

CHURCH ARCHITECTURE: ITS PROPER RELATION TO SIMPLE CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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Numerous papers read by antiquaries, architects, and amateurs at Church Congresses and Diocesan gatherings are on record, containing so many statements in stereotyped form of what the writers have desiderated, that no recapitulation of them can be necessary by any additional essay on church architecture. I am therefore anxious, in leaving the beaten track of Ecclesiology, that we should discover what principles are in danger from the Ritualistic encroachments of the day, and take counsel how to act in the emergency.

For thirty years, Mediaevalism, under the specious garb of a Gothic revival in architecture, has been moulding the minds of the clergy and laity alike for the reception of certain Romanistic forms of design and structure now said to be popular. This tendency has gradually spread, like a fretting leprosy, over a large Ecclesiastical surface. Not only has it imposed upon church buildings, fittings, furniture, and vestments a Romish character, but an affected gorgeous ceremonial has, in many cases, taken the place of simple Christian worship. By a veiled and stealthy sapping, the pulpit, the platform of God's herald, has been undermined, and the Altar of Sacerdotalism substituted as the central object of attraction. Over-decorated structures of pseudo-mediaeval design, but carried out in detailed subservience to modern conventionalities, are introduced to covertly favour Popish formularies, and to serve as stepping-stones to the ornate ceremonial of a sensuous religion whose chilling influences and bondage to ordinances stamp it as antagonistic to the scriptural injunction that we should "attend" upon the Lord without distraction."

In the stormy aspect of our political and Ecclesiastical horizon, it behoves us to look with anxious care, not only to the principles, but also to the external expressions of form in our church architecture. "*The house of God, which is the church of the living "God,"* is exposed to fierce assaults from the enemy who seeks to gain the citadel. Under such conditions, the Christian who holds the "truth" dearer than life, must offer an uncompromising resistance to error in every form as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

It cannot be overlooked that architecture, music, painting, and sculpture, as sister arts, have so intertwined themselves with religious edifices in all countries, Pagan or Christian, that we cannot lightly estimate their legitimate influence. In the Tabernacle "*Bezaleel and Aholiab were filled with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship,*" to carry out the details of the Divine Specification. In the work of the Temple, the highest art and the choicest treasures of wealth were gathered within walls of exquisite workmanship; yet all was brought to a proper level by the manifested presence of "One greater than the Temple."

Doctrine—ceremonial and architectural effect are so indissolubly associated in all Ecclesiastical edifices, that, by a natural law, a correspondence ordinarily exists between the external style and the religious uses of a building. So Egypt, Assyria, India, China, Japan, Greece, Babylon, Rome, and Stamboul—each and all testify to the harmonious union of the Fine Arts and Religion.

If we believe as an axiom that “Christianity is essentially Christ’s life in the Church, pervaded by the Spirit of God,” we must keep this belief steadily in view, as the criterion of our opinions in all questions affecting Christian worship. Primitive Christianity adopted the Basilican form as best adapted to its wants and to a simple formulary. The development of an apostate Christianity gave origin to fanes erected for gorgeous display, and adapted to an idolatrous system which enslaved the worshipper to dangerous errors, veiled by art and gross superstition, and draped seductively by the sacerdotal powers.

In the present day the churches of our English towns and villages are often made to serve as provincial museums for curious and artistic embellishments, presenting in most cases an incongruous mass of distracting details, the heterogeneous contents of a student’s sketch-book. It should be our endeavour to sweep away the cobwebs of a decayed superstition, by faithful adherence to simplicity of form and worship, and recognizing as the standard of all Christian usage, the early precept — “*Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do in the name of the Lord Jesus,*” and so transmitting uninjured and unimpaired to our successors the precious legacy of Apostolic doctrine and practice.

Let us inquire, **in the first place**—

What have Ecclesiologists, antiquarians, and modern architects done for our churches in building and restoring them?

They have sketched out the general plan of our parish churches and cathedrals; they have argued well and ably for their congregational usages; but, with a scrupulous tendency, they have linked up and incorporated in their designs many Romish accessories.

