

"THE STONES CRY OUT"
A Theological Tour of
The Independent Presbyterian Church
Of Savannah

One hundred and seventy years ago the first sanctuary on this site was completed. The building which stands here today is a near replica of that first one, destroyed by fire in 1889, and rebuilt in 1892. The question which I would like to pose for our consideration is this: why did those responsible for this edifice build as they did? Why is the architecture as it is? Are there reasons for the arrangement of the stones?

"Architecture for churches is a matter of gospel," say Donald J. Bruggink and Carl H. Droppers, authors of *Christ and Architecture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

Moreover,

"A church that is interested in proclaiming the gospel must also be interested in architecture, for year after year the architecture of the church proclaims a message that either augments the preached Word or conflicts with it" (p.1).

The Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah stands as a nearly perfect example of Protestant, and especially Reformed architectural design. The original architect of the first church on this site was John Holden Greene of Providence, R.I., designer of the First Congregational Church of Providence, a man trained in the New England Puritan style of church architecture. Everywhere one looks one sees structural reinforcement of the ecclesiastical heritage of the builders of this church, the heritage of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

The Reformation

At the time of the Reformation the Protestant leaders altered the architecture and furniture of the Roman Catholic churches which they inherited. Never were the changes merely matters of style. Statues were torn down, altars were replaced with tables, and pulpits were erected because of the theological convictions of the Reformers, and because they "were acutely conscious of the power of architecture and the constant message that it held for the people." "It might fairly be said," say Bruggink and Droppers, "that the Word of God challenged the architecture of Medieval Romanism, and the Reformed responded with an attempt to transform these inherited buildings into structures more suitable for biblical worship" (p. 2,3).

What kind of changes were made? We may begin with the focal point of the sanctuary. The fundamental theological statement that a church makes with its design begins there. What was to be central to sanctuary and, therefore, to the worship of the church? Gaze to the front of any church and you will quickly understand what that church is essentially about.

Let us, then, conduct a guided theological tour of this magnificent sanctuary. Though we have no surviving documents of the builders themselves, their work itself speaks volumes of the theological framework from which they built, and which we continue to embrace today.

Pulpit Versus Altar

Open the front doors of the IPC and walk down the center aisle and what do you see? The dominant feature of this building is unmistakably its remarkable pulpit. Why is there such a massive pulpit?

The early Reformers were convinced that the focal point was not to be the altar, as it was in the Medieval church and remains in Roman Catholic churches today, but the pulpit. This was accomplished in several different ways. Sometimes the pulpit was moved to the center, sometimes it remained on the side but was elevated and enlarged, sometimes a large sounding board was added, sometimes it was the seating of the people that was moved, to positions around the pulpit. The point in each case was to give the pulpit an enhanced prominence so as to make it the central architectural feature of the sanctuary, or at least of the seated congregation. When they built new churches, the Reformers and their successors built so-called "auditory churches," churches made for preaching and listening.

One should not think that in making these changes that the Protestants were introducing something novel. Central pulpits are found in the first formal church buildings, the basilicas of the third century. According to A.L. Drummond, in *The Church Architecture of Protestantism*, the Reformation's central pulpits "restored the real arrangement of the primitive churches." In the early basilicas as well as gothic churches before the ninth century, "there can be no doubt that the bishop always preached or exhorted, in the primitive times, from his throne in the centre of the apse..." (p. 206).

Still, we ask, why did they do it? Because they believed that the preaching of the word is the chief means of grace. Without slighting the sacraments, the Reformers, nevertheless, understood that the word must accompany them in order to illumine their meaning. Grace is mediated through the understanding. The word, then, is indispensable to the sacraments in a way in which they are not indispensable to the word. Calvin cites Augustine's claim that the word "makes" the elements a sacrament, and adds, "the right administering of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the word" (*Institutes* 4:14:4).

It was the Apostles who said that "faith comes from hearing the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). Paul said, "God was well pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). It is the word of God that is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). "Preach the word," Timothy, and with him all future generations of the church were charged (2 Tm 4:2). The Prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, the Apostles were all primarily preachers. Throughout the history of the church it has been when the preached word has received emphasis that the church has prospered. Architecturally, this priority should be evident. The pulpit should take the central place.

