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# Theology in Stone

*Church Architecture from  
Byzantium to Berkeley*

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## Introduction

Robertson Davies tells of an English country church where the women make a slight curtsy to a blank wall on entering. Why they do so is unclear, until the vicar explains that a statue of the Virgin once stood at precisely that spot, and Cromwell's troops destroyed it in the seventeenth century, yet even these iconoclasts "could not destroy the local habit, as evinced in the women's behaviour."<sup>1</sup> The story is not unique to Davies's novel. Historians speak of a Continental church where it is a wall-painting of the Virgin that is plastered over during the Reformation, venerated nonetheless with reverent bows by generations of villagers, then rediscovered in the course of restoration.<sup>2</sup> Here as elsewhere, the old religion lingers.

The tale lends itself to more than one reading. For Protestant Reformers or rationalist critics it can be a lesson in the lamentable tenacity of folk superstition. Just as plausibly it can show how ordinary folk have deeper memory and keener perception of a sacred presence than iconoclast elites, even if their memory and perception are embodied in gesture and not explicitly articulated. A modern liturgical reformer might see it as a cautionary tale showing how private devotion infiltrates liturgical space, while a traditionalist might brandish it with glee as evidence that liturgy and devotion will go hand in hand whatever the puritans of any age do to keep them apart. But neither the skeptical nor the romantic view of such a story, neither the reformist nor the traditionalist reading, could claim authority without somehow entering into the scene and speaking with the villagers, giving them occasion to articulate what they experience. Do they in fact have some awareness, however vague, of

a statue or a painting once on view? Does the experience of entering a church and bowing to a spot on the wall, meaningless as the gesture may seem, help give a sense of sacred place and prepare for richer experience of worship? The story brings into focus several issues in the use of sacred space. In the end, however, it can perhaps best be read as a parable urging everyone—reformist theologians and lay devotees, secular scholars and other outsiders—to become more reflective and articulate about what ritual is meant to do, how it gives expression to faith, and how the space provided for ritual is meant to function. The plaster concealing the image becomes a metaphor for all that blocks full realization of the purposes served in liturgy and promoted by liturgical space.

Interesting as it would be to interview the villagers of Davies's tale, the opportunity is not likely to arise, not least because the tale comes with an eyebrow-raising vagueness about exact location. But anyone who makes use of any church has experience of it as sacred space, and there is no shortage of opportunities to clarify people's perceptions by articulating them, by bringing experience to the level of conception. That, most basically, is the purpose of this book. It is meant to stimulate thinking about churches; to provoke deeper and more broadly informed reflection on the purposes of church architecture, and thus also on the worship carried out in churches; to suggest how one might go about *reading* a church; to provide conceptual tools and vocabulary for articulating experience of sacred space. At a time when church architecture is an intensely controversial matter, one may well raise the fundamental questions often obscured in polemics, and reopen possibilities closed off by dogmatism.

### Responding to Churches

During his travels in 1853 Augustus Hare was disappointed by his companion, "a good-looking, sentimental, would-be poet," whose only comment on Cologne Cathedral was "very pretty," and on Sankt Aposteln "very nice."<sup>3</sup> Even in an age that prized sentiment more than ours, these sentiments must have seemed thin indeed. But where does one go beyond "very nice" and "very pretty"? Would Hare have been any more pleased with a less tepid comment such as "magnificent!" or "awe-inspiring!" that required no greater mental exertion than "very pretty"? One might move to the opposite extreme; Edward Dart said about one of his own churches: "Christianity is not a pretty religion—I will be disappointed if our church is classed as a pretty church."<sup>4</sup> Skirting that issue, one might focus on the historically contextualized particulars of a specific church, and the cultural milieu that led to some phase of construction or renovation. One might relate Cologne Cathedral to its seminal role in the development of German Gothic design, and then to the connection between the Gothic revival and romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century, while

Sankt Aposteln could bring to mind the flowering of Rhenish Romanesque and its modern revival.<sup>5</sup> One might walk through these churches discussing the history and background of each feature, each arcade and window, each altar and shrine—but without serious study of historical contexts this sort of information remains merely anecdotal.

Response to a church are conditioned by culture and by cultural interaction. A writer on African missionary churches noted in 1966 that African people are more sensitive than Europeans realize to "the atmosphere created by a building, especially when the building has a high and dignified interior." Passersby might come off the road, kneel in even an unfinished building, and declare: "Truly this is the House of God."<sup>6</sup> It is hard to say how far such a statement is spontaneous and uncoached, and how far it reflects the missionaries' teaching. But this is a special instance of a broader phenomenon: reactions learned from others often seem more spontaneous than they are.

