

Let's Not Spiritualize Our Church Building Projects

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Recently our local church decided to enlarge its building. More space is needed for worship and other activities, so the church plans to remodel its existing facility now, and later build a much larger sanctuary.

This is a common experience for growing churches. More space has to be found, either by expanding the existing building or by relocating to a larger building in a different location.

It is also very common, I have noticed, for a church to *spiritualize* its church building projects—that is, to describe the project glowingly in spiritual terms, as though this were God's project, not our own. The project may be described as a vision given by God, or even as “building God's house.” Often slogans like “Forward in Faith” or “Building God's Kingdom” are used. Call it Divine Hype.

This is dangerous. The Bible warns: “The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7:48); “the Lord of heaven and earth . . . does not live in temples built by hands” (Acts 17:24). Stephen quoted God's word in Isaiah 66:1, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?” (Acts 7:49). It got him in trouble.

The tabernacle, and later the Jerusalem temple, were prominent in the Old Testament. And yet the temple and its worship could come under judgment. God promised to be present in the temple—*as long as* the people were faithful. If the people were unfaithful, the temple would become an abomination. “Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (Jer. 7:4).

The New Testament teaches clearly that now, since Jesus has come and risen from the dead, the church itself—the community of God's people—is God's temple. A building can never be a church. It is never the dwelling place of God. God's Spirit fills the whole universe, and he dwells especially in faithful communities of believers. As Paul says, the church is “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Paul is talking about the Christian community, not a physical building, when he says that in Jesus Christ “the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21).

In the New Covenant through the blood of Jesus in the Holy Spirit, the “temple” and “building” language of the Old Testament is transformed into descriptions of the church as God's people. The basis for this is that Jesus himself is the true Temple which was “destroyed” and “raised again” in Jesus' own death and resurrection (See John 2:29). To be joined to Jesus is to be part of the true Temple.

The Danger of Spiritualizing

There is a natural tendency for churches to describe their building projects in spiritual terms, to raise money and promote the project as though it were God's revealed will. But this can be a form of idolatry, or of manipulating people.

Let us be honest and frank about our church building projects. We are not building God's house; we are building human-made structures which we hope will be of service to God and his work.

And beware the of temptations of ego. Pastors face subtle temptations to pride when they are promoting building projects. A larger or more elaborate church building gives pastors more status. They will be seen as successful—even if they are not really building the true church of Jesus Christ in the Spirit.

How then should church building projects be promoted? Not as if the project were God's revealed will, a Sinai vision, but simply as a matter of function. Church leaders should say, in effect: We think this project will help us be more effective in ministry. We are not claiming that this is a spiritual project. We know in fact that building projects can divert us from our primary mission. We hope we have the mind of Christ in this. But we don't claim this is God's project. It is not your spiritual duty to support this project, but if you feel it will help us as a church be more effective, please give it your support.

There is a hot place in hell for those who merchandise the gospel. Surely those who market the gospel as a product—and those who sacralize church building projects—will not inherit the kingdom of God.

If we are not careful, our church buildings can become idols, and the church itself can come under God's judgment.

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