From the time of Constantine, the Basilican hall with its apsis has been accepted as the basis of our church architecture, and to this day the leading principles of the Basilican plan are dominant, in spite of the fringe of aisles, chapels, and altars grafted on it in times of apostasy, when the pulpit was supplanted by the altar.

Without drifting into a dissertation on the various styles prevalent in Christendom, let us, for the practical issues before us, look within the range of English history at the rise, maturity, decadence, and revival of our national Gothic style, carefully nurtured by centuries, and perfected in the magnificent cathedral piles which adorn our cities. From the Romanesque and Norman periods prevailing from 800 to 1150, successive developments of our English Gothic passed through transitional periods and reached a climax of beauty in the decorated architecture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But when the degenerating florid and perpendicular Gothic took its place as the dominant style, and prevailed to the middle of the seventeenth century, a general decadence characterized all the works of the period, not only at home, but also abroad.

We have at the present day the conventional forms pressed upon our attention and presented for our general adoption in Nave, Aisles, Transepts, and Chancel, all appropriate to the simple Christian worship of our Church of England services. Special pleading and pressure, however, are exercised to introduce the unnecessary and distracting accessories of the Ecclesiologist. The simple worshipper knows no altar or sacrifice but the person and work of the Adorable Redeemer, while the multiform chapels, shrines, and screens so essential to mediaeval effect, and so gratifying to the senses, can have no place in his formularies or creed. The Piscina, the Sedilia, the Baldachin, the Credence, the Rood screen, all have an origin and a history of their own, interesting and engrossing in no mean degree to the antiquarian and the architectural student, but bearing directly on Romish doctrines we do well to avoid involving, as they do, principles subversive of all that was restored to us by the Reformation. I am firmly convinced that those who venture blindly on the lines of conventional architecture, with all its paraphernalia, must sooner or later find

themselves on the high road to such mediaevalisms as Lady Chapels, Sanctuaries, Retreats, Confessionals, the Monastery, and the Convent.

It is an essential, in the policy of the Romish Church, that the so-called altar should be the central point of attraction in doctrine and practice for priest and sacrifice, and around it screens of iron, wood, or stone are erected to prevent the intrusion of the profane. These screens are now becoming prominent in modern Ritualistic churches, making them unworthy of the name of the House of God, by contrivances in plain opposition to simple Christian worship, and offering every encouragement to monastic institutions and to the introduction of Guild-halls attached to our churches.

There can be no doubt that a great contrast exists between the original Basilican design and the Mediaeval church. In the former large congregations could be assembled to hear without architectural or ritual hindrance the Gospel message from the ambassador of the King of kings. In the latter, the ceremonial and pomp of sacerdotal performances engrossed the senses of the congregations, reducing the actual devotees to a few, and driving them in small groups to altars and shrines seeking rest but finding none. Interior adornments involving points of coloration and sculpture form a subject the consideration of which, in its immediate relation to spiritual worship, might fairly occupy our whole time. Leaving that field as too large for us to enter upon, I simply remark there are valid climatic reasons for constructive decoration in the varied building materials within our reach.

We have to remark in the second place—

Ecclesiologists have brought to light and preserved many beautiful specimens of art. But by embalming them in modern structures as objects of veneration, and in insisting on their adoption as future models, they attempt to carry our admiration beyond its legitimate purpose in church architecture.

The Romanizers of our day have not only dealt seductively in their apostate dogmas, but in a fraudulent manner have subtly foisted their doctrines into the plans and details of Ecclesiastical architecture on the specious plea of antiquarian veneration and a holy love for religious symbolism.

This tendency must be resisted. "What concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" There are some so enraptured with their conceptions of the typical and the symbolical, that they have grossly distorted the metaphors of Scripture to favour the forms and sculptures of their superstition.

In all these efforts there is a dreamy affectation of mediaevalism, and a cold unreality, strangely inconsistent with its own assumption of a beautiful parallelism and harmony between structure and doctrine.

It is quite legitimate to take an artistic and antiquarian interest in mediaeval designs and details, as history itself recorded in stones; but we must carefully distinguish between mere artistic appreciation and revival and any theological principles and practices involved in their application to Christian worship. Weighing well their logical consequences and their natural effect in transforming the services of our Church into a vain display, the injunction "*touch not, taste not, handle not,*" must guide our decisions in this solemn matter lest we be exposed to the Master's rebuke, "Who hath required this at your hand?"