Response to a church is conditioned by expectations, yet a church can frustrate or exceed expectations, even those grounded in long study of photographs and historical background. I am probably not the only person who has gone to the Fronleichnamskirche in Aachen fearing the worst, expecting it to look something like a prison, only to be transfixed on walking through the door by the flood of pure luminosity, and by the divine stillness that Romano Guardini found in this interior.<sup>7</sup> When Sally Kitt Chappell was planning to visit Hagia Sophia for the first time, she feared her expectations might be too high. "Perhaps after all the years of study and anticipation, the work will turn out to be a disappointment; perhaps one will fail to feel what has moved others so profoundly." When she arrived, she found that her expectations had not been high enough. The dome, supported by the half-dome flanking it, first raised and then fulfilled her expectations. "This is what a masterpiece does, it expands your ideas about what is possible." And the immensity of the light-filled space, she found, works its magic on all: "Masterpieces succeed universally." Her experience was informed by analysis and study of architectural history, yet in the end it was reverential. "In the peace and light of its radiant spaces, faith and knowledge celebrate their divine union, wed in the sanctuary of Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom."<sup>8</sup>

Response to a church can depend on whether it is being used liturgically. Both scholars and enthusiasts often find themselves visiting churches when they are not in use: as if anaesthetized, the buildings lend themselves more to examination. Yet even between services a church is not *merely* an inert functional structure or an aesthetic environment without religious meaning. Paul Tillich urged that a church building should elicit a response even apart from its liturgical use, that the space should give people an experience of "the presence of the holy . . . even before anything else happens within this space."<sup>9</sup> Or, as a monk once said of his church, it "prays of itself."<sup>10</sup> Still, the sense of sacrality will not be the same in an empty church and a church enlivened by

gathering and movement, music and drama. A church is intended by its builders mainly for use by the assembly (which, after all, is what *ekklesia* or "church" means in New Testament Greek). In this respect a church is more like a synagogue or mosque than an ancient or Asian temple: it is designed primarily for an assembly and perhaps secondarily for private use, while a temple is built primarily for private encounter with the deity or private meditation and secondarily for communal functions. If one knows well enough what kind of liturgy is celebrated in a church, even an empty building can be imagined in use, but liturgists are sometimes full of surprises in their use of space.

Liturgical use of space can give the lie to artificial distinctions. If one church has an altar in the chancel at the far end, while another church brings the altar down into the center of the assembly, the buildings may seem to declare opposing messages even before services have begun. A distinguished interpreter sees the first sort of church as suggesting that "God is remote and transcendent," while the second intimates that "God is near and immanent."<sup>11</sup> But what if the clergy enter into the nave during the liturgy of the word? What if the community senses keenly that God is present not only in the eucharist but in the scriptures, read and preached in the nave, so the altar alone is not the marker of divine presence? What if the entire assembly moves into the chancel during the eucharist, making it into a place not of exclusion but of inclusion? And what if the passage from nave to chancel makes for a more dynamic, less sedentary worship? The liturgy and the ethos of the place then overturn the simplistic assumptions grounded in an uncontextualized misreading of the architecture.

The difficulty is compounded when the building is a pilgrimage chapel specially meant for throngs of devotees but sought out at other times by sightseers. John Ely Burchard visited Le Corbusier's celebrated chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp and found it in many ways lacking. Yet he conceded that the building might show to proper advantage only at the time of pilgrimage, when vested priests and throngs of pilgrims stand before the image of the Virgin for whose veneration they have assembled. His own visit was on a Sunday when the building swarmed with mere tourists. Photographs of it devoid of visitors had revealed a unity, an order, that he found missing when it was packed. "Do you judge it, then, by the repose of the photographs when no people are there? Might it be that way in mid-week? Was it our bad luck to come on a Sunday? Or were the people part of the glory of the edifice? A building for people ought to be able to stand the presence of people, but were these the right people?"<sup>12</sup> The taste for liturgy, the taste for special religious events such as pilgrimages, and the taste for sacred space do not always coincide, and indeed many people would rather visit and judge a church in contemplative solitude when it is not buzzing with chant and redolent of incense. There are even chapels where private prayer is the main intention, and chapels such as Ronchamp that are meant in the first instance for special devotional

exercises.<sup>13</sup> In these cases the experience of sacrality may be relatively independent of regularly celebrated liturgy. But these are special cases. Normally the reason for entering a church even for private prayer is that the place has a sacrality derived from association with public prayer, from discovery of a place where communal prayer, as T. S. Eliot says, has been valid.

On the day in April when I visited Ronchamp, all the other visitors I encountered were German tourists, a handful of them, whose interest in the place seemed more cultural than devotional. There was still snow on mountaintops not far away, and inside the chapel one could see puffs of one's own breath in the air. A quiet rendition of the *Regina coeli* (it was, after all, only a few days past Easter) proved the acoustics more hollow than resonant. At another time of the year, at another time of day, under other circumstances, the chapel would surely have presented a different face, but that day in April it was like a cave in which spirits had not yet roused themselves from hibernation.<sup>14</sup>

One's reaction to a church may well be conditioned not only by whether people are present but by how full or sparse the congregation is. In the early 1950s it was possible to speak of a church by Rudolf Schwarz in which "the greatness of the space is that priest and congregation are spontaneously brought together in unity," even though the priest was standing fully eleven steps above the congregation and with his back to the people. When both sanctuary and nave were packed, clergy and servers and congregation seemed united in a single assembly, and the priest at the altar could be perceived as standing out *among* the people, not at all isolated from them.<sup>15</sup> With fewer people present the same altar in the same position could have fundamentally different effect.

