
The Performance Church

by: Ronald L. Dart

Something important is happening to the way we design our churches. Obviously, how we lay out the interior of a church is heavily influenced by what we plan to do there. But the design of a church says even more about its people, their values, their dogma, their feelings about God.

Take the Baptist church, for example. The most important place in any church is opposite the entrance. Whatever is there is not only the first thing you see when you step inside, it is what you stare at throughout the service. In most Baptist churches, you will see there a full immersion baptistry, sometimes with a mural behind it (the Jordan River is a favorite scene). Baptism is central to their faith, so it is usually a public service performed in full view of the congregation. In front of the baptistry will be the choir and, like most Protestant churches, a central pulpit emphasizing the importance of preaching. Where the baptistry sits in a Baptist church, the First Parish Church in Plymouth Massachusetts has three stained glass windows. They depict civil liberty, religious liberty, and the signing of the Mayflower Compact. Religious freedom was so precious it was given the place of honor in this, one of the first churches in the New World.

The Friends meeting houses make no such display, being quite plain and having no decoration or ornamentation. No bells are rung, no music is played, no pastor preaches from the pulpit. The members sit in silent communion in which truth is sought from the "Inner Light." The silence is broken whenever a Friend rises to give a message to the assembly from his own meditations. There is no clerical class. The elders sit on plain benches facing the congregation.

The Mormons exalt music in their Salt Lake City Tabernacle. When you walk inside, you are immediately aware of the great pipe organ and the choir that dominate the structure. If you have a guide, he will demonstrate the truly incredible acoustics of the tabernacle. A love of sound is apparent in the structure and reflected in the liturgy.

In a Jewish synagogue, the Torah occupies the place of honor and is the focal point of the synagogue service. There is a podium for the reading of the Law and a place for the Rabbi to teach. Singers are set off to the side and screened from view. At the climax of the service, the Law is reverently taken from its place, opened, and read with great respect and solemnity. Afterward it is returned to its curtained enclosure, but even then, you are aware of its presence.

In a Catholic church, the altar is the center of attention. As the priest performs the sacrifice of the Mass, he has his back to the congregation much of the time. All attention is focused on the altar. The pulpit is placed to one side emphasizing that it is second in importance to the sacrifice of the Mass.

In a great cathedral, no effort is spared to create a work of art to surround the altar and to create a place of beauty with great symbolic meaning to the worshiper. In some measure it is an adaptation of Greek values. Maximus of Tyre wrote: "The Greek custom is to portray the gods by the most beautiful things in the world – pure material, the human form and consummate craft. The idea of those who make divine images in human form is entirely reasonable, since of all things the spirit of man is nearest to the gods and most god-like."

Statuary, tapestry, and paintings were all a part of the liturgy of the church and reflected the world view of those who put them there. As the Mormon Church appeals to the ear, the Catholic Church appeals to the eye.

While church design may reflect radically different doctrines and values of different denominations of Christians, most churches still have worship as their central purpose.

But from the beginning, the earliest Christians looked at all this very differently. In the first place, the Temple was still the place of worship and the place of prayer (Acts 2:46, 3:1). God could be worshiped anywhere (John 4:21-24), but if there was a place, it was the Temple, not a church.

The first assemblies of Christians were modeled after the synagogue with heavy emphasis on teaching and fellowship. Attention was to be given to reading, exhortation, and doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13). Edification was more important than the display of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:26). Most Christian assemblies were "house churches," that is they met in the home in an atmosphere conducive to teaching and fellowship. They were not temples with priests and elaborate ceremonies. That came much later when the church became wealthy and powerful and the clergy became a separate class. Then great basilicas and cathedrals were built which incorporated the idea of separation of clergy and laity in their design.

But in our own day another great change in church design is taking place. It is television that is bringing it about.

The idea of promulgating the Gospel by electronic media is nearly as old as the medium itself. In the early 1930s several evangelists were making the attempt to go national on radio. Herbert W. Armstrong started the Radio Church of God soon after Robert Fuller began producing The Old-Fashioned Revival Hour. Even "First Mate Bob and the Good Ship Grace" could be heard widely across the country.

When television was in its infancy, churches were already eyeing the medium with a view to the power it offered. Soon churches all over the country began incorporating video cameras and microwave links to their local stations. People all over the country could stay at home and go to church at the same time.

As new buildings were built, television facilities were included in the design, and the layout of the sanctuary itself changed to accommodate the electronic eye. Talented people began improving the visual quality of the presentation. Pulpits were reduced in size, made transparent, or disappeared altogether to allow movement by the preacher. Since television was a visual

medium with mediocre sound quality, even church music had to become more visual – it had to move.

Hence, many churches today have become "performance" churches. Television favors the performing preacher who paces back and forth, dances, and even strides up into the crowds as he preaches. This may be the reason all the biggest "televangelists" are Pentecostal.

Now, in place of a baptistry, a stained-glass window, or an altar, many churches have a stage. In the new church, the center of attention is the performer. He or she is greeted with applause, performs for the crowd, and may leave the stage to a standing ovation.

Even the salaries have become entertainer's salaries. If you are wondering how they could justify salaries like that, then you obviously don't understand that they look at themselves as entertainers – they are stars. In their own eyes, they consider themselves performers like Jay Leno or Oprah Winfrey.

One of the early church fathers, writing at the end of the second century, called the church the "Theatre of the pious." But he spoke of a stage where the play was the passion of Jesus and the players were mere pawns. Like Shakespeare, he would have said, "The play's the thing." When Paul described the Gospel as a precious treasure, he explained the relationship of the preacher to the Gospel thus: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

I can't help wondering if some of us might do well to try a "house church" for a while. It might do us good to go where people break bread together and where good solid teaching is to be found. Maybe we could get our perspective back and see the relative value of a multimillion dollar cathedral on the one hand and the care of the sick and infirm on the other. There is, after all, more than one way to glorify God.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your opinion about the churches today?
2. What style of church services do you like?
3. Do you think that the modern churches today are mere "performance churches" without any real solid food?

4. How are we to evangelize?
5. How do we attract the youth to God's word to the point that they stay in the faith?
6. Has technology today affected churches today?
7. If so, how has it affected the churches and is it positive or negative?
8. What should be the most important thing in churches today?