

The Value of a Building by Pastor Marty

Christians around the world were recently shocked when a fire destroyed a significant portion of the Notre Dame cathedral. Preliminary investigations suggest the fire may have resulted from some type of electrical short or accident in a portion of the building undergoing renovation. This was one of the most famous church buildings in the world, and it had been a landmark going back to the Middle Ages. Within the first week, people and organizations around the world pledged money to help rebuild the iconic church. As expected in today's culture, this quickly became a political issue: on the one hand, some view support of the reconstruction as promoting religious freedom and Christian faith; on the other hand, some see it as a waste of money that could have been used for more humanitarian causes. Before it is possible to decide on the value of a building, it is important to recognize the spiritual and philosophical idea behind the development of cathedrals, which may be foreign to our current society.

Our contemporary culture does not fully understand the role of churches in our history.

More than 1500 years ago, Augustine spoke about the invisible Church, referencing those who were authentic Christians within the visible institution of the Catholic Church. He recognized that there were some who claimed membership in the Church but did not actually know God personally—at least not to an extent that qualified them as being heirs of Heaven. He saw from his own experience that it was entirely possible for people to talk the talk without walking the walk. In response, he described the existence of two churches: the visible and the invisible. His terminology was not meant in any way to diminish the importance of the Catholic (Universal) Church as an institution as much as it was intended to prompt people to evaluate whether they were serious about their faith. More than 1000 years later, the Protestant Reformers relied heavily on Augustine's writings as they again called people to examine whether they were living according to the faith they professed. Even today, there can be little doubt that some churches in our culture contain people who have no personal relationship with God, who are ignorant of the fundamentals of the Christian faith, or who deny basic tenets of Christian theology.

There are churches today that are made up of people who have no knowledge of God.

Some churches today view buildings almost exclusively in terms of functionality while others equate them with identity. It is important to realize that both of these extremes have a potential for overlooking the Christian understanding of incarnation and sanctification. This dichotomy is most easily seen in the contrast between the "High" (Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox) and "Low" (Protestant, Pentecostal, and Independent) churches. However, it can also be seen within almost every individual denomination. To a large extent, this perspective correlates to how denominations define the Church—individual or corporate, institution or organism, and visible or invisible. However, there is much more to this issue than most people realize, and the Bible provides definitive support for both of the positions. Considering the argument for the opposing viewpoint is probably going to be hardest for those who are accustomed to regularly making the statement, "the Church is a people, not a building." There is certainly truth in this statement, but it includes a tendency to not recognize how God made us.

Focusing exclusively on the invisible Church can blind us to the way God designed us.

First of all, we need to admit that the value of a church building is not based in the size, price, or extravagance of human accomplishment. This is not to say that people have not often made some phenomenal structures that are truly astonishing and worthy of respect; however, we only have to get a few chapters into Genesis before we read about the Tower of Babel and see how God perceived what they wanted to be the greatest human accomplishment of all time. The difference between Babel and

the Taj Mahal, the Titanic and the space shuttle, or an Asherah pole and Michelangelo's David is drastic and profound. The motivation behind human accomplishments makes a great deal of difference in what they stand for and whether they glorify or stand in defiance of God. This does not mean that only things built intentionally to honor God can be considered valuable, but the purpose of a structure is important in understanding the meaning and significance of it and how we are supposed to evaluate it.

The purpose behind a building's development and design tells us how we should value it.

On the opposite side of the spectrum from the Tower of Babel and the Auschwitz concentration camps stand the Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon. Both of these were designed by God Himself to reflect the Heavenly and eternal throne-room. As the author of Hebrews says, every aspect of the Tabernacle (and the Temple) represents a specific reality about life in a Universe created and sustained by God. Indeed, the writer goes so far as to warn us that we place ourselves in peril if we dismiss the details of the first covenant as nonessential to our faith because it was also written for our benefit. Those details were so important that God gave specific measurements for each room and each piece of furniture, and He identified by name those He chose to do the work and gave them a special anointing to do the work. Although we recognize that God is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we should not assume this means He is an obsessive-compulsive micromanager. He gives a great deal of freedom to us in our day-to-day choices. The specificity and level of detail tells us something here is important.

The specificity and level of detail tells us God is revealing something important here.

The construction of the Tabernacle and Temple was meant to interact with a specific aspect of human nature: our imaginations. This part of our being, also created in God's image, was designed to enable us to comprehend realities beyond the simple physical world around us. Through a sanctified imagination, we would recognize every curtain, every door, every table, and every carving of cherubim and seraphim as a reflection of what was ultimately real. This would fill us with the sense of awe that in turn, birthed in us a fear of God and a passion for holiness. Our imaginations were sanctified by laws given not to stifle our creativity but to protect us from images of idolatry and evil, for those would only serve to open our souls to demonic forces. Indeed, we only need to consider the images of immorality, idolatry, violence, and horror in our culture today to see that they destroy lives, harden hearts, and set human reason unable to discern between good and evil. For Christians, a godly imagination is essential.

