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Encountering God Through the Ages: A Brief History

Synagogue

The earliest followers of Jesus were Jewish and worshiped with other Jews in synagogues where they gathered weekly to hear again the stories of God’s call and deliverance of their forebears. We can get a flavor of those gatherings from the gospel stories where Jesus himself read from Isaiah or told the story of the Good Samaritan as an illustration of a reading from the Law and the Prophets. After the resurrection, Jesus’ followers continued to go to synagogue and they also gathered, usually in someone’s home, on Sunday, the day of resurrection to celebrate, remember, and expect Jesus in the way he had instructed them, by sharing a meal.

Homes, basilicas, and martyrs

Over time, the followers of Jesus did not feel welcome in the synagogues and so moved their celebration of the word to their celebration of the meal at their Sunday gathering in someone’s home. Communities grew. Larger homes were needed. Some were purchased or donated and renovated to serve their new purpose, with a large room for word and meal, and another room for baptisms. The community stored offerings and conducted social ministries from there. With their exterior walls and courtyards, they were virtually indistinguishable from other homes. Other communities gathered for word and meal at the graves of a disciple or martyr or other faithful leader. Sometimes these homes or gatherings were secret for fear of persecution.

In A.D. 313, the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and made it the religion of the empire. House churches could no longer meet the needs of growing assemblies, especially in urban areas. Buildings needed to be more public. The new building of choice in the West was the Roman basilica, a rectangular general-use civic building, with a half-circle apse on one short end and the entrance on the other end, often with a courtyard leading to the entrance. These buildings usually had long rows of columns down the center that held up a central raised roof section with a high row of windows called a clerestory. Large, open spaces with plenty of light, basilicas were the all-purpose building of their day, with nothing especially religious about them. Used for legal proceedings, occasional gatherings, and warehouses, they worked well as rented buildings for worshiping communities of Christians. The establishment of Christianity allowed basilicas to be purchased or even built by congregations. The ability to own property is an important development. With ownership, the interior of a house or a basilica could be more freely arranged or modified. A long tradition of arranging platforms, furniture, and art for Christian worship began to develop.

Some communities, who had developed a tradition of worshiping at the graves of their saints and martyrs, at the grave of a disciple, or near a site important in the life of Jesus, chose to build their buildings over or near these sites.

Western developments

In time, the Church split: East and West. The Western church developed two distinct patterns of organizing itself: around bishops and around monasteries. As Europe descended into the dark ages the monasteries held much of Western civilization, including ecclesiastical art and practice, in trust. Through the Middle Ages most worship leadership roles became the sole province of educated professionals, and the assembly became primarily observers of their activity. The people rarely received communion, with the focus shifting to devotional meditation upon the sacrament. The celebration of word and meal accumulated many layers of meaning. People lost the ability to understand the Latin language of the professionals. The sacraments were mysterious and magical. Holy Communion came to be understood primarily as sacrifice. Buildings came to reflect these practices. Large areas for the professionals were created near the altar (the choir), fences and screens separated the altar and choir from the rest of the building, where people came and went, praying their own devotions, while the liturgy of the professionals continued behind the screens. Two major zones of sacred activity emerged: a place for the professionals, and a place for the laity. Occasionally a bell would ring summoning those in the main body of the church building (the nave) to pay attention, or a preacher would come out to the pulpit in this area and preach. Commerce, conversation, private devotion all might happen in the nave as the congregation milled around. (Pew seating was not introduced until the fourteenth century.)

As allegorical interpretations of worship grew, the building itself came to have special meanings. Often Gothic buildings were built in the shape of the cross to represent the body of the crucified Lord. Sometimes the chancel was even built at a little angle to the rest of the building to provide a greater allusion to the dead Lord's head. Windows told the stories of creation and redemption. Linens and vestments had functional use with allegorical meanings: the tablecloth became the burial shroud (fair linen), a small cloth to further catch spilled bread and wine became the cloth that covered Jesus face in the tomb (the corporal).

The church's first buildings were literally houses of the church (*damns ecclesiae*), a house in which the church gathered to celebrate word, bath, and meal, and from which they were sent for mission and service. By the time of the Renaissance, the buildings had become fully houses of God (*domus dei*), in which God dwelled as consecrated Holy Communion to be meditated upon devotionally; in which, like a temple, sacrifice was offered to God; into which the assembly entered perhaps with some fear and trembling; and with some areas into which only a priestly class could venture.

Reforms and reaction

The Protestant Reformation challenged many of these practices and allegorical meanings. The reformers shared a common goal of returning the people's focus to gathering around the word. Luther was also concerned with returning participation in the weekly celebration of Holy Communion to the people. Architecturally and aesthetically, reformers disagreed about how the

arts serve or distract from worship. Luther was conservative in this reform, valuing the arts as tools for worship and proclamation. Other reformers went further and gutted former Catholic buildings for their own use or built very simple, plain buildings. This difference in the use of the arts can still be seen between various Protestant denominations today. The Catholic response to Protestant simplification was to further ornament church buildings and liturgies resulting in the baroque and rococo styles of church architecture. Richard Giles sums up the result as "the building, not of houses for the people of God, but of throne rooms for the shriveled fruits of division and separation, i.e., shrines for either the Host or the Book" (*Re-Pitching the Tent*, p. 43).

Participation

In the Protestant Reformation, reformed churches attempted to modify existing church buildings or develop new arrangements that architecturally served their understanding of the primacy of the word of God. Preaching in the language of the people demanded a space in which all could hear, a place for the preacher near the assembly. Participation in the weekly celebration of Holy Communion demanded that the assembly could hear, see, and draw near to the table of the Lord. Public baptisms meant the place of the bath needed to be where all could hear, see, and participate. Distinctions between clergy and laity were minimized or eliminated, and unified, multi-purpose, flexible rooms were proposed for Christian worship. This twentieth-century trend toward simplification is summarized in Louis Sullivan's famous architectural phrase, "form follows function." The church made its own version: "form follows function follows faith" (*Where We Worship*, p. 6). From this development came the concept of *centers of liturgical action*, a concept that we will examine in Chapter 4.

In some Protestant communities, hearing the word became the central focus to the exclusion of everything else. Auditoriums, lecture halls, and TV studios have been built for Christian worship. They serve one function: the audibility of the preacher. Sacraments are diminished. Art is unimportant. Assembly interaction is lost. And the community again is reduced to observing a religious professional (or a talk show host). The pendulum has swung in the other direction.

In the last 40 years Roman Catholic thought on worship environment entered a new phase as exemplified by this principle from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9; see 2:4-5) is their right and duty by reason of their baptism" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Second Vatican Council, 1963). Zeal for reform led to guitar masses and some starkly gutted church buildings in the 1970s and 1980s. Having found the extremes of clerical exclusionism and anything-goes populism, Protestants and Roman Catholics alike are searching for that middle ground today.

House, temple, theatre, warehouse, courtroom, auditorium, TV studio, or lecture hall? River, baptistery, or pool? Dining room or catacomb? House of God or house of the church? In its 2000-year history the church has tried on many buildings and is ever seeking a more comfortable skin. Exactly what that skin will look like is guided by how the church understands itself, by how it worships, and by what it understands its mission to be.

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe the church buildings in which you've worshiped in your life of faith. Do they represent different historical developments of church buildings? Different understandings of worship space?
2. What's your favorite "old" church building? What's your favorite "new" church building? Why?
3. What most surprised you from this short survey of church history? What do you still wonder about?
4. What do you think all church buildings share in common?
5. What does your building say about the people who worship there?
6. How does your building shape the self-perception of the congregation that gathers in it?