How the Room Effects Worship

*“We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us.”*

Winston Churchill

Now, this is a notion we normally do not give much thought to at all. In most of our experiences, we are not actively engaged in the determination of a building or room’s shape or size – we have what we have, we accept it, we deal with it, or, if necessary, we make whatever adjustments we can that fit into our growing, changing and pragmatic needs.

It is a bit more familiar, perhaps, if we think of the regard we give for our homes. While it may be the dream of many marriages and families to one day build the “perfect home”, the truth is, that experience does not come to all of us. Instead, more of us will buy a “fixer upper” and might even take a sledge to a wall or two. Others will just content themselves to remodel the kitchen or bath.

But when we are faced with the notion of building an entirely new structure, we not only have the luxury of making and shaping the building the way we think we want it to be, but we also are determining – either consciously or unconsciously – how that building will continue to shape us in the future. And when it comes to a church building and, more particularly, to a worship room, we need to ask ourselves if God’s Word guides us as much as our own tastes and financial abilities.

For instance, what direction shall the new worship room face? How will sunlight be used and why? Will natural light or artificial light dominate? And will such decisions effect the mood of the room no matter when it is used? Does Scripture call us to include and appreciate the general revelation we have in creation or to draw away from all outside distraction in order to regard the special revelation coming from His Word?

How about the size? Do we just make the worship room as big as traffic and space will allow? Will we choose to become a “bigger” church or a “smaller” church or will we wish to “remain the same”? Are we going to make a knowledgeable determination as to how big our congregation is going to get? How do we do that and what principles and priorities will guide us? All these things – whether we answer them or not – will effect the personality of our congregation in the future.

How about the shape and arrangement of the seating? We were used to a long, rectangular room arrangement in the past and then we turned the whole thing sideways. Did you notice any changes in us or in our worship? Would you want to go back to the old arrangement and why? Is it less distracting to sit in rigid rows looking at the backs of everyone else’s heads or is it more intimate to be able to see each other’s faces as we worship God? Is there any biblical principle involved in either? What about an historic precedent? Why are other church buildings arranged as they are?

What about the expense we put into our building? What do we want to convey to ourselves and others? What will that indicate as to our priorities – both now and in the future? Would richness and quality define us as a self-centered congregation? Do we want “bare-bones” furnishings and housing because we want to declare that buildings do not matter? Are we to be “above all” a mission-minded church or do we agree with John Piper that missions is required only because we do not worship God as we should?

Whenever we visit another congregation, our thoughts do not usually focus on the building and the message it conveys and reinforces. We usually look more carefully at the order of service, the quality of the preaching, and the activity of the people. But perhaps we should also ask ourselves how our impressions are also dictated by the kind of place the congregation chooses to use in order to call on the name of the Lord.

Buildings of all kinds, not just church buildings but also civic buildings and our own homes, are not only places where we live and do business and worship, they are also testimonies of our priorities, values and principles. The more I study this the more I realize this to be true.

This does not make the job of planning our new phase any more difficult but it does invite us to grow in our understanding of these things and, perhaps, be more aware of how we not only shape our environment but also how the environment we choose will shape us and our children in the future.