

You cannot judge a church's spirituality by its building

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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Sometimes I run across articles that are so profoundly ignorant that it hardly seems worth the time to refute them. However, one particular article caught my attention when its author attempted to explain why there was a shortage of quality sacred space in the suburbs, as opposed to the abundance of quality sacred space in urban areas.

I am not going to mention the author's name or even the name of the article. This is not about attacking an individual who has a very warped idea of what sacred space is, but about a growing and pervasive attitude toward churches in general, and toward Protestant churches in particular.

The author defined sacred space as something that connects humans to a higher power, is a place that preserves the culture and traditions of particular people groups, and something that connects the past to the future and mankind with the transcendent.

Examples of sacred space that he gave were a war memorial, "third places" (the places that people go where everybody knows your name), and now defunct downtown department stores that in years gone by had their own cultures and rituals.

The author attacked Protestant Christianity for being Deists and disconnected from the "transcendent" and gave as evidence the architecture of the suburban Protestant "strain" megachurches, while upholding Catholic architecture found in urban settings. He described suburban churches as being "poor" and "disposable," and as such claimed that they could not perform as sacred spaces should, while praising the Catholic Church for its theological architectural beliefs.

He lamented what he believed was the neglect of suburban Protestant churches for the greatness of God in their architecture, even implying that they were sinful for building something unlike the majestic churches that he standardized as real sacred architecture.

This kind of critique is quite prejudiced, but more importantly it exhibits an attitude that the public is being told is proper. Several years ago I coined a phrase for it – "what the public sees the public owns."

This is a philosophy that has developed over the last two decades or so that says that if someone is to construct a building, it must conform to someone's idea of what the community as a whole believes it should look like.

Unfortunately, this idea fits in well with one of the most destructive habits that has ever permeated America, and that is entitlement. In this case, one person believes that he is entitled to judge a congregation's acceptance by God upon his own conception of architecture. In this case, this author believes that Catholics are more acceptable to God than Protestants because Catholics tend to design their buildings in the neoclassical style.

The logic then becomes more convoluted when that standard is applied to churches in suburbs. The vast majority are Protestant churches that do not build in the neoclassical style, but tend to construct buildings that are modern or more simple in design.

To follow that line of reasoning, one would conclude that if only churches in the neoclassical style (along with war memorials and department stores) can be sacred, then a church of any other style is not. Therefore, there is a shortage of sacred spaces in the suburbs and the only real sacred spaces are generally found in urban areas where churches were usually built in the neoclassical style.

The truth is that it does not matter what style a church is designed to be, it has nothing to do with God's acceptance of the people in that church. It would be equally preposterous to assume that the congregants of a church designed in the neoclassical style were unacceptable to God because their buildings were designed in the style of the Romans who persecuted the church.

There are many churches that have been built to bring glory to man instead of God. Some of them are majestic cathedrals and others are cheap metal boxes. But there are cheap "ugly" metal box churches that have built demonstrating the best that its congregants could give. If any church were to be called "sacred", it would be the latter, not the former.

It was Jesus who said that the woman who gave the last pennies she owned to the Temple gave more than the rich man who made an elaborate and public show of his abundant offerings. It was God who said that he desired our hearts over rote animal sacrifices.

It is bad enough that there are those that don't want churches in their cities. But to qualify whether or not a church is sacred or not (and therefore is or is not acceptable to the public) based on its architecture simply demonstrates a complete lack of understanding about God and his church. Isn't the public confused enough already?

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