

Question: How can anyone justify building big, fancy church buildings while there are still so many poor people in our world in great need? Would Jesus do this?

Jesus made it clear that his mission on earth was to minister to the sick, the poor, and to lost souls. He began his formal preaching in a synagogue in Nazareth by announcing, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19 NIV). He began another sermon by saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20 NIV). To His disciples Jesus said, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:33-34 NIV).

At the same time, Jesus said nothing about church buildings. During His earthly ministry, he preached mostly outside on the hillsides and along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Sometimes he did teach in private homes where people came to see and hear him. The first Christians assembled together in the temple, synagogues, private homes, public places like the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus or outside in open air places. When we hear the word “church” today, we usually think of a building where Christians gather for worship; but in the Bible the word “church” refers to the people. It is actually a translation of the word for “assembly.” The first meeting houses for churches were not erected until about 200 years after Jesus was on earth.

Does this mean that Jesus would be opposed to all church buildings? No. The early Christians did not have electricity, automobiles, buses, radio, TV or newspapers to help them fulfill our Lord's mission on earth. Along with these modern conveniences, a building can be a useful tool for the church to use in serving God's purposes.

However, there is a problem when the church building becomes more of a convenience suited to the preferences and comfort of the church members than an instrument for ministering to the poor and lost for

whom Jesus died. Sometimes maintaining religious institutions is given a higher priority than fulfilling God's mission to people. Artistically-elaborate physical structures may actually do more to call attention to themselves than to the Lord. Instead of glorifying Christ, such buildings may hinder people from knowing him. The apostle Paul said, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5 NIV). In a similar way, we should seek to impress people with our Savior and not with the beauty of our meeting places.

In light of the above, I believe Jesus would say our church buildings are justified only to the extent they can be and are used to fulfill His mission to the poor and the lost. Certainly he would not give the erecting of buildings top priority, and it should go without saying that the poor should feel most welcome in whatever buildings are constructed. Where to draw the line between appropriately adequate and inappropriately elaborate is unclear and must be left to the best judgment of each local church. However, serious and prayerful attention should be given to seeking for wisdom and spiritual discernment along with constant re-evaluation in light of scripture and God's mission for His church.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2011/04/29 repub from 2007