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WE CARE

Tim O'Hearn

I see a man who is in need of help. I see that he is not a-ware of Je-sus. He's
O, there are ma-y peop-le in the world Who live, but of the love of God are heed-less. It
I once was with-out Je-sus, lost in sin. I came to him and then he changed my sto-ry. I
poor in spir-it and he's out of love. For him to live that way is simp-ly need-less. We Care be-cause we
is my ob-li-ga-tion, up to me, To show them just how much they're need-ing Je-sus.
want to tell the world; I want to shout I'm saved, and now I will re-flect his glo-ry.
must. We Care be-cause of Je-sus. We Care be-cause we trust In Je-sus' pow'r to save us.

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We Care Ministries is a ministry begun by Larry and (my cousin) Peggy West with the focus on teaching the gospel of Christ and with the goals of saving souls, training soul winners, and leaving churches edified.

Two years ago I wrote the melody and words of this song for Peggy's birthday. Although Peggy is a much better arranger than I, as testified by some of her published arrangements (*The Greatest Commands, What Will You Do With Jesus*, etc.), I arranged the song for her birthday in 2011.

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A TRADITION OF BUILDING

People love to visit the cathedrals of Europe. They are magnificent buildings, even in the pictures for those of us who can't see the originals. With what has been said recently about the serious decline of practical Christianity in Europe, I suspect that on any given Sunday there are more tourists in attendance than congregants. The equivalent of millions of dollars were spent on buildings that are now essentially empty. And yet, it is not just the great cathedrals that suffer this fate. The church buildings in America are similarly empty.

Those who argue for the use of instrumental music in worship often point out that we in the churches of Christ use church buildings, which were not authorized or known in the first century. The (faulty) argument is that the instruments are no different an aid to worship than a building or a song book. Even as spurious as that argument may be, they have a point. Church architecture is a tradition, albeit a longstanding one, and nothing more. As a tradition, it is something that bears some examination to see if it serves a valid purpose.

Practically impractical

The argument is often made that people expect a nice building. If the building in which the church meets is

For eight hours a day a building designed to hold hundreds is used by one to three people.

run down, or appears to be thrown together at the last minute, then people are likely to think less of the church than they would in a finer building. That may actually be true, although there are some people that would never come to an assembly if it were held in a standard church building. The flaw in this argument is that if people are coming for the building, then they are coming for the wrong reason. If a fancy building is what draws people, rather than Christ doing the drawing, they will fall away much more easily. Buildings are susceptible to natural or unnatural disasters. If it is destroyed, then those who came for the building will not return. Those who came to be part of the body of Christ do not need a building.

The average building among the churches of Christ is used about five hours a week (Sunday morning Bible classes and assembly, Sunday evening assembly, and Wednesday or Thursday Bible class). In some

denominations the total time is less. Even some congregations of the Church of Christ have gone to small-group meetings except on Sunday morning. A few congregations use the building, other than as an office for the preacher, more often. I knew a congregation in North Chicago that had something going in their building every night of the week, but they were a brilliant exception.

Some people object to the thought of a church being run like a business (although we should be good stewards of God's money), but how many successful businesses will go out and purchase a building and keep it closed all but one day a week? Would they not rather find a place to rent for a short term? And yet we run our churches like unsuccessful businesses. Would it not actually be more cost effective to rent a theater or school building for the one day and one evening that most churches use their buildings, and use the rest of the money for things that will actually bring people to Christ? People do not follow Jesus because they happened to pass a nice church building and stopped in. No, people come because somebody spoke to them. It would be more effective to spend the money on radio, television, or internet outreach. It would be better, even, to hire a preacher whose whole purpose was the biblical model of teaching the lost rather than preaching to the congregation of the saved.

Often the main purpose of a building, from a practical standpoint, is to house an office for the preacher and maybe the church secretary. For eight hours a day we have massive buildings designed to hold hundreds, even thousands of people, and yet they are used by one to three people. We have the expense of lighting and heating or cooling a building on the off chance that someone will come for counseling or to request some food. If we also provide a house for the preacher, it seems more cost effective to just add an office to the house.

There is an alternative to meeting in a rented hall. Some congregations have made their buildings practically practical; ideas like using the classrooms for schools, or turning the building into a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Other ideas might keep the building unoccupied during the day, but busy at night. These ideas might include Bible classes (for the unchurched as well as the congregation); dependency meetings with a strong leaning toward teaching the word of God; activities for youth, singles, older adults, or any other group within or outside the church. The possibilities are endless, and have a business-friendly bottom line. The more active a church is, and the more the building is used (especially for programs for people outside the church), the more people will come to Christ. An active church is a growing church. Most importantly, the building will be used to teach others, to

reach outward. Instead of being primarily for the use of the congregation, perhaps the expense of the building should be poured into using it to reach the world.

Now, some might object that some of these things border on “selling” in the church. They point to the cleansing of the Temple, where Jesus said, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.” (Matt 21:13) They fail to realize that the church building is merely a tradition. It is not the Temple, of which Jesus spoke. Nor is it a sanctuary or holy place. It is a convenience. I object to using the assembly, including the announcements (another tradition) for selling, although I violate my conscience on this matter frequently. But the church is not the building. If we can use it to benefit others, and to teach God’s word, then it is only a tool, as some say.

What do you look at?

If we must have church buildings, and some people will always say we must, then I propose that we reevaluate the architecture of the building, particularly the auditorium (which some call the sanctuary). Almost every Christian church building I have seen, in almost every denomination, uses the high church model in the auditorium. That is, the congregation faces forward so all they can see of the other congregants is the backs of their heads. This allows the preacher to occupy (hide behind) a pulpit. Perhaps it allows for a band or chorus, in those denominations who use such things, to have a stage for their performance. (Yes, I call it for what it is: a performance for the congregation.) It is little wonder, then, that most people find the worship unfulfilling, or even downright boring. There is no human interaction. Even if we sing as a congregation, we are basically singing to ourselves and God, rather than teaching and admonishing one another (Col 3:16).