Response to a church will be conditioned not only by liturgical practice but also by the ethos of the community. A procession down the center of a long nave, with a cross borne in the lead, accompanied by candles and perhaps incense, with clergy in vestments and choir in cassocks and surplices, may seem to some a meaningless show, a display of clerical grandeur, or a manifestation of difference between those processing and those in the pews on either side. If in a particular parish the clergy are experienced outside of liturgy as aloof and magisterial, and if the choir members are paid outsiders with little interest in the life of the parish, this may be precisely the effect of a procession. But if the clergy are known to be warm pastors or fiery charismatic leaders, if the choir members are in general active parishioners who wash dishes in the parish soup kitchen, if there are once and future choristers and acolytes in the pews, or people who know they could assume these roles if they wished, and if meanwhile the congregation joins vigorously with the choir in singing while the procession takes place—if, in short, the clergy and choir are perceived more as "us" than as "them"—then the procession is likely to be experienced as a dramatic manifestation of solidarity, an opportunity for clergy and singers to

move closer to the congregation, and a means for setting a tone of solemnity or of celebration. It is not only the liturgy that will be perceived differently, but the space: the long nave will take on a greater or lesser sense of purpose depending on how its processional use is experienced. What one person experiences as meaningless show, and a second perceives as dazzlingly impressive show, a third will recognize not as show but as drama.

Churches that represent one extreme or another are likely to elicit a strong first impression: buildings that are exceptionally soaring, or luminous, or dark and mysterious, or remarkable for any other unmistakable quality. Lindsay Jones says of the uncommonly ornate churches of Santa María Tonantzintla and San Francisco Acatepec in central Mexico that the first sensation is invariably one of stunned surprise, leading visitors to gasp audibly on entering.<sup>16</sup> The middling church, being neither particularly large nor notably intimate, neither radiant nor dark, neither strikingly ornate nor singularly pure, neither very long nor very broad, may be either the most flexible or the most nondescript of spaces; its effect will depend all the more on how it is used liturgically and how the ethos of the community helps define its character. Yet even churches that do make a striking initial impression may not wear effectively with repeated exposure or lend themselves equally well to all feasts and seasons. Like liturgy itself, liturgical architecture must overcome the numbing effect of familiarity, and it can do so only through the ways it is used and the ethos that is cultivated.

Interested observers sometimes suppose a church will elicit one inevitable response from all who see and use it. In 1933 a commentator noted that a certain architectural plan made for "a more worshipful church interior" and that "with it will come an improvement in the order of worship" because the improved design would discourage carelessly prepared services.<sup>17</sup> Only a few years later, in 1940, Eric Gill urged that moving the altar down into the midst of the congregation would *force* people to take notice of what is done in liturgy and *compel* people to seek and to give instruction on liturgical matters.<sup>18</sup> Even more extravagantly, a minister in the early 1950s exclaimed of his new interior: "It would be difficult to speak or think anything but the truth in such a setting."<sup>19</sup> Yet responses are not so simple and predictable. Architecture does not force people to do anything. Careless services can be held anywhere. A building that guarantees truthfulness could only be sought, one might suppose, in the Heavenly Jerusalem where there is no temple.

The idea of responding to a church takes on different meaning if one imagines the church as speaking first. Edward Sövik in the 1960s entertained a contrast between two churches, one of them large and imposing, the other more modest. The imposing church he imagined as saying: "I am the ruler; when you approach me you must be impressed by me, and I want you to move in certain ways and assume an attitude of awe and subservience in my presence." The second church says, more ingratiatingly: "You are people, and you

are the most important thing. I offer you shelter within my powerful structure; but I will not impose my forms upon you or make myself the demanding object of your attention. . . . In this way I will be your servant."<sup>20</sup> But even apart from the strangeness of putting words into the mouth of a building, and apart from one's suspicion that if the first of these churches could speak it would strike a rather different rhetorical tone, there is a problem here of misplaced attribution. If we wanted to sustain the conceit of a church that speaks to people, we would have to note that the same church says different things to different visitors. The church that proclaims itself a ruler to one person and demands homage in response would project to another a message of uplift and inspiration in the presence of holiness, and it might expect in response an expression of awe and gratitude to God. But if the church is uttering such different messages, one quickly suspects that someone is ventriloquizing, and suspicion falls on interpreters such as Sövik, who wish their interpretations to be perceived not as their views projected onto the buildings but as inherent meanings, as if emanating from the very stones.

Response to a church is learned, and the process of learning requires informed reflection. The meanings of a church are seldom obvious. One critic suggests of good architecture generally that it "does not make all its meanings explicit."<sup>21</sup> To be sure, another insists that a church has meaning to communicate, in particular "the meeting of God and man in the bond of love," and ought to communicate this meaning to all: "it is no argument to say that some are insensitive, uncultured, and need first to be educated. This is a means of education."<sup>22</sup> People respond spontaneously to ordinary natural and social environments, and they should be able to grasp the significance of a church in much the same way. What this argument disregards is that responses to social environments are not purely spontaneous, and even reactions to nature are not purely natural: in various ways, explicit and subtle, people learn how to perceive the world around them, and in the case of a church the lesson is learned gradually, through experience of liturgy and by life within community, and by absorbing principles of interpretation learned from others.

Some individuals report an exceptionally keen sensitivity to the presence of the holy within sacred space. One acquaintance, an eminently practical individual, handy with a hammer and screwdriver, tells of experiencing physical reactions to this presence. When she visited Westminster Abbey she had a sensation of being drawn upward, as if from her heart. At Benares she was absorbed for nearly an hour in a state of insensate bliss so intense that she was unaware of a goat nibbling on her jacket. In other sacred places she has felt a surge of energy running along her spine and up to the crown of her head. The older the place, and the longer its tradition of worship, the more intense is her experience. And she has little sympathy for sightseers who treat a church as merely an object of curiosity. Her sensitivity is perhaps one form of the mindfulness cultivated in meditation, and it is surely no coincidence

that she practices and teaches meditation. But as she relates her experiences it is clear that she perceives them as coming in response to a presence rooted not in her but in the places themselves. For her, more than for most people, the experience of the holy is an experience of reality distinctively present in a particular location. For her, sacrality is not ascribed to a place but discovered.

