

Editorial – Worship Space and Worship Focus

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What a difference light makes to a church building. At Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, our old ‘sanctuary’ was dark and depressing, but when we redeveloped our church premises, we created new roof-lights. Now light streams in, and the worship space has been transformed. Light uplifts the spirit and inspires the soul. Long before the organ sounds or the band strikes up, I am ready to worship God. I agree with Thomas Fuller, an English 17th century divine, who said: “Light, God’s eldest daughter, is a principal beauty in a building”.

Sir Christopher Wren, designer and builder of more than fifty churches in London, was of a similar mind. In all his churches he used clear glass, not the stained glass which was so popular at that time, because, he said “God’s greatest gift to man is light”.

Christian theology is ‘theology of light’. Light is a symbol of the presence of God. Paul ascribes glory to God “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6.16). John declares: “God is light; and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1.5). God is the giver of light in creation. God’s first recorded word is the command of God “Let there be light”, and there was light (Gen 1.3) – and the Bible states that “God saw that the light was good”.

God is also the giver of light in the new creation. Jesus cries out “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8.12). Peter takes up the words of Isa 62.12 and reminds Christian believers that their task is to “declare the wonderful praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2.10). Jesus says that his disciples “are the light of the world” (Matt 5.13). Light, light, light. The Scriptures are awash with the theme of light.

Not surprisingly, Christians down through the centuries have sought to give expression to this theology of light in the way they have constructed their buildings. Church buildings are more than protection from the elements. They express something of who we are and what we believe, but they can also affect the content of our worship and the pattern of our discipleship. When it came to re-building the chamber of the House of Commons, which was

destroyed by a fire-bomb in the Second World War, Winston Churchill, in putting forward his preferred design, said: “We make our buildings and our buildings make us”. No building is neutral.

This then leads me to state that the present ‘warehouse’ ‘cave-like’ structures favoured by many evangelical churches today is a denial of our Christian heritage, for natural light is banished in favour of artificial light. The architectural focus is no longer on God, but on the performers. I find it significant, for instance, where I have preached in such churches in New Zealand, that without exception the chief concern has been to test my ‘sound levels’ – and not once have we prayed that God will bless the service! The setting of worship in churches without natural light is similar to what one would experience in any secular worship venue. The band and the singers dominate the stage: the singers sway in time to the beat of the drum, and encourage the congregation to do the same.

Nor does it help when singers flaunt their sexuality – on one occasion, I was mesmerized (distracted?) by a half-exposed tattooed breast! Church has become religious entertainment: the focus has subtly switched from giving glory to God to making the punters feel good. In all the cave-like churches I have visited in New Zealand, most of the songs have been devoted to telling God how we feel. At no point have we confessed our sins or prayed for people beyond the church. At no point in the first half hour or so is God allowed to speak – Scripture is notable by its absence. ‘It’s all about me, Jesus!’ The sense of the numinous is hard to discern. Such ‘worship’ can produce ecstasy, but is it truly divine? Has Jesus just become my ‘drug of choice’? So Andrew Walker and Robin Parry write: “If we position worship as a form of Christian entertainment, we will shape Christians who consume worship as a product; Christians that move from one worship ‘high’ to the next, chasing one stimulating event after another; Christians that assess how good the worship was by how fuzzy it made them feel; and Christians that will leave one congregation for another with little hesitation if a more entertaining gathering springs up in another church. But this kind of worship is, at rock bottom, all about me, and God is approached as if he were under some

obligation to keep me happy. He is my drug of choice, but if he gets boring, I'll move on.”¹

These comments are not to be construed as an attack on contemporary worship *per se*. Just last night I attended an amazing service of contemporary worship in a meeting house on a Maori marae led by a Kenyan group visiting New Zealand to mark the 200th anniversary of the Gospel in New Zealand. I was overawed by the sense of God's presence as we moved from praise to confession to 'surrender'. I was deeply moved, not just by the singing, but also by the praying. Throughout the hour or so God was the focus: every song and every prayer was directly addressed to him, and Scripture abounded. The congregation, made up of young and old, Maori and *Pakaha* (white), was caught up into heaven itself - the spiritual intimacy of the occasion was almost tangible. But there was no platform, no spot lights, just one guitar, a piano and a drum.

So to sum up: my concern is that as worship styles inevitably change, we need to take a hard look at the theology which underlies our worship – and our worship space.

Understanding the elderly – a theological reflection

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I have noted in funeral ministry over the years an increase in printed orders of service with a picture of the deceased on the front cover. It raises the question 'What picture of you would you want on the front cover for your funeral order of service – and why?' Should it be young and flattering – or the last picture of you that was taken – or something in between? Can any picture sum up who the essential 'you' is? It's an interesting way of reflecting on who we 'are' in our own eyes, the eyes of others and the eyes of God.

¹ *Deep Church Rising: Recovering the Roots of Christian Orthodoxy* (SPCK, London 2014) 98.