In the congregation where I currently worship, if we move outside for a day people do not set up their chairs in rows; they naturally form a circle where they can see each other. The Jewish people knew this ages ago. Synagogues are built around a central *bima* (platform) where the cantor and readers lead the congregation. People actually look at each other’s faces, not the backs of their heads. How much more might we interact with one another, or even just know one another, if we made this one small change to our church architecture? How much more natural would such an assembly feel? We might even increase our attendance if people felt like the congregation was less cold and unfriendly.

Of course, this would call for a different model of preaching. The teacher might have to interact with his audience. It might result in shorter, or maybe even longer, sermons. Maybe the preacher might even have to make his sermons interesting, using object lessons or videos.

Technology

That brings up another, controversial, aspect of church buildings. How much technology is acceptable? If a congregation uses a projector, the circular model might require the expense of two or more systems and screens. Should a congregation, a preacher, a song/worship leader even use a projector?

There are some congregations that use technology in a way that some rock bands would envy. The assembly has a light show, multimedia preaching, and surround sound. Some people are drawn by the flashiness; more are driven away. Some feel that it becomes more of a performance than a worship.

Does that mean that we should not use technology? Not necessarily. Projecting the words of a song, or short videos to go along with the sermon may enhance the worship. Visitors unfamiliar with the songs may actually be able to understand what we are trying to teach by them. Men, especially, learn visually; a video or

The congregation faces forward so all they can see of the others is the backs of their heads.

even an outline of the sermon will allow such people to retain the message more readily.

With the advent of the Bible.is app, and others, people are as likely to read their Bibles from an electronic device as from paper. They can follow along with the readings in many different languages, thus helping multilingual congregations. Many people will use a smart phone as their primary Bible. Some of us, however, are still in the wi-fi age. And yet, most church buildings are in the stone age. A number of people in any congregation would benefit from the church using a wireless hot spot. The network could be turned off except for the assemblies or classes. For those really worried about security, the password to a secure network could be announced at the beginning of the assembly and changed for every assembly.

Technology is here, for better or worse. If we are going to use church buildings for teaching, then they should be equipped with certain technologies. When Jesus sent us out into the world he did not limit us to camels and handwritten scrolls. Some people deride the Amish and Mennonites for being stuck in an earlier age, not realizing that the only difference between those groups and them is the age in which they are limiting themselves.

Church buildings are a tradition. They can be good or bad. Mostly, though, they need to be used, and used to teach God’s word. Otherwise they are a traditional waste of money.

IT GRIEVED HIM

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondswoman and her son: for the son of this bondswoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. (Gen 21:9-11)

People read this passage frequently and usually just pass over the last verse. At best they make assumptions about it, but few people stop to consider, "which son?" After all, both Isaac, Sarah's son, and Ishmael, Hagar's son, were his sons.

Obviously Sarah did not see it that way. She very specifically says "this bondswoman and *her* son." Probably she does not want to remind Abraham that Ishmael is his son as well, or not wanting to acknowledge that to herself. (Sarah seems to have been a very self-deceptive woman.) Maybe she is engaging in a little word play many people use. How often do we hear, when a child is misbehaving, one parent say to the other, "take care of your son/daughter"? If the child does something wonderful it is "my child," but when the child is exceptionally bad it is "your child." In this case, Sarah leaves the one parent, Abraham, out of the issue entirely and merely calls Ishmael this bondswoman's son.

Ishmael was fourteen years older than Isaac, and Isaac was probably old enough that mocking would be understood. Ishmael undoubtedly knew Isaac was the heir. Nevertheless, he did what many an older sibling has done; he mocked his younger half-brother. If he did know that Isaac was the heir, then he did a very foolish thing. You don't make fun of the one who will one day have power over you. But Ishmael was probably just being a

teenager, tired of a much younger brother. He mocked. Sarah objected. Abraham grieved.

The *pshat* (clear explanation) of this passage is that it was Ishmael to whom the verse refers, and Abraham grieved over his older son. Many a parent has been sorry to have to punish a foolish or unthinking child. Abraham comes home and finds that his son has done a very unfortunate thing, and he will have to punish him. The way the passage is phrased, however, indicates he was grieved by the degree of the punishment. Sarah demanded that the mother and child be sent away, which meant almost certain death. This was grievous because Ishmael was his son. Abraham was known as a peaceful and compassionate man. He would have preferred a less harsh punishment, and certainly one that did not require sending the mother away as well. If he was grieved because of Ishmael, it was probably at having to send the lad away. After all, when you have your son with you for almost twenty years it is hard to part, and even harder to force that parting.

Maybe, though, there is another way of looking at the verse. One *remez* (hidden view) of the verse may be that Abraham was grieved on account of his heir, Isaac. But why would sending Ishmael away cause Abraham to be grieved for Isaac? Even if Abraham was not gifted with true prophecy, it wouldn't take a prophet to see the answer to this question. What Sarah was blinded to was that by sending away Hagar and Ishmael she was creating strife for her own son and his descendants forever. There are many long-standing rivalries in the world: Cubs-Cardinals or Yankees-Mets in baseball, Cowboys-Redskins in football or American history, Hatfields-McCoys. But no rivalry in America can compare with the rivalry through the centuries between Ishmael and Isaac. Even today that rivalry continues. And that is grievous to Abraham.