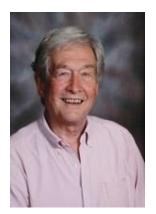Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]
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Architecture Always Wins: Part A

A   Yet another Golden Oldie. I'm rescuing these from earlier days. Since this website was re-designed in 2013, it has not been available to readers.

B   This one was Essay 32, from September 1999.

C   I reproduce it below, almost un-edited.

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1   In an earlier Essay in this space (Essay 17: The Cincture Test), I made glancing reference to a favourite Important Principle of mine: "When your theology and your architecture are in conflict, architecture always wins." It's not original with me; it is the bon mot of a respected teacher.

2   This month and next, I want to return to that dictum, faithful reader, and spell out its implications in some detail. More than that: I conceive of this Essay as the first in a series, touching on each of the arts of worship:

a) architecture, that is, the environmental setting of Christian worship;
b) drama, that is, position, posture, and gesture in worship;
c) music: hymns, prelude and postlude, and offertory;
d) vestments, banners, and paraments;
e) artifacts as "signs" and symbols, that is, such items as book, bread, wine, cup, processional cross; and finally,
f) the words of our worship, that is, our verbalizings.

3   First, an important Preface to this Essay, and to the rest of the series yet to come. It could be argued -- I myself would be willing to argue! -- that, phenomonologically, the sequence in which I have listed these "arts of worship" (2 above) represents the sequence in which worshipers perceive the meanings in Christian worship.

4   This is not to say that our words (verbalizings) are less important than our architectural arrangements. It is to say that the disposition of our worship space is what first confronts a worshiper.

5   And it is to acknowledge, yet once again in these Essays, the reality that the Incarnated Word includes, and embraces, more than verbalizings. We just as surely "speak" in the arrangement of our worship space -- and indeed in our gestures, our vestments, our music, our symbols -- as in our verbalizings. They are all Media of Meaning.

6   And, lest anyone fear, I am not proposing (by appeal to this hierarchy of worship's "arts") that pastors and worship leaders spend less time preparing their sermons or their prayers each Sunday. I am proposing that pastors and worship leaders spend (relatively) more time and energy and imagination -- more, that is, than Lutherans, at least, have often spent! -- in reflecting on, and properly ordering, these other non-verbal "voices."

7   To a) architecture, then.

8   Let's begin with a brief overview of architectural history. And let's ask, of each of the examples I put forward: What is the secular equivalent of this space?

9   Hard distinctions between "sacred" and "profane" can scarcely be defended, theologically, since the rending of the veil of the Temple at Jesus' crucifixion; indeed, since the days of Israel's prophets. Abraham Joshua Heschel has reminded us that, for the Biblical sensibility, "Everything is either holy; or not yet holy."

10   Nevertheless, the Word Incarnate has always sought, and found, a humble human home. Some of those homes, I will argue, are more congenial than others to the Word they welcome.

11   The first stop on my architectural tour is Syria, and the House Church at Dura Europas. It's now only a ruin, but it dates from the earliest years of the Christian community, the First or Second Centuries. So it represents the "House of the Church" in its infancy.

12   Dura Europas is apparently a private residence, modified to meet the needs of a worshiping Christian community: an entrance hall, a living-dining area, and a separate room housing a kind of baptistery. Frescoes adorning the walls depict a worshiper in orans posture, and Christ healing the paralytic. Worshipers presumably assemble, standing, around the host's dining table.   A bishop or presbyter leads worship, reads scripture, and presumably preaches, facing the people across the same table. Its arrangement is basically radial: worshipers gathered around Word and Meal. Its secular equivalent is of course your own dining room.

13   Second stop: The basilica of St. Apollinaire in Classe, near Ravenna, Italy. Dating from the Sixth Century, a couple of centuries after the time of Constantine, St. Apollinaire is one of the earliest buildings built specifically as a Christian church. Its secular equivalent is quite consciously the Imperial Byzantine Law Court.

14   A small but magnificent marble-columned nave opens to a semi-circular apse / chancel raised a dozen steps above floor level.   A free-standing altar is centered in the apse.   Against the semi-circular apse wall, a row of seats for bishop and worship leaders. (Read: "judges.") To right and left are pulpit and lectern. (In the Imperial Law Court, for prosecuting attorney and defense attorney! Yes!)   True, the Presider still faces the people across the Table at Mass, "basilican style."   But already the Christian community has become strongly hierarchical ("priests first") and triumphalist!

15   Third stop: Notre Dame in Paris, France. Like all Gothic churches, Notre Dame is a strongly axial, "two-room" space, the chancel elevated and clearly separated from the nave, with its unmistakable message: "Laity Keep Out!"   English Gothic actually interposes a rood-screen between chancel and nave, separating clergy and laity; Orthodoxy an iconostasis ("icon screen"). The effect is identical in any case: a still stronger signal of hierarchy

16   Further: The long, narrow nave serves almost no purpose except to enhance the pageantry of processions, such as those in the then-popular Services of Benediction, where the communion bread was displayed for the peoples' adoration in an elaborate ceremonial cortege. Such a long, narrow worship space would defeat almost any attempts to build a sense of community.   Worshipers stood (no pews) to stare at the backs of other worshipers' heads -- as now, today, in "neo-Gothic" church buildings by the scores, in every North American suburban subdivision

17   Finally: The separate, raised chancel contributes to a perception among the people that, in worship, they themselves are passive spectators, an audience, the choir and clergy in the chancel performing on their behalf. The secular equivalent of Gothic? Perhaps a long, impossibly narrow, proscenium-style theatre.

18   The bottom line, with Gothic (and "neo-Gothic"!) church buildings: a) compromising, if not contradicting, a sense of "the priesthood of all believers"; b) compromising, if not contradicting, a sense of community; and c) compromising, if not contradicting, a sense of congregational participation.

19   Not till the Twentieth Century (in the reforms of Vatican II!) would these three principles of Luther and Calvin be realized in church architecture. And I haven't even mentioned triumphalism!

20   Granted: It should be possible, in spite of your architecture, to nurture these qualities in an assembly of worshiping believers – by constant, diligent teaching and preaching. But it would be an exhausting, up-hill battle: your building would be fighting you, every step of the way. "Architecture always wins," at least in the short term.

21   Alternatively, you could spend some time and energy and imagination – and probably but not necessarily some money – in re-designing your worship space. See my next Essay here, Part B, with its splendid example of The High Church of Scotland in Edinburgh, at paragraph 20...

22   Hence, I would not be among those who regard what we have come to call Gothic church architecture as a demonstration that the Middle Ages were some fabled, golden "Age of Faith." Ask Martin Luther about the Middle Ages as "the Age of Faith"!

23   Magnificent architecture? Certainly!   Marvels of unprecedented and audacious engineering? Unquestionably!   Spiderwebs of stone!

24   But -- Sorry! -- inadequate as Houses for Christian Worship. Inadequate, I would argue, even when they were first built.

25   (And yes: I've been there. I've visited all the sites I mention here, with the single exception of Dura Europas.)

26   I'll continue this tour next month, in Part B, and draw some further implications.

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