

7. JESUS NEVER SANCTIONED HOLY BUILDINGS OR HOLY OBJECTS

One of the most deeply ingrained religious instincts of man is the concept of the holy building. It probably originated from the fact that it is man's fate to die, and when man dies, the body has to be placed somewhere. These places of man's remains may have become the first holy places. The evidence we have from the earliest times is that people often built some sort of housing for the dead and some sort of memorial for remembering them. As the housings became more elaborate they developed into tombs and as the memorials became more elaborate they developed into temples. The tomb is the home of the deceased and the temple is the home of the deceased's god or gods.

All religions have holy edifices. For thousands of years, people in countless cultures have frequented and made pilgrimages to sanctuaries which have been constructed in a multitude of ways. Some were caves or grottos, some made of brick or stone, some hewn out of solid rock, some covered in sheets of gold, and some fashioned out of wood or marble. They have in common that they are usually places of sacrifice (therefore with altars) and worship; they represent the abode of a god or gods; they are administered by priests who act as mediators between the profane and the divine.

Jesus was well acquainted with temples, altars, and the work of priests. Though he grew up among the Jews, he and his family also had contact with Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and various Semitic peoples. All of them had temples. The Jews were unique in the fact that they had only one temple which was in Jerusalem. Were it to have stood alone, it would not have been a very impressive structure.

It was King Herod, the ruling monarch at the time of the birth of Christ who surrounded the Jewish temple with some of the most impressive architecture of the entire Mediterranean world. The portico of double-tiered columns adjacent to the Jewish temple was the second largest roofed construction of its day.

In spite of its regal trappings, the single temple of the Jews did not seem very awe-inspiring to the surrounding cultures. They all had hundreds of magnificent temples. Some of their cities housed multiple temples, any one of which might have outshone the Jewish temple.

The temple processions and celebrations of the neighboring peoples were also far more spectacular than anything the Jews ever performed. The services conducted at the great Artemis Temple in Ephesus, one of the wonders of the world, demonstrate how spectacular the temple sacrifices could be. It was not unusual for ships from far away lands to enter the port at Ephesus bringing dozens (hundreds in some cases) of bulls to be sacrificed on the altar in front of the temple. The altar itself was bigger than most temples. A long procession with music and decorated animals proceeded along a spectacularly paved street lined with marble columns. At the temple dozens of priests performed the ceremony. An elaborate system of linked pipes provided the thousands of gallons of water that were necessary to clean the altar.

Christianity continues the religious practice of building holy structures

It was true then and it is true today that the nations of the world are literally covered with temples, church buildings, cathedrals, chapels, and other holy structures. Whether a country be rich or poor, advanced or undeveloped, literate or illiterate, holy structures are often among the most impressive architectural creations of a land.

The traditions of Christianity have continued this practice with some of the largest and most ornate buildings in the world. St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican is often considered to be the largest edifice of its kind, but it is only one of many cathedrals in the world which come close to matching it.

The Crystal Cathedral is a Protestant megachurch in the city of Garden Grove in Orange County, California. The prominent architect Philip Johnson designed the main sanctuary building which was constructed using over 10,000 rectangular panes of glass. It can hold 2,900 worshipers. The initial estimated cost of the church was \$6 million, but the final cost was over \$17 million (about \$58 million in 2010 dollars).

Jesus Christ only recognized the one Jewish temple and the record shows that he was not at all happy with the way it was used in his day. The time came when he decided to demonstrate his displeasure and he proceeded to dump the cash reserves of the money lenders on the floor. In the confusion he drove out all of the animals that were being sold near the temple. Later, he also made it clear to his students that the temple of the Jews was going to be completely destroyed which was the case little more than a generation later. To the present day it has never been rebuilt.

After the death and resurrection of Christ, his closest students, the apostles, began to make students of others and put the teachings of Christ into the writings of scripture. Nowhere in their writings did they ever mention the need for a temple, a sanctuary, or any other sort of holy structure. Instead, they taught an amazingly different perspective. They said that the body of a believer was now the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. They said there was no need for sacrifices or altars or for priests to man them. They taught

that the individual follower of Christ took over all of these roles. Each believer was a priest, and each believer was supposed to be a living and holy sacrifice to God.

The result of what Jesus did was not a new religion with all the old structures, roles, and requirements. It was the end of all that and the beginning of the most intimate of relationships with the Son of God. Anything of any importance that any religion has ever tried to accomplish was accomplished in Christ. He tore down all barriers, removed all restrictions, and offered himself to any who would receive him.

It is no coincidence that the institutions of Christianity returned to the age-old practice of building holy structures which contain altars and are presided over by mediators who position themselves before the altars to perform sacred acts (sacraments). They have turned from the message of Christ and returned to the basic tenets of religions in which sanctuaries play a huge role. It's in these places where a god lives and the people must come to pay homage to him.

