# Building the Right Message

## Constructing a Worship Room

## Along Reformed Principles

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Abstract

The Reformation rejected Roman Catholic form and function in worship much more than positively constructing it. That resulted in many Protestant churches losing a sense of what it means to worship in a room prepared in a theologically Reformed way. Instead, and particularly in America, even Reformed churches have followed the model/design of non-Reformed architecture. A return is needed to Reformational thinking in church architecture in order to positively influence Reformational worship.

# Preface

This is a paper about church architecture. However, it is not about columns, stucco, marble, or concrete. In fact, the focus of much of what passes for church architecture – e.g., the genius of architectural imagination and design, the development of art and technology, the progressive excellence of craftsmanship – is not my concern. The well-known historical phases of church architecture – Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Neo-Gothic, Modern, etc. – will only be touched upon in a cursory fashion.

This study is concerned with what is actually going on inside those buildings – what kind of thought and rationale goes into the decisions of shape and structure. That will take us in directions much more revealing than the recording and heralding of artists and architects and their historic and creative designs. Our heroes include Knox, Calvin, the non-conformists in England, and the Puritans in early America much more so than Inigo Jones or Christopher Wren.

This is also an historical survey and, for its expressed purposes, it must be done with an exceedingly broad brush. I must overlook many things some readers will find not only unfortunate but even unconscionable. I do not pretend that I do not overlook a great deal. There are many influences, arguments, contexts, individuals, circumstances, pressures and trends that can be brought to bear in the effort to excuse, explain and even justify many of the observations and/or criticisms that will be pointed out, as it were, from the sidelines. Such rudeness of treatment to so much historical detail is my fault when, indeed, it simply cannot be helped.

I also admit that, to a great extent, I am "preaching to the choir". I make a great assumption as to the correctness of the Reformed perspective theologically, based on the Westminster Confession of Faith generally and the truth of the Regulative Principle particularly, and I do not spend a great deal of time apologetically dealing with the marketplace of ideas. To do this would have doubled the size of this presentation.

The point here is simply this: what history has left with us is what remains. And that is sometimes the very problem. There are many magnificent buildings that still stand, just as there are many others built very differently that do not. Very often, the ones that remain instill in us the impression that the glory of such construction is analogous to the glory of the truth and theology which once inhabited it. Conversely, the ones that did not last represent the form of church which was not true or successful. This is the mistake of the ignorant.

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## Dedication

*to Janet, my heart-home*
*and my most precious, God-given possession*

*and to my very supportive sons*

*(Psalm 121)*

## Acknowledgement

*I thank the session and congregation*
*of New Covenant Presbyterian Church*
*for their support, prayers and love.*

# Introduction

Immediately down the hill from Edinburgh Castle, on High Street at its junction with Johnston Terrace at the west entrance of the Royal Mile, stands a grand and impressive gothic structure, known to some today simply as The Assembly Hall. Its massive spire rises powerfully higher than any other structure in Edinburgh even to this day at two hundred forty feet. The building itself stands prominently at the fork in the road, declaring to all of the significance and position that this building has in the community and the authority it represents in terms of the faith and testimony in the lives of the people of the city.

The church building was designed by James Graham and August Pugin, the latter being a famous gothic-revivalist. Its foundation stone was laid by Queen Victoria in 1842, and after three years of construction it became the home of the Highland Tolbooth St. John's Church, which held its services both in English and Gaelic. The church building was equipped with a large, luxurious meeting room called Victoria Hall where it customarily hosted the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

In 1979, the dwindling congregation left their church home and merged with the congregation of the famous Greyfriars Kirk on Candlemaker Row, three blocks to the south. This prominent building then sat unused until a restaurant opened up within the great hall in 1999 which now calls itself "The Hub – Edinburgh's Festival Centre".

Farther down the Royal Mile a few blocks, equidistant from St. Giles Cathedral but on the east side, stands another, distinctive church building. This one is much

older, being "dedicated to Christ" in 1641, and was called Christ's Kirk at the Tron. "Tron" is a word going back to the 12th century in Scotland, referring to the central marketplace where weights and measures were officially standardized[i]. But "Tron" in this case had more to do with differentiating the parishes of the city of Edinburgh, particularly with regard to the neighboring St. Giles. Having a church building at the Tron communicated the significance and centrality of the spiritual witness of the city and of the culture's obedience to Christ as King. The nobility and dignitaries of Scotland, it is said, had specific and prominent thrones reserved for them as they worshipped at the Tron Kirk within the political atmosphere of the day.