This degree of sensitivity may seem unusual. But what counts then as usual, and why? *All* ways of responding to a church arise from the particular backgrounds of specific observers, who will see in it what they have been taught to see, what their sensibilities lead them to see, and what the uses and ethos of worshipping communities enable them to see. In the midst of all this variation, then, it is a challenge to find aspects of church architecture so basic that they can usefully guide everyone's perception of any church—to find common ground for discussion, for possible agreement, and even for clearer understanding of the disagreements that will inevitably remain.

#### Four Ways of Looking at a Church

Two basic questions are relevant to the understanding of any church: how is it used, and what sort of reaction is it meant to elicit? But each of these questions can be divided into two more specific questions. To ask how a church is used is first of all to ask about the *overall configuration of space*: how is it shaped, and how does its design relate to the flow, the dynamics of worship? The question of use is secondly a question about the *central focus of attention*, if any, within the church: what is the visual focus, and how does it make clear what is most important in worship? To inquire about the reaction a church evokes is to ask first about the *immediate impact* it makes on a person walking through the door: what aesthetic qualities come to the fore, and how do they condition the experience of the holy within the church's walls? But the question is also one about the *gradual accumulation of impressions* gained in repeated experience of worship within a church: how does sustained exposure to a building and its markers of sacrality lead to deeper and richer understanding?

One might easily devise thirteen ways of looking at a church, but this book will suggest four, corresponding to these four fundamental questions: the spatial dynamics of a church, its centering focus, its aesthetic impact, and its symbolic resonance.

Specialists in the history of church architecture may hear echoes of Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, who in a classic essay on early churches distinguished purpose (*Zweck*), meaning (*Bedeutung*), and form (*architektonische Form*) as the main factors in church-building.<sup>23</sup> The spatial dynamics and centering focus of a church might be said to express its purpose, its symbolic resonance might be taken to express its meaning, and its aesthetic impact could be assimilated to its form. But Deichmann's categories refer mainly to the

governing conceptions of the people who planned and built churches, while my concern is not only with the intention of the builders but also with the appropriation of churches by generations that view and respond to them, use them and often refashion them. The question what a church *has meant* and the question what a church *can mean* are related but not identical.

#### Three Traditions of Church-Building

These four factors are handled differently in different types of church. For heuristic purposes, this book will survey three broad traditions of church design (other forms and hybrids could easily be adduced) and will explore how spatial dynamics, centering focus, aesthetic impact, and symbolic resonance function in each.

The first tradition, that of the *classic sacramental church*, stretches back to the earliest generations of public church-building and claims a rich and venerable history. One of its most familiar forms is sometimes called the basilican plan, a long structure with lower aisles on either side and an apse at the end. Variations can be found in Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican parishes, and often in other traditions as well. Its standard features include a longitudinal nave (mainly for the congregation) and chancel (chiefly for the clergy), allowing for processions of various kinds from one end to another. The chancel is traditionally at the east end, the nave at the west. Layout and terminology vary, but one standard arrangement is for the chancel to be subdivided into the sanctuary (with the altar) and the choir (with choir stalls). The focal point of a classic sacramental church is the altar, the place of sacrament to which the longitudinal space leads. If a church of this type is based on a coherent aesthetic vision, it is usually one meant to evoke the immanence of God and the possibility among worshipers for transcendence of ordinary consciousness. Such churches often abound with symbolic forms and decorations, making them rich in symbolic resonance. I will refer in more than one chapter to Santa Maria Maggiore, a basilica of fifth-century Rome, as a classic example of this form of church (fig. 1).

The second tradition, the *classic evangelical church*, is meant chiefly for preaching the gospel. The interior is an auditorium, with the pulpit as its focal point. Its space is often relatively small, encouraging spontaneous interaction between preacher and congregation. The main aesthetic goal is to create a space for edification of individuals and of the congregation. The building itself may be relatively plain; in any case it will usually be less adorned with symbolic decorations than a classic sacramental church. Variations on this form were built by sixteenth-century Huguenots and Dutch reformers. The design was taken over and transformed at the hands of nineteenth-century urban revival preachers, and again by modern evangelicals with the latest technology at their

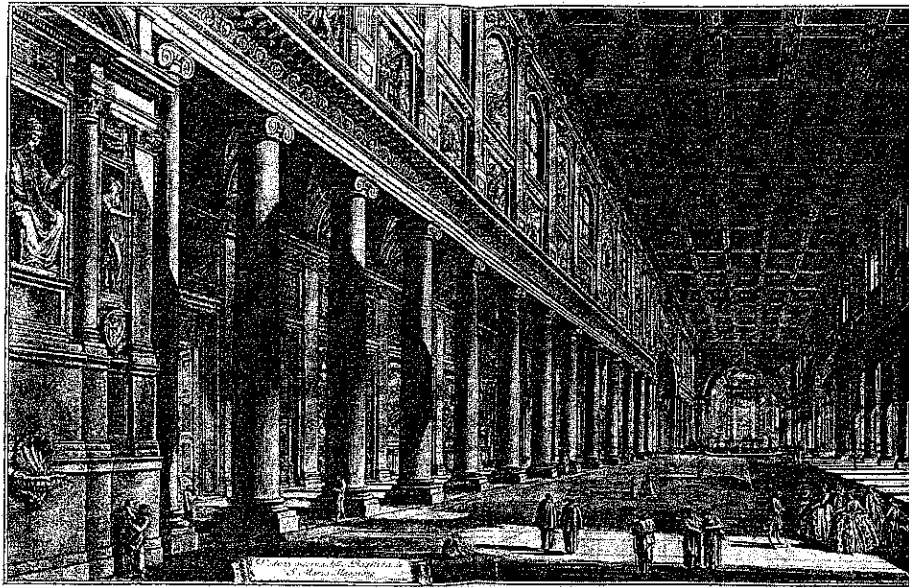


FIGURE 1. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, interior. Engraving from Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Vedute di Roma*. Reproduction courtesy of The British Library, with permission.