In Christianity a church is a building

In all of Christianity church buildings have come to be synonymous with the ecclesia of Christ. Children the world over have been led to believe by the leaders and followers of Christianity that a church is a building. One goes to church, marries in a church, hears the Word of God in a church, and celebrates the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper in a church. In each instance, *church* means a sanctuary of some sort.

Though many Christians would protest that *church* means more than a building, they nonetheless seldom differentiate in their use of the word so that generation after generation of young people continue to grow up understanding a church to be a building. Plus, although there are those who are aware that *church* means something completely different from a holy building, few can imagine a church existing without there being a corresponding sanctuary. In the end, for most people a church is a building or at least includes a building, even for those who profess to know better.

With the advent of Christ, God no longer lived in a house made with human hands. The entire religious world was turned upside down. Holiness could never again be associated with places or things or special people or events or days. The Holy One himself had come to earth, given himself as a once-and-for-all sacrifice. He made it possible for any man or woman to accept him into their lives. He brought his own holiness into the life of a believer. No one and no thing could ever surpass God's gift of His own son.

Temples and sanctuaries are designed to impress

Over the many centuries, people have come to build religious places of worship to impress both the worshipers as well as the worshiped. From small chapels to mighty cathedrals, they are supposed to provide a place where a god dwells who may be willing to lend an ear to a worshiper. To assure that both the people and the god are properly impressed, religious structures have always come with a huge price tag, not only in material resources, but in flesh and blood. Consider the human cost of the following:

- The pyramids in Egypt
- The temples in Greece
- The cathedrals in Europe
- The temple pyramids in the Americas
- The mission churches in the New World

What people had to build these? How many died in their construction?

It is instructive to analyze the history of almost any sanctuary. Consider, for example, the ruin of the Jemez Mission Church in New Mexico, just an hour north of Albuquerque. It was built in the seventeenth century and it dwarfed any dwelling of the surrounding peoples. The native American people around it lived in pit houses and simple constructions made of local materials. They worshiped in kivas which were basically large round holes in the ground.

The mission priests forced the native men to build the church. It was basically slave labor, and many died during the construction. They were told they were doing it for God. They were told it was a holy place. This has been the story of many peoples through the ages.

St. Stephens Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, required 120 years to build. It still requires many resources just to maintain its brick and mortar, its extensive art works, and its monstrous organ. It takes a small army of church personnel to run it. These are resources that cannot be made available for charity or human need. It all goes for the maintenance of an 800 year old building.

Such expenses can be multiplied around the world. In the US there are thousands of church buildings that serve no other purpose than celebratory ones. The great majority of them remain empty over 85% of the days of the year. They all required substantial outlays to build, decorate, and furnish, and require ongoing outlays to maintain, administer, insure, heat, and cool. The charitable outlays of the institutional churches who own these sanctuaries are a pittance compared to the initial investments and ongoing costs related to their holy buildings.

Traditional religious objects

Often associated with religious structures are the religious objects they house. One of the ways a person can detect the difference between Christianity and the original teaching of Christ is the importance that religious traditions give to objects. One can search the Christian scriptures and find absolutely no object that was ever considered holy or to be revered by any follower of Christ. His followers never carried around a piece of the cross; they never made a chapel out of his home; they never sought the manger in which he was born; they did not divide up his possessions as keepsakes or exhibit them as relics; they made no portraits of him; they carved no statues of him; they placed no value on any object associated with him.

This is quite remarkable considering the object worship that prevails in much of Christianity. The list is long. There are all those things associated with worship services such as sanctuaries, chapels, altars, paintings, statues, cups, bells, scepters, rings, necklaces, clothes, and, of course, the huge variety of crosses invariably present at most holy places.

Then there are the relics and burial places of past saints and important persons. They are the “sights worth seeing” of traditional Christianity and give a certain historicity to its various institutions. They give an air of hucksterism to it as well. One might think that modern man would not be so taken in by the medieval aura of relics but the opposite seems true. One need only observe the interest people have in the Shroud of Turin or the willingness of world leaders to kiss the ring of the pope to be reminded of the powerful role that holy objects play in the world of traditional Christian religion.

The only “things” the first generation of followers of Christ valued were his words. They were the true silver and gold that they possessed. The only time Paul ever mentioned any objects of value was when he requested that Timothy bring him a coat to stay warm and his writing materials. A coat and writing materials! These are the valued tools of a man who takes the words of Christ seriously. These are objects valued by a true student of Christ.