There are two dedicatory plaques placed in the stonework of the Tron Kirk. The first, above the main doorway, would seem to be original[ii]. The second stands at the base of the spire which had to be rebuilt after fire destroyed the first. Both plaques very boldly and proudly spell out how this building has been erected and dedicated for no lesser purpose than the glory of God and his Christ[iii].

That church closed in 1952. It remained empty for fifty years, was gutted, and the flooring excavated in search of even older foundational remains underneath. Now, it is the seat of just one of the many tourist traps that characterize "the Royal Mile" today. When I was there looking at the building, its doors were wide open and young men and women were standing in the doorway, hawking their show on the history of ghosts and goblins in Edinburgh to walkers-by – a show which the curious visitor could behold for himself if he could just dare to buy a ticket and enter.

Such things happen all over the world, of course. Everyone understands that buildings grow old and tired and need to be replaced, that older cultures' priorities become changed by newer ones, that devotion to the worship of God swells and diminishes, that populations immigrate in and out, and that kingdoms, themselves, rise and fall. Still, it raises the curious question: how is it that a mere building can be considered holy, set aside for the supreme name of Christ at one moment, and become a restaurant or a ghostly fun-house the next? Is it a crime of hedonism for later generations to use such buildings for folly; or is it religious pride and vanity in the earlier generations to build and dedicate such edifices in the first place?

What is holy space? Jeanne Kilde, who has studied the history of Christian architecture extensively, begins her book, Sacred Power, Sacred Space, by saying:

> *Religious space is dynamic space. Religious spaces house religious ritual, of course, but they do far more than simply provide the setting within which ritual takes place. They contribute in important ways to the very meaning of ritual practices and to the shape and content of religious systems themselves. (Kilde, SPSS, p. 3)*

Winston Churchill said much the same thing in what must have been a political, cultural context: *"We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us."* When the Barker family moved from New York to Maryland, it was surprising for us to notice how a differently shaped and sized house and yard changed several of our lifestyle patterns and habits. This was only curbed, it seemed to me, by our attention to larger family priorities.

So when church architecture changes over the centuries and even becomes as wide and varied in design, purpose and expression as it has become to this day, what are those larger "family priorities" that keep the Christian Church focused and on track

when it comes to the worship of God? Are those things really still there, or have we lost them somewhere along the way? Have they been replaced by other priorities? Is it really true, as many Christian voices have said, particularly Reformed voices, that church architecture does not matter? Or does church architecture actually matter very critically?

Even determining where to start this discussion requires some thought. Do we start with God? Has the one true God with whom all men have to do spoken with regard to the place of worship that is to be built for Him? Has He given clear direction and instruction as to where man is to find Him? Does He expect monumental structures for worship or is it true that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Mt. 18:20, ESV)? Is man left on his own with what may, at least, be sufficiently concluded by good and necessary consequence and what be deduced from Scripture?

Or do we start with man? Should we begin with the assumption that there is a general, spiritual phenomenon within all of mankind that urges, even drives him to worship a higher being? Should we begin by observing what all faiths have in common and endeavor to see how this need to worship is addressed and expressed at its bare essential regardless of which organized religion his tradition teaches him or that he claims to practice? May such a higher being be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, even the suggestions of Satan, and under any visible representation? Is the higher being even aware it is being worshipped, or is it simply for the spiritual encouragement of the worshipper?

There has been a good deal of study and writing devoted to the latter starting place. It is not acceptable, from this perspective, to regard man as being designed and built as a unique receptor of God's direct communication. Rather, all men simply and similarly possess "a religious side". And because all men are similar with regard to the propensity to religious experience, what results in terms of his expression of worship can be categorized and analyzed and the resultant conclusions be known as being true for all religions and all faiths everywhere.

One significant contribution to this angle of dialogue is the writing of Mircea Eliade, who wrote The Sacred and the Profane in 1957.

> *It must be said at once that the religious experience of the nonhomogeneity of space is a primordial experience, homologizable to a founding of the world. It is not a matter of theoretical speculation, but of a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world. (Eliade, p. 20-21)*

It is the subjective experience of external power, not divine communication, that all cultures share and that result in man's creation of "privileged places, qualitatively different from all others – a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth." (Eliade, p. 24)

Frequently in such studies which focus on the kind of subjective experiences of power that all men share in common, two passages from the Old Testament are cited as examples to prove their point. The one is Exodus 3:5 when God confronted Moses from the burning bush[iv].

