



## A Theology of Space

### Introduction

As we begin to contemplate what kind of building might usefully serve our church,<sup>1</sup> we begin with a focus on God and his presence with his people: how should we think about space (the inside a building type) as it relates to God being with his people?

At the outset, let me identify three extremes we will avoid.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, some church building designs are completely utilitarian, indistinguishable from other contemporary buildings like big-box shopping centres or cinemas. These buildings reflect the cultural values of consumerism and performance, respectively. Another design extreme is ostentatious, ornate, and gaudy; in celebrating a culture of luxury, it is forgotten that church is people, not a building. Finally, in over-reacting to extreme luxury, some church architecture is simply dull, plain, and ugly; as an example of dualism,<sup>3</sup> this approach reflects a devaluing of God's material creation. Before suggesting an alternative, let's first explore the idea of God's presence.

### Part 1: God's Presence

The story of the Bible is the story of God's presence: from Genesis 1, when the Spirit of the Lord hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2), to the city of God and the throne of God being in the midst of God's people in a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21-22), God's presence is a key theme in the Bible. Note three key moments when God's presence is manifest in unique and astounding ways: he visited Sinai with displays of great power (Exodus 19:9, 19-20); he instructed the people to build a sanctuary in which he would dwell to be with his people (Exodus 25:8-9); when the permanent temple was built,

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<sup>1</sup> When using small 'c', we refer to the local church. But remember what the Church (big 'C') is: 'The Church is the community of all true believers for all time. This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved. Paul says, 'Christ love the church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25). Here the term "the church" is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those whose saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age as well. So great is God's plan for the church that he has exalted Christ to a position of highest authority for the sake of the church: 'He has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:22-23)'. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Nottingham: Intervarsity, 1994), p. 853.

<sup>2</sup> Instead of two poles, imagine a triangle with three points. The point is to avoid the corners and land in the centre. At the centre-point. ☺

<sup>3</sup> The idea that spirit is inherently good and the material world is inherently evil.

God's glory was so richly present the priests could not stand to minister (1 Kings 8:11-12). All of this pointed to the future: one day, God would be with his people – spiritually and personally.

The incarnation of Jesus is the ultimate expression of God 'pitching his tent' with his people: the Eternal Son became a man and dwelt among us; the apostles saw his glory. 'In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:9); when Jesus cleansed the temple, and then later told the religious leaders that if they destroyed it, he would raise it in three days, he was referencing his body (John 2:19-21). God was with us in a unique and personal way in Jesus. After the resurrection, as he was preparing to leave the earth, he promised that he would be with his disciples forever. How could he be present if he was leaving? By his Spirit! And on the day of Pentecost, the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit to fill and be with God's people – the Church.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit inaugurated a new means by which we experience God's presence: rather than dwelling in buildings, God dwells with his people: "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The people of God, the Church,<sup>4</sup> are now the dwelling place of God. The identification of Jesus with the Church is so strong that he calls it his body (1 Corinthians 12:27). Stephen makes clear in Acts 7:48 that God does not dwell in 'houses made by hands'. God now dwells with his people by personally indwelling those he has brought into the fellowship of the Trinitarian life by the Spirit through the work of Christ. God is with us so much that we can be filled with God's Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

There remain, however, moments when the presence of Jesus is with the church in unique and precious ways. Paul writes to the Ephesians that they – as a church, believers joined together as Christ's body – are a special place for God's presence: 'And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22). So while God's Spirit dwells within us personally, there is a special sense in which we as a church are a dwelling place for God. We could call this God's personal/corporate presence with his people.

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<sup>4</sup> Here is a brief etymology of the word church: 'We should bear in mind that the names 'Church,' 'Kerk' and 'Kirche' are not derived from the word *ekklesia* [called out ones] but from the word *kuriake* which means belonging to the Lord. By calling the *ekklesia* the *kuriake*, these names stress the fact that the Church is the property of God. The name to *kuriakon* was eventually used to designate the place where the believers met together: 'The Lord's House' (literally, 'the Lord's thing'). It is interesting that when Luther translated the New Testament into vernacular German, he did not use the word "Kirche" to translate *ekklesia* but rather the German word "Gemeinde" which means something similar to the English word "community." When Tyndale translated the New Testament into English in 1536, he also did not use the word 'church' to translate the Greek word *ekklesia* but rather the word 'congregation.' The French *eglise* and Spanish *iglesia* derive from the Greek *ekklesia* through the Latin *ecclesia*." L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 557.

