

Nicholas Wolterstorff - Does Your Church Building Say What it Should Say?

- I. Introduction
 - A. When people build church buildings, they think in exclusively *functional* terms.
 - B. Sometimes they add that their building “look like a church.”
 1. High roof.
 2. Wood beams.
 - C. Main point of today
 1. If this is the full extent of the church’s consideration, something of first rate importance is missing.
 - a. Buildings speak, say things, are expressive.
 - b. Different buildings say different things.
 2. A congregation should think functionally *and* theologically.
- II. What Buildings Say and Should Say
 - A. What do I mean when I say that buildings speak, say things, are expressive?
 1. *Illustration: Ping Pong word association*
 - a. Association: what fits with ping and what fits with pong?
 - 1) Fast, slow
 - 2) Big, small
 - 3) Elm, spruce
 - 4) Brown, yellow
 - 5) Pretty girl, matron
 - 6) Brahms, Mozart
 - 7) Sharp, dull
 - b. What’s going on here?
 - 1) Fittingness - psychologists have discovered that many aspects of fittingness are trans-cultural
 - 2) Synesthesia - mention something, and it triggers another sense (e.g. What’s the color of the number two?)
 - c. All of us do in fact make judgments about fittingness.
 - 1) The character of x is expressive of y. That is a statement of fittingness.
 2. So, re: buildings
 - a. Memorial Pres - stately, majestic, not cozy
 - B. Questions
 1. How does the church understand its liturgy?
 2. How does the church understand the assembling for its liturgy?
 3. In short, the church is engaging in liturgical theology.
 - C. Wolterstorff’s Liturgical Theology (an illustration of how one would think theologically about liturgy)
 1. We have to think theologically about the liturgy itself, *and* the activity of assembling and dispersing.
 2. Assembling/Dispersing
 - a. One idea: leaving the world behind, casting all earthly cares aside
 - 1) If that’s the case, your building will be other-worldly, or being closed off from the world, or very different from the rest of the world.
 - 2) Maybe a “jewel box”
 - b. Rebuttal
 - 1) Confession: sins we commit in everyday life, not in church
 - 2) Intercession: petitions about what transpires in the world
 - 3) Scripture reading/preaching: it casts light on our daily past
 - c. Therefore
 - 1) Assembling is like the systolic and diastolic phases of the Christian life; we take the concerns of our daily life with us

- 2) Having participated and protested (in Greg Thompson's words), we go forth
 - 3) Assembling and dispersing does *not* represent secular>sacred>secular.
 - 4) Lighting and colors won't be overly different than the world; one gets a sense of coming into, or continuing to be, in the light.
 - d. Biblical consideration: 1 John 1: God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.
 - e. Historical consideration: Best symbol we have for God is light (Calvin); light is uncircumscribable (can't draw a line around it); the reason that the early Calvinist churches were light inside is that they were following Calvin's view
 - 1) It's customary for us to read those Calvinist churches as empty; rather, we should read them as chock full of light
3. The Liturgy
- a. How should we understand it?
 - 1) Traditional Catholic understanding: liturgy = work of the clergy
 - a) "rude screen" in Medieval churches
 - b) people sat facing a raised platform
 - 2) Traditional Reformed/Presbyterian understanding: liturgy = work of minister
 - a) Only exception to Catholicism: people sang psalms and hymns
 - 3) Contemporary Protestant megachurches; liturgy = work of worship team
 - a) Only exception: people still sing
 - b) Everyone faces forward
 - c) Though seating is semi-circular formation
 - 4) 20th century = resurgence in liturgical theology
 - a) Convergence among Christians in the nature of the liturgy as the work of the people
 - b) So when congregations assemble, they assemble so that *they* may enact the liturgy
 - c) Reformed tradition makes a qualification: in liturgy, not only is the congregation an agent, *God* is likewise an agent, acting and speaking
 - b. Wolterstorff's preferred: Family of God assembling (horizontal), for encountering the divine (vertical)
 - a) Architecture: semi-circular, flat floor
 - b) Horizontal quality (not a hierarchy)
 - c) Strong vertical quality (not here for a potluck, but transcendent word and sacrament)
 - d) No great separation of height or space between congregation as a whole and the people leading the liturgy (b/c liturgists are part of the people, not performers)
 - e) Floor is not banked or tiered, but flat
 - f) Space between seats so that people can enter to go forward (most motion in churches is merely stationary up-down)