command. I will refer to a seventeenth-century Congregational chapel at Walpole in England as one classic example (fig. 2).

The third tradition, more recent in origin than the others, might be called the *modern communal church*. Built for both Protestant and Catholic congregations, this kind of church is meant to emphasize the importance of gathering people for worship, often around an altar or a pulpit. Such a church is usually built with ample space for social mingling at the entry; the importance of gathering people together is highlighted by this provision of social space. More often than in other designs, the modern communal church is built for a congregation that is not already formed as a community in everyday life and that thus needs to be constituted as a social community en route to the place where it becomes a worshipping community. Seating is often wrapped around three sides of the interior, heightening a sense of group identity. The assembly itself may thus become the main focus of attention. The atmosphere is meant to be warm and inviting, to create a hospitable environment for celebration. And while symbolic resonance is not usually as dense as in a classic sacramental church, symbolic reference is often richer than in a classic evangelical setting.

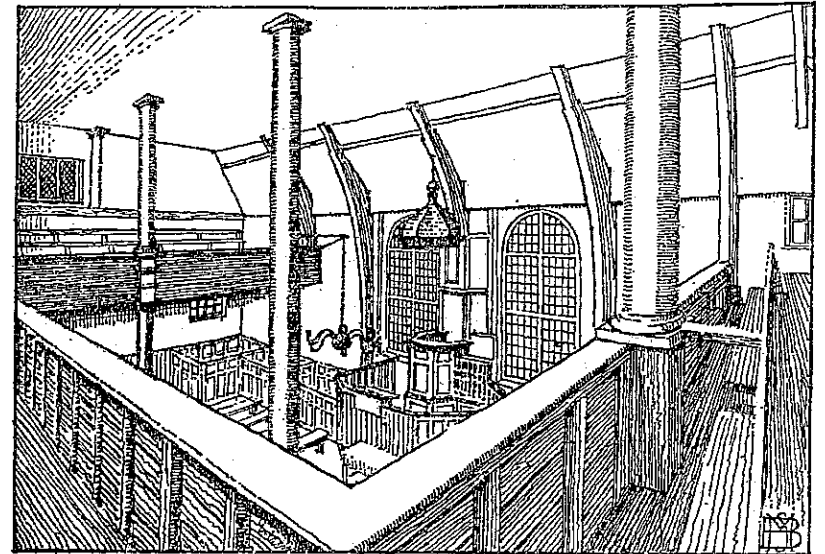


FIGURE 2. Congregational Chapel, Walpole, Suffolk. From Martin S. Briggs, *Puritan Architecture and Its Future* (London, Redhill: Lutterworth, 1946). Used with permission of Lutterworth Press.

I will make reference to a church of the mid-twentieth century, United Methodist Church at Northfield, Minnesota, as one example of this form of church (fig. 3).

The labels suggested are meant to highlight the factors governing the shape of church buildings. All churches are evangelical, if only in reading and commenting on the gospel and claiming to worship in its spirit. All churches are communal, bringing congregations together for worship. And all churches are sacramental, even if they see the word of God as the truest sacrament and the fountain from which others flow. But there are churches that, following a tradition traceable to relatively early stages of Christian worship, take sacramentality in various senses and on more than one level as a fundamental determinant of church design. Other churches, following a tradition anticipated in the later Middle Ages and worked out explicitly in the sixteenth century, accept evangelical proclamation as the basic determinant of design. Yet others, at least since the rise of the twentieth-century liturgical movement, have seen the gathering of community not simply as a factor in sacramental or evangelical worship but as itself a key determinant in design of the church building. The point, then, is not that certain churches unlike others are sac-

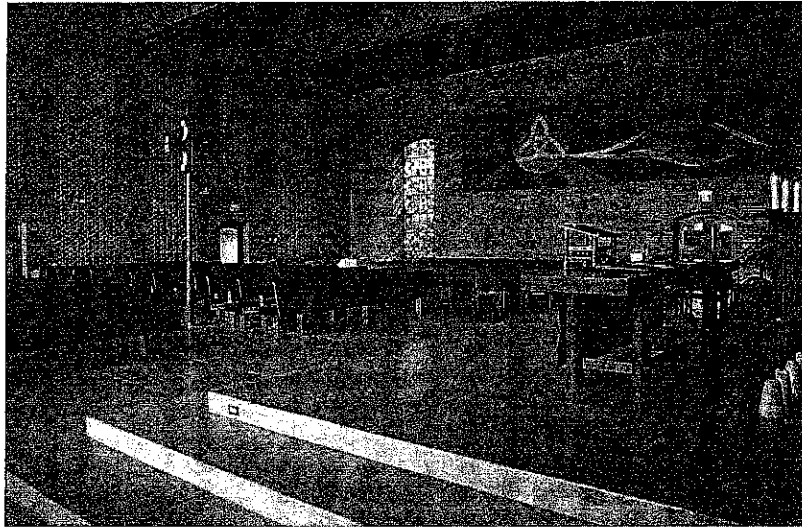


FIGURE 3. United Methodist, Northfield, Minnesota, interior. Photograph by Richard Kieckhefer.

ramental, or evangelical, or communal but that one of these three characteristics underlies the basic form of a church building (see table 1).