While worshipping God (sacrificially giving God what he is due because he is worthy of it) on the personal level involves our whole lives (Romans 12:1) and our perpetual speaking his praises (Hebrews 13:15), something special happens when we gather for worship: God visits us in the preaching of His Word, in celebrating the Lord's supper, and through the contribution each believer makes to the building up of the body (I Corinthians 14:26; Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16; Hebrew 10:24-25). In short, God feeds and builds his body in unique ways when we gather. On one hand, this explains *that* church attendance is so important (*not neglecting meeting together*, Heb.10:25); on the other hand, it explains *why* gathering together is so important: this is a core means by which disciples (followers of Jesus) are made; God meets his people in a unique way when they gather.

The body of Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, builds itself up in love. That God meets us in unique ways for the up-building of his body when we gather in his name should not surprise us; Jesus told us that He was sending the Spirit to empower witness (Acts 1:8). And he said that receiving the Holy Spirit was very much linked with being sent on mission (John 20:22). In summary, although God is personally with each of his people, God's people together experience God's presence uniquely in worship and in mission for the purpose of making disciples. These are two key words where we can expect God's presence: in worship and in witness.

Two words that describe two dimensions of God's presence are *transcendence* (beyond) and *immanence* (close at hand). By transcendence, we mean that God is *other* and *beyond*: although he is genuinely with us, He is not *only* with us; He is not with us in the fullness of his glory: He is the Great One, the creator of the ends of the earth, the Lord of heavens who dwells in unapproachable light, the Eternal, Omnipotent, Mighty One. He is the great I Am who revealed himself by saying 'Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one'. He is absolutely distinct from creation. When we gather to worship, we do so remembering that He is holy and awesome and to be revered. But he is also Immanuel, the God with us, who became man and sent his Spirit to dwell in us: He invites us to call Him Father; Jesus came to bring us to Him, and he delights in fellowship with his people.

In worship, we experience, celebrate, and give honour to God, the holy and transcendent one. In worship, we enjoy the immanent closeness of God's presence as he meets us in his Word and at his table through His Spirit. We experience and share his closeness with each other in fellowship and encouragement. In short, when we gather, we are in awe of the God who is *Other*; we enjoy the God who is near. In worship and in witness, we experience the transcendence/immanence of the Awesome God who is with us.

## **Part 2: Practical Presence**

If God does not dwell in buildings, how should we think about God's presence relative to a building – specifically, a church building set apart for the gathered life and ministry of the church? First, I suggest that we think in terms of the two dimensions of presence, transcendence and immanence: a good building will serve the experience of the holy God who is awesome and beyond the created universe, and the loving God who abides with us personally for comfort and ministry.

Think about your house: different functions happen in different rooms, and the life of the family is expressed uniquely in each room. In the dining room you gather to eat; in the lounge you gather to chat and watch television; in the kitchen you prepare food; in the office you get work done. Different kinds of communication happen in the different rooms: you chat differently around the kitchen table than you do in the bedroom. Behaviour appropriate in one room isn't always appropriate in another. This is a practical way of thinking about the *zones* – or types of space – in church. Below I summarise five functional zones in a church building.

### **1. On Worship**

As noted, worship is a central part of the church's life, and a building should serve this function in effective and appropriate ways. David Gobels summarises this approach to thinking about buildings:<sup>5</sup>

Worship is the purpose of the church. It is what the church does when it gathers. Worship, as we understand it from the teaching of Scripture, consists of the reading and preaching of the Word, public prayer, congregational singing, and the celebration of the sacraments. It is to be done 'in spirit and in truth', with 'reverence and awe', and 'according to Scripture'. The building in which we worship is the physical setting for this supremely important activity, but it is not to be worshiped itself, nor should it distract us or lead us to worship any created thing.

The components of gathered worship are quite specific, and these are well served by space devoted to that purpose. Rather than working for a stripped down, utilitarian, 'one room that does everything' approach (e.g., a combination sanctuary/church hall), we will prioritise space that facilitates the worship of the holy God.

### **2. On Witness**

We know that 'man looks at outward appearance, but God looks at the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7). Does that mean that a church building should be 'unattractive or drearily utilitarian?