We are also bound to remark that in some modern cases the high ceremonial associated with such architectural excesses is an exaggerated burlesque of a corrupt original. While conveying only the faintest idea of the traditional or primitive usages which form its defence, it exerts on the minds of

the people a fascinating influence by scenic effects, by the charms of music, and by pompous ceremony. We cannot, therefore, but raise the voice of warning against the insidious and arrogant demands of a High Ritual, veiled and at the same time supported by architectural device, as calculated to pervert, by their traditional associations the sacred ordinances of our Church into actual stumbling-blocks to the simple worshipper.

That this tortuous process of amalgamating truth with error is really the policy of the Romanizing party is amply proved by the Jesuitical tactics which they have recently exhibited in straining the public patience and trifling with the dignity of our courts of law. These strategies have purchased for them a temporary evasion at the cost of a complete exposure of the arts they employ in their endeavours to taint church architecture with error and superstition.

In the third place we note—

That the Ecclesiologists have endeavoured to make the drapery of Romish plan and ornamental device suit the form and circumstances of our Protestant Church. The voice of Jacob is heard in unholy incongruity with the garments of Esau. The example should itself be a sufficient warning to us not to enter into any alliance or compromise that could accept those mediaeval accretions which are the distinguishing characteristics of the Roman Catholic ritual. All such accessories group around the central doctrine of the Altar and Sacrifice, terms which are foreign to our Church category, for only in a spiritual sense have “we an altar whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle!”

Against this parody of religion and this obtrusiveness of worship, permitted—alas! by the latitudinarian tendencies of the day, “*the stone* cries out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall “answer it” that the walls are “daubed with untempered mortar.” Sacerdotalism is, in brief, the central purpose of the Tractarian movement. It is the goal to which they urge our people by insidious education. Let us therefore avoid as jealously as possibly any contact with the unclean thing. Let us recognize that we are in the presence of two powerful and antagonistic forces, and that a challenge is exchanged between the Altar and the Pulpit—between Sacerdotalism and the Ambassador of Christ.

We now come to the inquiry:—

How can architecture consistently represent the principles and usage of the Church of England, and thus in a subsidiary way contribute to simplicity and reality in Christian worship?

Having pursued our subject up to this point negatively, by demonstrating what errors and dangers should be avoided, we would now endeavour to ascertain positively the legitimate use of the means at our disposal as sanctioned by the unerring word of God.

Let us first ask, What does God require of us? “*To present our bodies a living sacrifice,*” which, taken in its obvious and spiritual sense, involves the vital principle of Holiness to the Lord, manifest in all things religious, whether internal or external.

As the visible church is but the outer court of an invisible inner court where the Shekinah dwells in Divine glory, it is incumbent upon us that we allow no intermediary glamour to disturb our vision or impede our access. Anything that the architect can do to further this spiritual aim is fairly at the disposal of the Church, but any doubtful innovation should be checked at its earliest appearance by the thought that the place whereon he stands is holy “ground.” We must as a rigid duty examine the principles and motives which are latent in the forms we adopt, lest, like the Pharisees of old, we

“make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter,” leaving them within *“full of extortion and excess.”*

Let our buildings and ornamentation reflect, in design and execution, the pure light of New Testament Scripture where no sacerdotal acts are performed by the Ministry, but where they are appointed the Evangelists of the Gospel, to teach and exhort the people as Ambassadors of the Most High.

Simplicity of plan should, therefore, characterize all our Ecclesiastical structures; and where means and inclination combine to produce a building of imposing proportions and striking beauty, all the resources and expedients of the arts may be worthily employed in harmonious rivalry for legitimate effect.

In thus consecrating human will and genius to the service of God, scrupulous care should be exercised to protect the worshipper from distraction, recognizing his supreme desire to *“see the King in His beauty, and find grace to help in time of need.”* Infinite as are the glories of the New Jerusalem presented to us in Scripture the most splendid imagery, all its glory is as no thing in comparison to the central *“Light thereof,”* the presence of *“the Lamb that was slain.”* So in our churches should all our architectural detail be subordinated to the one great purpose of our assembling together, and should tend to impress on our hearts by faith the presence and power of the Divine Master.

