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"The House of God"

- Ps 42:4

The Reformation of the 16th century undeniable brought us closer to the theology of Jesus. But Christian theology and practice has not been totally delivered from the superstition, magic and paganism of the Middle Ages. There are still more areas in which we need reform. For instance, we still think the church is a place and God is a spook who haunts church buildings.

Two thousand years ago Jews actually thought they were carrying the omnipresent God around with them in a box or a tent. Five hundred years ago medieval Christians thought they could capture the presence and blessing of God in a cathedral. Today both our speech and our actions betray our belief that God is a friendly ghost who likes to hang around in buildings with pews and pulpits.

Preachers daily bully the faithful into attendance at the services of the church by referring to the church building as "the house of God." So much do we believe that God lives in "the sanctuary" that we spend obscene amounts of money on activities buildings so we won't have ball-tossing, pizza-eating children running down the aisles of "God's house," disturbing God when we don't want God aroused.

We protect the sanctity of this holy place by refusing to allow divorced people to get married in "the sanctuary." Such pariahs are often wed in the preacher's study, just down the hall from the room where we keep God.

On a leaflet published by one congregation is a picture of the church building with the caption, "How beautiful if Thy dwelling place, O Lord." In another supposedly Protestant church the congregation heard a sermon about the sacredness of places and of buildings. Such is our un-Christian, un-Biblical theology of space and place.

"Ghostbusters," a popular 1984 film, was about a building in New York whose architectural design made it an antenna or a magnet for spiritual activity. That is one of the reasons we thought the film was so funny: Everybody knows you can't design buildings that draw spiritual activity like magnets. And yet sometimes Christians speak and act as though the steeple is the only antenna in town that will receive the presence and the message of God.

Our medieval attachment to buildings, where we presume to house God, robs the church of its status as the church. If church is somewhere you go, as in answer to the question "Where do you go to church?"-the church is not people but a place.

Jesus spoke of a day when we would no longer worship God in a place, but in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:21-23). Unfortunately, however, many Christians still worship God in a place. We will not be Reformed until we change our thinking.

Our belief in the sacredness of places and buildings also leads to the pre-Reformation elevation of the man in the pulpit to a special status above the rest of us, and to the denial of the doctrine of the

priesthood of all believers. There is a story about a little boy who was sitting in "the house of God" with his parents for the first time. He was awestruck by the size of the building, the distance between him and the high ceiling, and the spooky-sounding music the bulletin called "Organ Prelude." Then from somewhere, the little boy knew not where, the robe-clad preacher appeared and strolled solemnly toward his place near the pulpit. The little boy's eyes got big and his voice loud as he gasped, "Mommy, is that *God*?"

The little boy's startling profession of faith in the preacher's deity reveals something of the psychological effect that the medieval reverence for buildings has upon Christians when the building in question happens to be one we call "the house of God."

God is not a spook who haunts church buildings. Solomon understood this when he said that the heavens could not contain God (2 Ch 2;6). Stephen understood it when he said God does not dwell in houses made with hands (Ac 7:48).

Neither is the presence of God dependent upon or even more real in a sanctuary. Francis Shaeffer, evangelical author and theologian, said that "the early concept of the church had no connection with a church building." Until our concept of the church has no connection with a church building or with a place, we are not Reformed.

The 20th-century church is spending too much money on buildings. Not only the "Crystal Cathedral" in California but congregations in West Virginia and New York spend as much as a million dollars on buildings while benevolences and missions and other budget items go begging until the buildings are paid for.

We like to have nice buildings. Our buildings are our monuments to our middle-class lifestyle, and we build them not because they are a ministry necessity, but because they make our congregations more attractive to the middle class we hope to draw.

It is a telling fact that "white flight" is epidemic in the church just as it is in the secular world. When one of our nice buildings gets surrounded by black people, poor people and other people we don't want in our midst, we abandon that building and sense God's leading to go build another one in a nice, white middle-class neighborhood in the suburbs.

Buildings are not a ministry necessity. According to an article in *Christianity Today* several years ago, the fastest-growing congregation in New York City—a Christian and Missionary Alliance congregation—was growing on the strength of more than 40 home Bible studies. The church planned to have a home Bible study on every block in New York—all 39,000 of them. They won't need a big, umpteen-million-dollar church building if they minister from house to house like the first-century church did.

Let us replace pagan theology and practice with Christian theology and practice. We shall continue to hear about reform and rumors of reform. But what we hear are only rumors of reform. When the day comes that we no longer worship a ghost who haunts steepled buildings, that will be a Reformation indeed.

- J.H.

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