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<sup>5</sup> David Gobels, 'Reforming Church Architecture', n.p. [cited 18 May 2016]. Online: [http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=688](http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=688)

Is beauty excluded? Absolutely not! Rather than dreary and utilitarian, a building designed for church should be *decorous* (marked by *decorum*); it fosters dignity and delight in God, it serves the reverent worship of God without becoming an object of worship itself.<sup>6</sup> God is beautiful and excellent, and a church building should reflect these characteristics. We have to remember that our building will not be tucked away in a private forest; it will be located in the centre of the village. The church is not only a spiritual body; it is an earthly institution. Thus, we must remember our civic role: 'Like all civic and commercial institutions, when churches construct buildings, they are building public statements about their identity'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, our building should not be eye sore, it should not be gaudy; it is appropriate that it add value to the community and represent God well in a society which finds little place for God. It is a 'calling card' for our witness in the community: it communicates something visually about our understanding of God and our role in the village.

### **3. On Fellowship**

How should God's *immanence* be reflected in a building? God is not only experienced in worship, but also in fellowship. Imagine the lobby of a church building as the transition zone between the outside world and the worship of God: between being 'out there' and 'with him', we are with each other. Thus, designing space that fosters fellowship and the sharing of life helps to strengthen the church and communicates the immanence of God's presence. This is the same kind of *presence* we experience in community groups: because a certain portion of our church is only ever gathered on a Sunday, it is important to design space that facilitates fellowship and conveys a sense of belonging.

Fellowship space would include a church hall. Rather than trying to fit everything into a non-descript common-use space, having designated space for both worship and fellowship empowers both functions to be more effective. From Centrepoint Feasts to youth games night to receptions and letting the hall out for community events, a well-designed church hall can help fellowship happen.

### **4. On Discipleship.**

The mission of the church includes making disciples: We worship, we fellowship, but we also equip and train. If the sanctuary is where we gather for worship, and the lobby/café is where we engage in fellowship, then learning and training is done in the classroom. Kid's church and crèche and adult classrooms and training space – this is central to the mission of Jesus, and a church building needs this kind of space. Imagine space so compelling that kids can't wait to come to kid's church each week. The biggest component of that compelling-ness is people – teachers who love and care for the kids and lead and teach

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<sup>6</sup> Gobels, 'Church Architecture'.

<sup>7</sup> Gobels, 'Church Architecture'.

with quality and enthusiasm. But a building can facilitate and assist creating this kind of ethos.

Further: because our mission extends *beyond* the village to the ends of the earth, we should not limit our training space to what we need now. Imagine space used to equip church planters and pastors to take God's gospel all over Scotland and Europe! The first part of our mission is all about honouring God; following from this, we honour him by making disciples and planting churches.

## **5. On Administration**

The word *deacon* in the New Testament well captures those dimensions of church life that make ministry possible: though not glamorous or up-front, administration is a necessary function. As non-spiritual as it sounds, administration best happens in what might be called *office space* – space designed to get work done. Because administration is a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:28), we know that God's presence will be with us in the office as well as the worship gathering! While efficiency is not the same thing as ministry effectiveness, being excellent in administration is one way of caring for the people we serve.

## **6. On Service**

Beyond our specific church activities, we aim to develop a building which will be an asset for our community. Apart from the school, Wester Inch is void of community space. Though many people within Wester Inch share various degree of relational connection with others in the community, there is no regularly available space to gather, meet, discuss, share, and fellowship. Imagine a café, open on weekdays where parents can gather and chat while they drink a cuppa after the school run. Imagine excellent multi-purpose space available for hire. Imagine a performance venue with state-of-the-art light and sound. Due to the significant overhead of developing and running them, these types of spaces will probably not be developed in the community outwith what we do as a church. Thus, in developing an amazing place for our church but with our community in mind, we serve our community with the love of Christ in a physical and tangible way.

## **Summary**

In summary, we can think of a church building in terms of five zones: an exterior design that well reflects God and church to the community; a lobby/café for fellowship and relational engagement; a sanctuary for worship; classrooms for training and discipleship; offices for administration. God promises to be with us in all of these places as we do what he has told us to do. All of this will facilitate our mission to honour God by empowering people to follow Jesus through worship, community, and mission. Further, the building we envision will be a dynamic part of our community, integrated into the rhythms of life in Wester Inch with a café, multi-function space available for hire, and an amazing

performance venue. God has placed us in Wester Inch to be light: as we are faithful in our identity and calling, great blessing will come to our community.