The architect must remember this duty in his work by arranging that the congregation may have an uninterrupted view of the Pulpit, Prayer-desk, Lectern, and Communion-table. While the eye may be satisfied with beautiful outline, just proportions, and with appropriate decoration made subordinate to the general plan, the mind must be left unfettered to experience those holy emotions and impulses for the absence of which no excess of ornament can atone.

The high ceremonialists of today beguile the eyes of our congregations in the most specious manner, engrossing the attention by over-adorning the church fabric according to a perverse and delusive fancy: for the idea of a peaceful and triumphant Church resting and rejoicing in a world of sin and sorrow and active antagonism is surely the reverse of actual Christian experience. We maintain, on the contrary, that the Church being really in her militant state should be represented to the world as far as possible in her true character, *“persecuted but not forsaken, cast down but “not destroyed,”* a united body triumphing only by faith in assured victory, but struggling for her Lord day by day, and invoking help and strength from the sanctuary on high. Her unquestionably militant condition is altogether incongruous with the triumph signified by an ornate Ritual.

As illustrating a consistent love of church architecture combined with the deepest attachment to principles of vital godliness we may glance at the work and character of George Herbert, an enthusiastic and reverent church restorer of Reformation days. In this remarkable man the highest faculties for poetry, music, and architecture combined to stir up the master-passion of his soul—an absorbing love for his Divine Lord—to sanctified Christian work and worship. The one pervading theme of his life, his writings, and his work, the inspiration of his holy example, was the Atonement of Christ. Next to the personal Saviour, the Church of England with her scriptural formularies was nearest and dearest to his heart. To a mind like his the structure in which he gained the closest and holiest communion with his Lord was the very threshold of the heavenly court.

His poem of *“The Temple,”* published after his death, sheds on the subject of church decoration a freshness and a perfume which covers the whole theme with a sanctified fragrance. His mind, richly stored with biblical knowledge, and his affections steeped in the love and grace of his Redeemer, the quaintness of his fancy, the boldness of his thought, the vigour of his language, and his deep simplicity all combined with an artistic power rarely equalled, to make his poesy one long and flowing hymn of praise to God.

Christopher Harvey published in the seventeenth century some poems on the same subject and in the same strain as Herbert, whose mantle he seemed to inherit. Recognizing the necessity and value of popular instruction for the people in the House of God, this able and judicious writer links up in a quaint style the actual wants of the people, making no reference to mediaeval usages, but touching salient points of simple Christian worship as appropriate to our Church services, by depicting in glowing terms his ideal of the external and material means of grace.

The Prayer-desk and Lectern, as the source of comfort in supplication and sustenance from the Word of God,—the Pulpit, as the fountain of divine light and life, and the ministering place of God's messengers commissioned to provide edification and faithful exhortation,—and the Table of the Lord, beautifully representative of the banquet-table of Christ's love with His own people to perpetuate the memory of His death "*till He come*,"—have each their proper sphere as a help to Christian worship beautifully designated in his writings.

We note, further, that all the resources of art should be legitimately employed to adapt our church architecture to the simple usages and formularies of the Church of England.

David would not offer to the Lord a gift which cost him nothing, and abundance of treasure and free-will offerings from the people. Though God was pleased to sanction, sanctify and bless the work, it would never have been accepted if David's own heart and life had not been consecrated with it to the service of God. In like manner the love of Cornelius was manifested in Apostolic times by building a synagogue, which proved to be a gift acceptable to the Lord.

The Temple of Solomon, with its elaborate detail, its priceless adornments and its wealth of treasure, is a striking example of the extent to which ornamentation may legitimately be carried when authorized by a definite ceremonial under Mosaic law and Divine appointment. Yet we have no trace of the Divine approval of the Temple *merely* as a gorgeous structure. The real glory of the Temple was in its great spiritual purpose and design, in the loyal recognition of *Jehovah's great name* being there in the unapproachable sanctity of the Holy of Holies, and in the effulgent presence of the Shekinah.