> *When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Ex. 3:4-5, ESV)*

The other is Genesis 28:16-17, when Jacob receives a vision in a dream of angels ascending and descending on a ladder set up between heaven and earth[v].

> *Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Gen. 28:16-17, ESV)*

These passages are cited as recordings of typical, religious experiences of power - that such subjective experiences are actually common and when they are experienced it is in much the same way as with all men of all religions. Those places, then, become significant and holy.

Rather than being typical, however, these biblical references are actually quite exceptional because these expressions of a religious experience of divine power came with something very unique to Christianity – meaning; a divine meaning, in fact, that was told unto men rather than something men concluded to interpret on their own. We know what the experiences of Moses and Jacob mean because the God who confronted these men spoke and communicated to them His mind.

> *And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:13-15, ESV)*

Clearly the place to start in such discussion of holy space is not with the kind of subjective experiences all men share in one way, shape and form, and thus feel free to interpret in any way they choose. The place to start is with what the God of the Bible

reveals and teaches about Himself and how His people are called and instructed in how to respond as they approach Him.

Another exception with regard to these biblical experiences is a surprising one. Even in the case of such examples as these, Scripture does not teach that these particular sites - where God, Himself, appeared and identified His presence - are to be returned to and used for worship again and again as if they remained holy space permanently. Jacob returned to Bethel once but even after his conversion, he displayed no duty to God that needed to be satisfied with regard to that place continually or generationally. It remained historical in nature but not religious. Even when Constantine's mother, Helena, commissioned a church to be built on the site she presumed to be Mt. Sinai, Christians then and now sense no religious duty to return there on the understanding that, being holy ground still, God may be found there yet. Even from the earliest pages of Scripture, it is clear that worship space is not considered holy space. And that testimony is confirmed in the Westminster standards.

> *"The Westminster Directory (1644), the traditional standard for Presbyterian worship, stated that "no place is capable of any holiness." To the Westminster divines it was unthinkable that holiness should be attributed to physical things in and of themselves." (J. White, p. 31)*

The Christian Church has gone through twenty centuries of expansion and witness, taking the gospel wherever they could, and have built buildings in which to worship the God of the Bible. Yet, many of the buildings that have been built over the centuries have been done not with the reasoning and understanding that comes from the objective teaching of the revealed word of the one true God, but rather based on an

appeal to those subjective, religious experiences that all men seem to have and to which they can all relate.

> *"It is strange then that so much attention in building projects is devoted to emotive factors and comparatively so little concern shown about how the building functions in common worship. One hears and reads much more about how new churches look than about how they work. This is true of most of the literature now available on church building. The emotive factors are discussed at length but the liturgical factors are virtually ignored. … The liturgical factors, then, deserve the most serious attention in church building programs, though all too often they fail to receive it." (J. White, p. 30-31)*

Why has this been the case? What "family priorities" have been set aside and for what other considerations have decisions been made? What is it we are left with as a result? What do the monumental engineering and construction efforts of the past - buildings built and consecrated to the glory of God and His Christ – say to us today? What witness do they really present for the generation of today and tomorrow? How must the "family priorities" be restored?

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[i] The Tron Kirk, or the Kirk at the Tron, was so called from its proximity to the public Weighing Beam, called the Salt Tron, to distinguish it from the Butter Tron or Weigh-House, which stood further up the street. … '[I]t formed a well-known landmark in the city, for here, from time immemorial, not only was all the merchandise that came to the city weighted, but on it also those who had been 'found wanting' in their behavior … were wont to be exposed to the derision of honest people.'" (Butler, p. 115)

[ii] *Aedem Hanc Christo Et Ecclesiae Sacrarunt Cives Edinburgeni. Anno MDCXLI* (This building the Citizens of Edinburgh have consecrated to Christ and His Church. In the year 1641.) (Butler, p. 115)

[iii] The famous story of Jenny Geddes heaving her sitting stool at Dean Hanna for introducing Archbishop Laud's liturgy in 1637 in St. Giles Cathedral had an effect on the construction of the Tron Church. "Thus Jenny Geddes' stool-throwing not only delayed the building of the Tron Kirk, then proceeding, but was symptomatic of the Scottish spirit, and was epoch-making in Scottish history," (Butler, p. 117)

[iv] Eliade, p. 20

[v] Eliade, p. 26