

We need to preserve our heritage by saving church buildings

March 12, 2015 By [Randy W. Bright](#)

In last week's article, I wrote about some of the forces that are producing a decline in the number of churches in America.

Among those forces were the urbanization of our population, the decline of rural areas and small towns, the loss of our manufacturing base to other countries, the economic condition of our cities and the unfriendliness of cities toward churches, as well as external cultural forces are changing the public's perception of Christians from admired to despised, and the internal forces within churches themselves that make them less viable.

There is little doubt that the church in America is in decline, and with it, America is losing a treasure of church architecture along with it.

I would be the first to admit that that seems a bit shallow given the enormous challenge in front of us to grow the church at a rate that meets and exceeds the rate of growth of our population. Why should church buildings be so important to this effort, especially when so many of them represent failures or don't meet our expectations of great and monumental architecture?

I think that most people, even most unbelievers, would agree that grand cathedrals and architecturally notable churches are worth saving, but few would think that the majority of our buildings have any significant architectural value. In fact, there is a reason to preserve all of our churches, if not the buildings themselves, then at least the records of them.

Americans and the Israelites of the Moses and Joshua era have many things in common, but this one is most particularly true: we are both a very forgetful people.

In the book of Joshua, chapter 4, after the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, God instructed them to take twelve stones from the dry river bed and to build a memorial.

In Joshua 4:5-7 (NLT) it says "In the future, your children will ask, 'What do these stones mean to you?' Then you can tell them. 'They remind us that the Jordan River stopped flowing when the Ark of the Lord's covenant went across. 'These stones will stand as a permanent memorial among the people of Israel.'" (Joshua 4:5-7)

There are many other examples of this in the Old Testament. God designed us to be visual and associative. Things we see make us recall things we have forgotten.

Our nation's churches say something about what our Founders and the Americans before and after them believed. We were first and foremost a Christian Nation, and as our ancestors made their way across America, it was a common practice that when a town was settled, the first building constructed was a church.

Though many of our church buildings have been lost, there are still many of those eras that still exist. Some are still in use; others have been repurposed for other uses; and still others have been abandoned and are in a state of disrepair or so unsafe that they need to be demolished. All of these buildings, to the extent possible, need to be preserved, whether by physical maintenance, or through photographic and textual documentation.

Why do I believe that this is so important?

Have you ever thought about what it takes and how difficult it is to start a new church? For the vast majority of the churches that exist now or existed in the past, a new church building represented groups of people and individuals who made great sacrifices and took enormous risks to extend and preserve the message of Jesus in the communities. Churches were important, not just to bring the message of salvation, but to enrich the lives of people in their community. Their story is worth saving.

Furthermore, as America grows more secular, so does the popular attitude toward the church. Church architecture is changing. Many new churches look no different than any other building; many would not be recognizable as a church except for a sign and the symbol of a cross. The day is coming, if we do not change, that even those outward signs will not be allowed. We could eventually be “de-churched” in regards to our buildings.

The pile of stones that Joshua made at God’s instruction told no unfamiliar passerby the reason for its existence. There had to be someone to tell the story of why it was built.

For that same reason, we need to preserve or document as many of our churches as possible, along with their stories, so that we can always say, “here is the evidence that we always were a Christian nation.” It is already too late for many church buildings that are gone now, so it is imperative to begin photographing and databasing the histories of the ones that remain before it is too late.



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