There are other objects of tradition as well that are also valued by adherents of Christianity. Among them are the diplomas and titles granted by religious institutions and the books written by honored individuals such as the *Institutes* by John Calvin or the *City of God* by Saint Augustine. Interestingly enough, the *Holy Bible* has become one of the chief objects of veneration in most of Christianity. An aged version of it can be seen lying near the altar in most churches. Its mere presence seems to have power in the minds of certain people. Oaths are taken on Bibles, and particularly ornate versions of it such as the *Book of Kells* in Ireland are counted among the most holy objects of Christianity.

Though the scriptures in the form of a Bible are a late development in Christianity, the Bible has become one of the two most foundational and non-negotiable symbols of Christianity. (The other being the sign of the cross.) For many people simply possessing a Bible or wearing a cross is enough to assure the benevolence of God.

Icons, mosaics, statues, frescos, paintings

It has often been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. It's a wise-sounding sentiment, but a closer examination shows that without words to accompany them, most pictures are of little communicative use. What is the picture of a man with a hammer in his hand, standing at the back door of a house supposed to mean? What thousand words does it replace? Is the man repairing the door or is he breaking in? Words first have to make the context of a picture clear. Only then can the picture make a contribution to the content.

There is no such thing as the superiority of art forms over words. Language is the very essence of man. It empowers him, and makes him the thinking, communicating creature that he is. At the very best, art is a subdivision of language, and in its most practical role, it is an enhancer of language.

It is undeniable, however, that pictures and indeed all works of art can powerfully influence the way people perceive their world. The scriptures teach that man looks on the exterior, but it is God who searches the thoughts of the heart. Fixation on externals has always been one of man's weaknesses. His attention is easily garnered by sights and sounds, whereas discovering the truth of a matter requires the work of locating reliable information and considering it in context.

The role of art in the traditions of Christianity

Some pieces of art—particularly religious art—become important in and of themselves. Initially, a painting or a statue may have been created only to convey some sort of spiritual message or portray some event or person in the scriptures. The art work is then allowed to take on the sacred nature of what it is depicting. It becomes a kind of mediator of holiness. Veneration is then given to the object itself.

It is also common for people to view *The Holy Bible* in this way which explains why Bibles are so often produced as works of art. The actual literary nature of the scriptures is replaced and divinity is ascribed to the object of the book itself. It has gone so far that Bibles are used as cultic objects in courts of law. Witnesses are asked to place their hands on a Bible while taking their oaths.

Artists often share in the sanctity of their works

A sidelight to the ascribing of holiness to works of art is the way in which the creators of the art are also often considered to be spiritual persons in their own right. The gifted artist is thought to have a kind of talent connection to the Almighty. Mozart was known as the “mouth of God” to some, even though there was nothing particularly spiritual or exemplary about the man himself.

Religious art is often understood to be part and parcel of the Kingdom of God on earth, and its praise often borders on worship. In church councils of old, the veneration of icons, after much controversy, was ultimately given a thumbs up from the ecclesiastical powers that be. Since that time both art and artists have been given high seats of influence in the institutions of Christianity.

There are legitimate ways art can be used

Art can be used in a way that it accompanies a text and becomes a rhetorical tag that functions as an illustration or an example. As such the art work is tightly tied to the text.

At the other extreme is what is often called “art for art’s sake.” It is detached from any meaningful information and its only value is the impression it makes on the viewer. As far as meaning is concerned, it can mean anything the viewer wants. A step up from art for art’s sake is art for decoration’s sake. It, too, has no particular normative value, but it does have a purpose and that is to beautify an area or a structure and thereby elicit an emotional response from the viewer.

Decorative art is used within various traditions of Christianity. It can be seen accompanying all kinds of religious architecture; it can be seen embellishing religious objects; it can be seen on the covers and pages of ornate Bibles. For the most part, however, Christian art has always been understood to be the illustrative kind. Most often it deals with persons and events described in the Jewish or the Christian scriptures. The spectrum covers everything from Adam and Eve and the creation of the world, to the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the last judgement. Such pieces of art assume that the viewer is familiar with the scriptural passages they illustrate.

The Jews have always been loathe to make any images that in any way could be understood to be of God or holy in any sense. The Second Commandment in the Jewish Law declares idolatry to be a sin: "You should not make of me any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You should not bow down to them, nor serve them... " (Exodus 20:4-5).

Though the veneration of icons, statues, relics, and symbols is widespread in Christianity, none of it can be observed among the followers of Christ in the scriptures. Among Christians of the Protestant persuasion the veneration of images and objects of art is not nearly as pronounced, but even among Protestants there is a heavy usage of Christian art in sanctuaries, in homes, and in literature. The problem with the great bulk of the paintings and depictions that are used lies not so much in the honor given to the images themselves as in their inaccuracy and their religious nature. The heavy use of the works of medieval and so-called classical artists in particular give the impression that Jesus and his students lived during the European Dark Ages. They often appear surrounded by angels with wings, saints with halos, and crowds of feudal peasants.