From a strictly historical perspective this categorization may appear strangely lopsided, because the “classic sacramental” church includes the vast preponderance of forms churches have taken over the centuries, while the “classic evangelical” church represents a particular development within some (not all) Protestant denominations, and the “modern communal” church is a recent development that might not seem worthy of equal footing with the grand traditions it reacts against. But if we focus more on the range of options available now, the perspective shifts, and the forms that loom so large historically occupy a less significant and more contested place.

It might be tempting to say that these forms of church function differently in worship. But while in some contexts the question “How does this church work?” may be appropriate, for the liturgist the more relevant question about any church is “What would it take to make this space work?” Every church and every sort of church presents a specific combination of opportunities and challenges; every variation in design can bring both gains and losses. A classic sacramental church may function as people expect if the liturgy they celebrate in it is dynamic and conveys a sense of participatory drama, if they use processional space to bring clergy and congregation into interaction rather than

TABLE 1. Basic Patterns in Church Design

|                                 | Classic Sacramental   | Classic Evangelical  | Modern Communal   |
|---------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <i>Liturgical use</i>           |   |  |   |
| Spatial dynamism                | Longitudinal space for procession and return (kinetic dynamism) | Auditorium space for proclamation and response (verbal dynamism) | Transitional space for movement from gathering to worship areas |
| Centering focus                 | Altar for sacrifice   | Pulpit for preaching   | Multiple and movable  |
| <i>Response elicited</i>        |   |  |   |
| Aesthetic impact (immediate)    | Dramatic setting for interplay of transcendence and immanence   | Dignified setting for edification                                | Hospitable setting for celebration                              |
| Symbolic resonance (cumulative) | High  | Low  | Moderate  |
| <i>Relationship of factors</i>  |   |  |   |
|                                 | Multiple functions, none of which governs the others            | Converging functions, governed largely by centering focus        | Converging functions, governed largely by spatial dynamic       |

keep them distant from each other, and if in general the liturgical ethos is marked by a kind of intensity that pervades and transforms the assembly, an animating vitality that fills the space. This kind of church generally does not lend itself to an understated mode of liturgy, let alone a casual touch. A classic evangelical church may require a balance of charisma and sensitivity on the part of the preacher, and an ethos of responsiveness on the side of the congregation. Modern communal churches can be among the most disappointing environments for worship if those who build them have exaggerated expectations about what the architecture itself will accomplish for worship, in particular how it will foster participation. The opportunities such a church presents seem obvious in principle; the challenges are less so, until candid assessment reveals that this church too requires creative use to function well. Integration of silent prayer with word and music may be needed to define a contemplative dimension to the space. Focused attention to symbolic action may be required to prevent a hospitable environment from becoming too familiar, too casual, even banal. The challenge here is to keep the worship and its setting from becoming merely bland.



## The Central Arguments of This Book

This book focuses throughout on the theological meanings and liturgical uses of churches. Matters not related to liturgy and theology, such as structural developments, will not be discussed, and questions of architectural style will be of secondary interest except when they bear on theological meaning. Remarkably, books on church architecture often give only passing notice to the liturgy for which churches are built. A finely nuanced comparative study of sacred architecture will analyze buildings as “microcosmic images of the universe,” “codified perceptions of order,” “the legitimation of authority,” and the like, but even when discussing Christian churches will neglect such themes as the gathering of the assembly, eucharistic sacrifice, communal meal, and preaching of the word—in short, all that defines a space as suitable for Christian worship.<sup>24</sup> A lavishly illustrated book on churches will devote a two-page section to the history and use of labyrinths but give no comparable explanation of the mass.<sup>25</sup> A popular book on the ostensibly ordinary church of Saint Agnes at Rome will give a poetic interpretation of its floorplan; will tell how its altar was erected in 1621 over a new silver reliquary, with a ciborium supported on columns of tooled porphyry; will survey the side chapels, including one to Agnes’s “milk sister” Emerentiana, nursed by Agnes in infancy; in short, will give loving attention to all the details of the building, but with almost no attention to the liturgy.<sup>26</sup> One can read detailed accounts of Salisbury Cathedral without learning about its leading role in the enrichment of high medieval liturgy or about the rebuilding and extension of chancels to accommodate that enriched ritual.<sup>27</sup> We are better off in the case of Hagia Sophia in Byzantium, for which we have studies that take pains to show how architecture came alive liturgically; these works represent the exception.<sup>28</sup>