The sanctified imagination is absolutely essential to living an authentic Christian life.

As we read in Genesis 6, humanity had become so devoted to evil that God had to bring a flood and wash the world clean. The human imagination had become so corrupted that people only thought about the next evil they would do. After starting over with Noah, God found a few people that He then designated as representatives of life as it should be: Abraham as the father of faith, Moses as the giver of the law, and Elijah as the voice of the prophet. Each of these has a relationship to our imagination: faith is a process by which our imaginations embrace ultimate truth when our physical eyes only see present circumstances; laws provide boundaries so our imaginations do not again become corrupted and devoted to evil; and prophecy enables our imaginations to receive inspiration and direction for the present day. We can see this in the way God has each one incorporate the imagination in what He calls them to do. God instructed Abraham to look at the stars and consider (i.e., imagine) his descendants as numerous as they were; he held onto that image in the face of all opposing evidence. God gave Moses the laws and the designs of the Tabernacle personally; the one was meant to reinforce and support the other. God spoke to Elijah in words, in dreams, and in visions; his imagination was inspired with Truth.

Faith, law, and prophecy all have direct relationships with a sanctified imagination.

It is important to remember that the God who commanded us not to make any image of earthly or heavenly things to worship is the same God who specifically commanded that the Tabernacle should incorporate images of angels, flowers, and oxen. This was not God contradicting Himself in a “senior moment” with Moses. The same images that were useful as support and instruction in the worship of God were dangerous and deadly when they replaced God. A clear example of this is the serpent on the pole that God told Moses to fashion; when the people looked at it in its appropriate context, they were healed, but when they looked to it as an idol, it polluted their imaginations and had to be destroyed. In the same way, the Temple was a physical representation of God’s throne-room, and His presence physical resided in the Holy of Holies; however, when people trusted the Temple or the Ark instead of recognizing them as only symbolic representations of truth, they lost sight of God and became lost. The lesson here is not that we should not have any images in our lives; it is that if we do not have good images in our imaginations, they will be filled with corrupt and evil images that lead us away from God. Our faith will be weak, our discernment compromised, and our ability to hear from God unreliable.

A holy and sanctified imagination is the foundation of recognizing truth from error.

Returning to the discussion of church buildings, we need to recognize—especially if we identify as Protestants—that not everything after the first century and before the Reformation was bad. Great works of art and theological insights came from the Church even when the leaders and the institution had largely given itself to corrupting influences. As Christianity spread, churches were built in more and more places around the world. Often, the common people did not have the benefit of individual Bibles. The creeds were developed, taught, and memorized to aid believers in avoiding those heresies that repeatedly tried to gain entrance into the Church. However, this was not enough. Recognizing that Paul meant it when he declared that creation itself glorifies God and reveals aspects of His character and His divine nature to all people, those who knew God realized that church buildings could sometimes fill in for what the environment lacked. Buildings were designed, similar to the Tabernacle and Temple, to be filled with images that not only reflected God’s throne-room and the world He created but also that taught principles of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Of course, this does not mean that all those structures were built with the purest of human motives, for wherever there are dead bodies, vultures will gather. However, the concept behind these buildings is that they would inspire awe and worship.

Cathedrals were designed to instill in people’s imaginations a level of awe and majesty.

We are living in a culture where many in the Church devalue holy imagery but accept almost all types of idolatrous, immoral, and dark images as relatively harmless; nothing could be further from the truth. We largely allow our imaginations to be polluted to such an extent that, without realizing it, we are essentially drinking from a sewer. In reaction to our culture promoting an excessive materialism and individualism, many churches diminish the value of visible church structures and stress the living, human aspect of the invisible Church becoming visible. As Jesus once said, they should have done the latter without neglecting the former. Having inspiring imagery in our buildings may risk the danger of some focusing on the images themselves instead of what they represent—similar to what the Hebrew people did—but the danger of having no good imagery is much worse; as science tells us, nature abhors a vacuum. If we reject every good thing because of the potential for error, we had better stay in bed. No good thing, including the Bible itself, is completely safe from the human potential for misuse. The safeguard against misuse is to explain the appropriate use and context for good Christian imagery. For this reason, we must recognize that although they are only physical buildings, many of our historic cathedrals are also much more; they represent our understanding that God’s presence is incarnational.