

Ornate or Not

Jon Gauger

For years I used to study the ornate churches of other faiths with a jaundiced eye. My admittedly self-righteous criticism: They're like museums: lovely to look at...but very little alive going on inside, spiritually. (As if I really knew).

My experience was that churches with fancy carvings and lots of scroll work typically hosted congregations that had little to with biblical expressions like “saved by grace” and “born again.”

I suspect that's why conservative evangelical churches have seemingly over reacted by constructing churches that are by comparison, almost Spartan. A curiously architectural response to a theological concern.

Recent decades in church construction have given rise to the concept of the Multi-purpose room or auditorium. No longer do we build —quote—sanctuaries, but “spaces” that can be used one day for Bible preaching and baptism...and the next day for basketball. Cappuccinos welcome.

Now it's not my place or my mission to somehow define what is or is not acceptable as a church building. Surely there's a place for the practical. But increasingly, I'm convinced that we evangelicals might be missing a critical piece to the worship puzzle.

Visiting places like the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C....or Notre Dame in Paris, there's a feeling of reverence and awe you don't find in a multi-purpose auditorium. Step into St. Paul's Cathedral in London and there's just something in the air that makes you want to speak in hushed tones. Same thing with the Cologne Cathedral in Germany, which took 600 years to construct.

The reason you get a feeling of awe and reverence is because the buildings were designed to give you that feeling. In other words, there's an impetus for worship, an inclination toward reverence. It's as if the walls and windows are themselves a visual prelude to worship.

Which brings me to the Jerusalem temple. Frankly, this was the farthest thing from a multipurpose room that any architect could possibly conceive. But Scripture makes clear the architect is God himself.

The brazen sea...the bronze lavers...brass pomegranates. The temple was hardly a multipurpose room. The idea was that in merely approaching the place, you sensed something of the majesty of God.

Contrast these experiences with a typical evangelical church where there are few visuals and generally less of most anything decorative. This, we often defend, in the name of pragmatism.

But what in the world is practical about a hand carved spire...or a decorative wall tapestry? Where is the pragmatism in sculptures that adorn a column or tiles that depict scenes from the life of Christ?

Understand I'm not trying to say that all churches must look a certain way. But surely at some point, the majesty of God ought to shape the way we shape our churches.

Now admittedly, there's a danger in ornamentation. Evangelicals are right in observing that worship is ultimately an issue of the heart, not the building. But to the extent a building either facilitates or fogs over a view of the majesty of God, it can serve to either help or hinder our sense of worship.

Ornate...or not? It's a question I've been pondering lately. .

Hoping to recover reverence, I'm Jon Gauger for PTA.