The following chapters, then, will focus on the uses and meanings of different kinds of church. But they will pay special attention to the classic sacramental church, because it is most in need of sustained attention and interpretation. The other forms of church, the classic evangelical church and the modern communal church, are reformers’ brainchildren, and they often manifest something of the coherence born of single-mindedness. In the classic evangelical church, designed straightforwardly for preaching the gospel, the elements of design will gather to a single point. The conception of the church interior as an auditorium, the centering of attention on the preacher, an aesthetic of dignity rather than of splendor, and symbolic parsimony—in such a classic evangelical church all these factors will cohere in their support of evangelical proclamation. To be sure, buildings that share all the essential features of the classic evangelical model do often borrow from the stylistic vocabulary of the classic sacramental church, and will often display accommodations to its liturgical arrangement, but without the same theological commitment to

those features or the same theological interpretation of them; accommodations remain precisely that. In a modern communal church, the space itself, the furnishings, the aesthetic, and the embellishment are all meant in large measure for one main goal, to create a welcoming space for celebration and hospitality. The classic evangelical and modern communal models, each ultimately grounded in a single and readily appreciated principle, are easily understandable and widely understood. They have the plainness and the familiarity of prose. The classic sacramental church does not have this kind of convergence of purposes, at least in the same way or to the same degree. Rather, in a classic sacramental church one can grasp first one dimension and then another—first the processional organization of space, then the focus on the altar as a place of sacrifice, then the emphasis on the immanence of God and the transcendence of ordinary human experience, then the dense web of sacral associations—and while they are not unrelated to each other, the strands are not tightly woven, the aspects of the church are not corollaries of a single basic principle. A classic sacramental church is not the invention of a reformer with clarity of conviction, and clarity is seldom its most notable virtue. A classic sacramental church works on multiple levels, while for others the levels tend to converge and are more of a piece.

The classic sacramental model is thus more difficult to understand. More than the other forms of church, it requires interpretation, and interpretation on multiple levels, not reduction to simple formulas. Its different aspects may be compatible with each other and even mutually supporting, but they rest on separate principles. To make matters yet harder, each of the principles underlying the classic sacramental church is now countercultural and thus hard to present in easily accepted terms. Forms of church design once taken for granted are now beyond comprehension to most viewers. Such a church is difficult to understand in much the way a dense and highly allusive poem is difficult, a poem that works its tangled allure on more than one level. Its attackers have a simple task; its defenders must appeal for patience and a kind of poetic imagination. The architect Daniel Lee tells about meeting a Christian poet who professed ignorance about architecture: “I really don’t know, architecture is such an esoteric art form.” Lee observes that “most Christians cannot begin a conversation on architecture” and that contemporary church architecture in particular “is as confused as the tastes, and faith, of building committee members.”<sup>29</sup> Understanding church architecture is indeed difficult, but not uniformly so. The purpose of some churches may be easy both to grasp and to articulate; for others this is not so.

Our culture tends to see classic sacramental churches and the liturgy they are built for as formal and therefore artificial; we know too little of the formality that implies heightened drama and focused attention. Does this mean these churches are esoteric and elitist? To the contrary, there is no reason they cannot serve as people’s churches. Cultural richness and complexity appeal to a range

of classes, in varying ways and for various reasons; the simplicity of tidy coherence is mainly a concern of elites and ideologues. The classic sacramental church may for many people have immediately clear meaning on an intuitive level—even if this meaning resists articulation because it is complex or because our culture does not provide the needed vocabulary.

In another way the classic sacramental church is paradoxical and resists easy articulation: it is built for transitions of various kinds, and within its structure oppositions are brought together in simultaneity. It is built for movement and dynamism but also for rest, for sound and for stillness and for the reverberation that mediates between the two, and for centering focus that permits a kind of scattering, often also for passage from darkness to light and from narrow enclosure to open space. At its heart is a sacrificial block represented as a place of death, but of life-giving death, a place of conflict between death and life. It means to awaken a consciousness of the holy within the sacred: that is to say, a simple awareness of divine presence within a richly complex symbolic network, in which narratives from the past and expectations for the future come into the immediacy of present experience.

My purpose, then, is not so much to advocate or disparage any tradition of church-building but to explore how each tradition can be coherent and lend itself to creative and inspired use. But making that argument in the case of the classic sacramental church requires closer and fuller attention. If this book reads in part as an apologia for that model—and it will—this is not because of an animus against other conceptions of church but because they can more easily look after themselves.

A further theme, then, which will emerge more gradually in the course of the book, is again central to an understanding of the classic sacramental church and its relationship to alternatives: the question how “the sacred” and “the holy” are expressed in church design. For many theorists of religion, sacrality is a quality achieved or expressed by separation: the sacred is that which is separate from the profane, and sacred space is space behind barriers meant to restrict access, or veils meant to restrict visibility.<sup>30</sup> Those critical of this understanding have generally shared its basic premise, and have sought to strip churches of sacred associations in order to overcome the separation taken to be the heart of sacrality. In response to both extremes, this book will argue that a church can be marked by a sacrality not of separation but rather of association: that what makes a building sacred is not its detachment from the profane (although this may be a secondary effect of sacrality, often mistaken for an essential factor) but the richness of its symbolic associations, its connectedness to images and narratives that bear on the deepest questions of human life. Further, a church differs from other spaces by its making concrete and vivid a sense of the holy, of the divine presence. It is association and presence that are most important to church architecture, not separation.

The main arguments of this book, then, are two. First, it will argue for a

reconception of the classic sacramental church and its relationship to other forms. Second, it will urge reconception of the question why and how a church should be thought of as sacred space, a place for encounter with the holy. These two arguments are independent yet have bearing on each other. They will be developed first within a systematic survey of themes, then within a very selective range of case studies.