The fact that Jesus grew up and lived at a crossroads of the Hellenistic culture during the Pax Romana, one of the most advanced places and periods of human history, seems to have completely escaped many of the famous artists whose works are used over and over to illustrate Christian literature and to adorn the walls of sanctuaries, chapels, and cathedrals. This repeated use of the art of a particular period and by particular artists is a form of tradition that depicts the life of Christ. It could be called “icon-lite.”

The true nature of the times of Christ seems to be of little concern to most artists including the modern ones who have illustrated countless children’s Bibles and pieces of Sunday School literature. They show, for example, pictures of Jesus in white sheets, with long flowing hair, and carrying a lamb in his arms. Art of this sort does nothing to illustrate the life of Christ as it would have been. Instead, it only serves the purpose of propagating various myths of Christianity. There are a few artists and authors who have done a much better job of using art to accurately and informatively illustrate reference literature, but their contributions will never make a dent in the traditional art forms that are adored, honored, and dutifully reproduced in the workshops and publishing houses of Christianity.

The tradition of art as a help to the illiterate

The rationale behind the use of the visual arts in Christianity has always been that pictures are a great help to the illiterate. In earlier centuries the uneducated were often a large percentage of a church’s membership. There is, however, a deep-seated problem connected with this seemingly logical perspective. Part of the very essence of the message of Christ is the commission to be a student of his words and to make others his students. Jesus’ own example was one of patient work with a group of individuals. He demonstrated what it was to be a student, he expected them to become students, and he sent them to make students of others.

One of the remarkable things about God’s plan as it is revealed in the scriptures is the patience and preparation shown in all of its phases. Consider, for example, that in spite

of the thousands of people groups in the world who needed to know Christ, one saw in Jesus none of the hurry-hurry, use a crowbar-if-necessary approach to communicating that became a part of Christianity as it was practiced through the centuries. At many junctures the institutional church has devised ways and means to speed up the spread of Christianity. It even used military pressure and forced mass conversions to accomplish the Christianizing of the world.

Using pictures to replace the nurturing tasks such as teaching people to read is just another example of a human scheme in which Jesus' way is sidestepped in preference for a faster and more economical way of restructuring his message. It is, in fact, one of the operating principles of the institutional church to offer people simpler, quicker, and easier ways of doing things than were offered by Jesus himself. Substituting pictures for words, however, does not provide the help or the understanding that people really need.

It is always tempting to want to do great things for God and to label it as faith or great faith, even when it means leapfrogging over Jesus' example. His tempo seldom fits what others think it should be. The thinking goes like this: Why bother to help people understand the many pages of John's testimony (Gospel of John) which was written with the express purpose that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Son of God and have life in him. Instead, it's a lot easier to work up a short creed or a three-step presentation with a prayer at the end. In fact, why even bother with that. Why not just baptize babies and be done with it. Or even better, why not just write Christianity into the documents of a country and consider all the citizens Christian. That's even quicker.

Christianity has made ample use of all of these "better and faster" ways of communicating the message of Christ. Using the visual arts to avoid the weary road of turning followers into students of the scriptures is just another one of these tools to speed up the process.

The Christian traditions of art have played a big role in cementing certain images in the minds of many generations. For the most part, however, they are not images that have contributed to the better understanding of the words of Christ. Instead, they have served to move the life of Christ away from historical reality into the spheres of religion and legend. It is a process that has taken place in much the same way that the gilding, adornment, and elaborate binding of Holy Bibles have moved the scriptures out of the realm of historical documentation into the realm of the holy book for most people. It causes the Holy Bible to take on a life of its own as a holy object with the result that its writings cease to be perceived as the practical documents that the authors intended for them to be. In the same way, traditional Christian art has also taken on a life of its own: From the ornamentation of sanctuaries to the veneration of icons, all phases of the "objectifying of the holy" can be observed in the art of Christianity.

Another reason given to justify the veneration of objects of art has been based on the creator activity of God. Here's the reasoning: God created the concrete world and images of Himself, therefore people, too, should be creative and make images that honor Him. This is an interesting rationalization that is typical of theologians. The fact that the Jewish Law forbids the making of images and the fact that Jesus never commissioned the making of images has no traction with those who espouse this view. The fact that God's creations were living and dynamic also seems to be of no consequence for them. Instead of accepting the instructions of the scriptures and the example of Christ, the institutions of Christianity have always promoted the adoration of dead images, the glorification of the artists who make them, and the preference for artistic expressions that enhance the traditions of Christianity rather than the realities of Christ.