in gratitude and praise and thanksgiving; and nothing was too precious, indeed, all things failed in a measure, to show the deep devotion of faithful men, and their solemn knowledge of the majesty of that Presence that should enter and dwell therein.

There is scant kinship between this spirit and that which prompts and governs the construction of contemporary churches. Were it restored, if only in a small measure, men would understand more clearly the fatal error of the modern principle, realize that no tricks, no imitations, no cheapnesses, no pretences of any kind, are tolerable in a Christian Church, and that the admission of those things in the temple of the living God is blasphemy. Instead of the cheap and tawdry structures of shingles and clapboards, or flimsy brick and stone veneering, doomed to very desirable decay, we should have once more solid and enduring temples that, even if by reason of our artistic backwardness could not at first compare with the noble work of the Middle Age, would at least take place with it in point of honor instead of standing, as now, a perpetual reminder of our meanness and our hypocrisy.

This is the first and highest reason for church building, and the second is this: the providing of a place apart where may

be solemnized the sublime mysteries of the Catholic faith; a temple reared about the altar and subordinate to it, leading up to it, as to the center of honor, growing richer and more splendid as it approaches the sanctuary, where is concentrated all the wealth of obedient and loving workmanship that may be obtained by means of personal sacrifice through years that gather into centuries. . . . It is unnecessary to argue for the importance of this exalted quality in church building. Conscience, instinct, impulse, all urge us to glorify, with the extreme of our power, the sanctuary of the Lord. It seems incredible that in the last few centuries this, the eminent reason and law of church building, should have been so grievously obscured, until men should wrongheadedly have reared their auditoriums and show structures, forgetting the supremacy of the sacramental nature of the Church in the zeal for the glorification of her prophetic nature. Such has, however, been the case; but thanks to recent events, it is no longer necessary to argue for a more just conception of things.

The third aspect of church architecture is this: the creation of spiritual emotion through the ministry of all possible beauty of environment; the using of art to lift men's minds from secular things to spiritual, that their souls may be brought into harmony with God. The agency of art to this end is immeasurable, and until the time of the Reformers this fact was always recognized. Not in the barren and ugly meeting-house of the Puritans, with its whitewashed walls, three-decker pulpit and box pews, were men most easily lifted out of themselves into spiritual communion with God, — not there did they come most clearly to know the charity and sweetness of Christianity and the exalting solemnity of divine worship, but where they were surrounded by the dim shadows of mysterious aisles, where lofty piers of stone

softened high overhead into sweeping arches and shadowy vaults, where golden light struck down through storied windows, painted with the benignant faces of saints and angels; where the eye rested at every turn on a painted and carven Bible, manifesting itself through the sense to the imagination; where every wall, every foot of floor, bore its silent memorial to the dead, its thank-offering to God; where was always the faint odor of old incense, the still atmosphere of prayer and praise. . . .

The fourth aspect of church building is the one which is generally considered exclusively, and is precisely the last in importance of the four that I have named,—the arrangement of a building where a congregation may conveniently listen to the instruction of its spiritual leaders. I do not mean for an instant that this quality must be sacrificed to the others: a church, if it is properly designed, may be a perfect sanctuary, a perfect temple, a perfect auditorium. . . .

[*Church Building*. By Ralph Adams Cram. Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1924, pp. 6—10]

Expressing a similar understanding is Mr. Halverson's later paragraph (p. 6):

I believe that the transcendence and immanence of God can be expressed in church architecture today perhaps better than ever before. The concern of contemporary architects with space and the relationship in inter-penetration of interior and exterior space can be highly significant. Professor Tillich asserts that space is our most valid symbol of God. The God who cannot be contained or "spatialized" is represented by definition of space which covers man in his finitude. With today's building materials and techniques it is possible to achieve architectural space of symbolic power. I believe that the Church building of our day can best express God's transcendence

of space and time as it also expresses the immanence of God in employing the space and time possibilities of modern architecture.

Obviously cost factors and budget attitudes are only symptoms—construction of a modern character can be just as expensive as a Gothic building, depending upon the details of the construction. Just as obviously no one can set a total amount that would express the value of Almighty God to every parish. The tremendous pressures of suburban growth and the rapid changes in urban development make necessary a rethinking of older judgments. But what is of concern is the matter of motivation. Even the right solution would be treason if the right thing is being done for the wrong reason.

But once again—look at the pictures. They carry facts which the words do not express. In the volume in which Mr. Spaeth protests the continuation of cathedral building in Washington and New York, the pictures make clear that the albatross he shoots is one of style and not of concept. The "contemporary expression of Cathedral traditions" by Basil Spence is given, describing his reasoning in the development of a new design for Coventry Cathedral. The photographs of that design as well as picture after picture of other construction give evidence that the motivation for most of the contemporary architecture pictured is not simply one of economy but one of expressing the Christian's free and living relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

One final note. Are there any churches which in their chancel architecture are really coming to grips with the sacramental revival of the liturgical movement? If the blessing of the reception of the body and

blood of our Lord is recognized, if the Eucharistic service is regarded as a full expression of the Christian church's worship, are architects arranging Communion rails and chancel areas to make possible the communing of a total parish? It is obvious that architects are paying attention to the needs of the flesh by a careful counting of pew seatings. Are they making as adequate a provision for the spirit by the number of kneeling spaces provided at the Communion rails? and as sympathetic a consideration for the flesh that protests a service extended unreasonably by the time required to commune a large congregation in groups of 12 and instead provides adequate space for the movement of an entire congregation to the altar? These three volumes would give evidence that the answer is no. The Communion rail in many Lutheran churches continues to be only the width of a chancel which is narrower than the nave and has doors only for the minister. In some instances the rail is as wide as the nave. In such instances the block may be in the parish's insistence on a traditional traffic pattern that is inefficient. But where is the evidence of a construction approach that recognizes the objective of involving the entire parish family in the reception of the sacrament, a participation that would both express the unity of the body of Christ gathered in worship and the blessings which the sacrament gives to each believer? Dr. Joseph Sittler, in *Religious Buildings for Today*, asserts:

The Lutheran Tradition is Christocentric through and through. God is the God who is revealed in Christ. The knowledge of God is what is offered in Christ. The worship of God centers in the entire Christ-deed, from birth through death and

resurrection, to His real presence in the household of God.

Therefore every effort to give this tradition palpable, declaratory force must set forth, point to, hold up, and draw to the single Christ-center, the multitudinous details of worship. . . .

The sole, final, and absolutely redemptive fact is God's deed in Christ: Christ in His historical actuality as Jesus of Nazareth, in His real presence . . . received and adored in His Church.

The editor adds to this statement that this places "the burden of the formal expression of meaning squarely on the architect. . . ."

The architects represented in these volumes have continued to value the Lutheran accent on the altar as the focus of worship. They have continued to express the parish's approach to God by placing the Communion rail in the chancel. But none of those represented here seems to have attempted to solve the matter of the number of communicants who can be served in the duration of an average worship service. True, none of the Lutheran churches that have constructed their worship around a central altar are represented in these volumes. But though the central altar would express the involvement of the total congregation in the Communion action, how many of those attempt to make possible a total communing by a large parish in a single service, and a communing in that service week after week? Since the actuality of Christ and His real presence in the church are part of the heart of our belief, and since the reception as well as the adoration and the hearing of our Lord are central to the Lutheran tradition, architects' plans should enable the total parish to participate in the total worship of our Lord.

St. Louis, Mo.