#### A Note on the Title

Various terms in the title may seem to call for comment, although they should be clear enough in context. The reference to Byzantium and Berkeley is meant simply to indicate something of the book’s chronological and geographical scope. The term “theology” may suggest to some readers that I am going to lay out an interpretive scheme, telling how Romanesque and Gothic styles convey different theological messages, or explaining why one form of church is theologically correct and others theologically deficient. For some interpreters the “meaning” of a church or of some feature within a church does depend on a fixed code of symbolism.<sup>31</sup> But this is decidedly *not* my approach. Churches have theological significance, but in fluid and complex rather than fixed and simple ways.

Why theology in *stone*? This is shorthand for all the materials used in constructing churches, including brick and wood, concrete and glass. People have even worshiped in churches made of cardboard, though not for long.<sup>32</sup> Stone may seem not to be a neutral or innocent selection from among these materials, standing as it does for monumentality and traditionalism. Should we really be taking stone as the normative building material for churches at a time when so few churches are actually made of stone, and its significance is open to challenge? We are told: “the construction of buildings in stone has always carried a strong symbolic charge, conveying notions of stability and permanence.”<sup>33</sup> Again: “images of divine powers are made of durable materials, and the heavy stone walls of temples, fortresses, and palaces have always served as a suitable metaphor for temporal and spiritual power.”<sup>34</sup> One Victorian writer proposed that natural stone should predominate in a church to call to mind the Great Architect who made the stone: “The works of nature remind us of the GOD of nature.”<sup>35</sup>

But on this point, as on most, symbolism is not univocal. The question arose when Renzo Piano—hardly a reactionary or a devotee of traditional monumentalism—was asked why his new church at San Giovanni Rotondo in southern Italy was to be built of stone. His first answer was straightforward: “Stone makes it look more like a church. There is an instinctive memory of the church built of stone.” But he went on to comment on the way stone gives a sense of relationship to a particular place:

As we looked at the empty site there were rocks coming through to the surface and we thought "What about digging stone locally?" The topography of the site is very interesting. You don't see the landscape in the immediate vicinity, you see the sea beyond, there is a sense of the infinite rather than the local. There are almond trees all around and a sense of calm in the air. This is how we started to build up a sense of place.<sup>36</sup>

While brick and concrete and glass are international materials, and wood does not easily reveal its exact provenance, stone tends to be specific to its region, and with some exceptions it is traditionally quarried not far from where it is used. By one estimate, if medieval stone was transported overland for a distance of twelve miles its price thereby doubled: strong incentive to use local building material, unless waterways were conveniently at hand for transport.<sup>37</sup> And the limestone of Somerset is clearly different from that of Lincoln and of Yorkshire, let alone the sandstone of Cheshire or the granite of Brittany. When Sophia Gray, the first woman architect in South Africa, combined hard local building stones with imported and already carved softer English stone for moldings and capitals, tracery and corbels, she established a practical and symbolic link between the colonizing and colonized lands.<sup>38</sup>

None of this means, of course, that stone is in any way a normative medium for church-building. But it does mean that when a church is of stone its material calls attention to the particularity of a specific building at a given place, in its own environment and community. And therein lies a salutary lesson about the multivalence of meaning: stone may mean permanence and power, but that is not all it means, and more generally churches have meanings and uses beyond those immediately perceived.

Further, there is biblical basis for taking a building of stone as a metaphor for the people who assemble in it: the congregation is a church built of "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5). When the Roman Catholic bishops in America issued their latest document on church architecture, they called it *Built of Living Stones*.<sup>39</sup> The metaphor can work in either direction: many languages use derivatives of the Greek term *ekklesia*, or "assembly," and apply them to the building as well as to the congregation; others begin with the Greek for "house of the Lord" and apply its derivatives (Germanic terms such as *cirice*, *Kirche*, and "church") to the community as well as to the structure.<sup>40</sup> In either case, the building and the community, inert and living stones, have meaning in relationship to each other. That a church building is a structure for an assembly is common knowledge. That the community brings its shared experience and its culture into the act of worship, and that doing so requires a particular kind of building, is equally but less obviously true. And it is true in various and potentially conflicting ways, making church architecture immensely exciting and inescapably controversial. ]

# I

## The First Factor: Spatial Dynamics

Entering a church is a metaphor for entering into a spiritual process: one of procession and return, or of proclamation and response, or of gathering in community and returning to the world outside. The form of sacred architecture will follow largely from the conception of spiritual process it is meant to suggest and foster, the type of dynamism it aims to promote.

When books on comparative religion come into the hands of architects, they sometimes begin speaking about churches as sites for such things as "spiritual paths" and "sacred places." One such writer speaks of "gate," "path," and "place" as critical factors in sacred architecture, marking the beginning of spiritual experience, the journey to transformation, and the culmination of the journey, and he construes these journeys broadly enough to include the route from parking lot to church building as well as a passage down the aisle to an altar, pulpit, or other destination.<sup>1</sup> The architect Thomas Barrie, in *Spiritual Path, Sacred Place*, distinguishes various types of path found in churches, temples, and other sacred places.<sup>2</sup> The axial path leads progressively across increasingly sacred thresholds and spaces, terminating in the home of the gods, to which only the deities themselves and their priests have access. The split path has diverging routes, or two routes converging as they move toward the final destination. The radial path has avenues converging from several directions on a central point. The grid path has either no center or several centers, suggesting the presence of God everywhere and nowhere. The circumambulating path makes its way around the sacred space or itself forms the sacred area. The segmented path has