The contentions that have been aroused in our own day by questions as to the proper position of the Lord's table might well be at rest for the simple Christian by the remembrance that the supper was instituted by our Lord—not in the Temple, not in synagogue—but in a Jewish dwelling highly honoured by the Master, and at an ordinary table. Let the table, therefore, stand—in the words of the rubric of Elizabeth—"*in the body of the church or in the chancel*." All superfluous ornamentation or formularies associated with the simple administration of the Supper of the Lord tend to divert the mind from the spiritual reality of Christian worship, are far removed from the divine original, and are contrary to the spirit of the Church of England.

Architecture should ever be pressed into the Christian service as the handmaiden of religious truth, but not used as an expedient for seducing the people into Romish practices and doctrines. Art should never be allowed to dominate over religious principle, but should contentedly remain its faithful servant. The material and finite must never supplant the spiritual and infinite.

The Scriptural injunction that the Church should, with "*lively stones*" of varied but harmonious parts, build up "*a spiritual house*," fitted for "*an habitation of God through the Spirit*," indicates the essential principle of unity and beauty that should characterize our church architecture and define its proper relation to simple Christian worship. Gathered together in such a consciousness, the people of God may not be surrounded with architectural embellishments, but they can well afford the loss if, realising their Lord's spiritual presence, they be filled with the joyful conviction—"*This is none other than the House of God, and this is the Gate of Heaven*."

To conclude:—It is manifestly our duty to protest against all dangerous innovations: adhering steadfastly to the great landmarks of our Christian verities, and to the simple worship of the Early Church, that the standard of vital godliness in our land be not debased.

We should jealously guard against the insidious attacks of the enemy from within, as discernible in the practices, pretensions and assumptions of the Ritualistic clergy, at once contemptible in themselves and disastrous in their tendencies.

That the powerful influence exercised by internal forces at work in the Church, suppressed only by temporary expedients, are now ready to burst forth into bud, blossom, and fruition of the rankest Popish development, is an unmistakable danger which can only be averted by a persevering, faithful, and prayerful resistance. The whole machinery of Ecclesiastical and Civil law has become necessary for the restraint of apostacy; and the decisions and specific prohibitions of Her Majesty's courts established for the protection of all we hold dear in our National Church are barely sufficient to avert an open assault from the enemy.

But for a healthy public opinion in support of judicial decisions' we are fully conscious that the virus might at any time burst forth with tenfold virulence. In loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ—the Supreme Head of His Church—let us cherish an intelligent zeal, founded on the consciousness of our union with Him, and fighting under His banner, to offer the most unequivocal antagonism to all encroachments of apostate doctrine draped in architectural forms.

For more than three hundred years the Church of England has raised a uniform protest against the intrigues of Rome; and still she must keep on her guard as a protester against an elaborate Ritual, flattering no doubt to the human emotions, but tending in the most direct and positive manner to draw off the mind from the great spiritual realities which the simple usage and formularies of our Church are designed to teach.

Let us also remember, by way of contrast, that the Roman Catholic Church claims to be a living encyclopaedia of the arts, especially in their architectural development, whether in Classic, Romanesque, or Mediaeval form. Consistently with the pretension, it seizes every opportunity to unite architecture, sculpture, music, and painting in harmonious competition to adorn the shrines and altars of an idolatrous system, in plain contravention of the written word of the Most High, "*who dwelleth not in temples made with "hands,"*" and has declared— "*To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit.*"

On the other hand, the Church of England has wisely preferred a more spiritual order of things in "*the proper relation of Church architecture to simple Christian worship.*" The Holy Scriptures and the Book of Common Prayer taken together, define the augustness of the House of God as closely identified with the "*Audience Chamber of the King of kings.*"

Holiness not only becometh the people of God, but should be the cornerstone of the House of God itself, so that solemn awe and filial joy may combine to fill the soul of the Christian with ecstasy of delight in anticipation of a promised blessing in the Courts of the Lord. Hence the architect should cultivate his great art with all its accessories for the service of the Lord of Hosts so as to assist and not hinder the worshipper, realizing the responsibility attaching to his most honourable employ as a servant of Jesus Christ—aptly expressed by Herbert when he said—

"Teach me, my God and King,
In all things *Thee* to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for *Thee.*"