In addition, the large, central pulpit, such as you see in this sanctuary speaks eloquently of the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. The Reformers were anxious not ever to be found guilty, like Jesus said of the Pharisees, of "invalidating the word of God by your tradition" (Mk 7:13). Preaching is central to the life of the church because Scripture alone is authoritative. All matters of faith and practice are to be determined by the unerring, infallible word of God.

This is a point which today's wandering, microphoned, pulpitless preacher misses, and in doing so draws attention to himself, and his personal authority, which our forefathers would have found offensive. The preacher ascending the steps of IPC's great pulpit is greeted by a brass plaque which reminds him of his task: "Sir we would see Jesus." The design of IPC demands recognition of the primacy of preaching, and the prominence not of the preacher, but of the Scripture alone.

Altar Versus Table

Accompanying this change came an altered form of Communion. As one looks around the sanctuary one might ask, "Where is the altar?" The answer is, there isn't one. The Reformation replaced altars with tables. The Lord's Supper is a meal, not a sacrifice, said the Reformers. Christ's presence is a spiritual presence with which we have "communion," not a physical presence which is re-offered in sacrifice upon an altar. Christ's sacrifice was once for all, sufficient for all, and never to be repeated (Heb 7:27; 10:10,12). Consequently an altar sends the wrong message. It calls into question the sufficiency of the cross of Christ. It creates the impression that His sacrifice must be repeated, or supplemented. Altars then were removed and replaced with common tables, which were placed to the side, or in the front, beneath the pulpit. The tables were cleared of everything not having to do with the meal (eg. candles, crosses), and anything suggestive of the enactment of a sacrifice. Through these changes the Reformers' conviction of *sola gratia*, *sola fides*, *solo Christo*, salvation by the grace of God alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, was given architectural expression.

Further, the tables were brought forward, and thereby made accessible and visible rather than remote, fenced off from the laity, and shrouded in mystery as were the altars. The family of God was symbolically being welcomed to the Lord's Table. The "priesthood of all believers," a cardinal Protestant doctrine was being affirmed.

How far forward were they brought? One quickly notices the size of the central aisle. Why is the aisle so wide? Because tables must go there! From the time of the Reformation until the 19th Century the practice in the Church of Scotland was actually to seat the people at long tables for the Lord's Supper. When this practice was first abandoned (for convenience sake), the General Assembly condemned the change, and only after the passage of many years was it finally accepted. Eventually the new, communion in the pews, completely supplanted the old practice. The strength of old way was its clear portrayal of the meaning of Communion: it is a meal to which all of God's people, clergy and laity, are equally welcome to come, and feed upon Christ by faith. For this reason, it continues to be observed in this manner at IPC.

Baptismal Font

Next one might notice the baptismal font. The baptismal font was moved from the door of the Medieval church to the front of the Reformed church. The doctrine of baptismal regeneration placed the efficacy of the sacrament in its right performance, apart from living faith, and had led to the practice of private baptisms. The Reformers brought the font to the "face" of the congregation, to be administered in the context of the living church, where all might see and hear (and believe!) as believers and their children were initiated into the body of Christ. There it stands, week after week, as a reminder of the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, of our baptism into Christ's death, and our resurrection with Him to newness of life.

It is a "font" and not a pool because of the fundamental meaning of baptism. Baptism symbolizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is "poured out" upon the people of God, as Joel prophesied and Peter claimed was fulfilled at Pentecost (Joel 2:28ff; Acts 2:17ff). We therefore pour water as a symbol of the outpouring, or baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Cor 12:13).

At this font both believers and their children are baptized. The Reformers and our builders believed in the privileged status of covenant children in the church. The promise made to Abraham, "I will be a God to you and to your children," was expressed in circumcision, by which male infants were initiated into the covenant community (Gen. 17:7ff). This promise was repeated by Peter at Pentecost, "This promise is for you and your children" (Acts 2:39), and receives expression in the initiation of infants into the covenant community through baptism. The architecture of IPC reflects our belief in the God of the covenant, the God who loves our children.

Thus, the worshiper in a Reformed church looks forward and sees symbols of the means of grace. At the center is the pulpit. It is flanked by the font and table. These God-ordained means of communicating Christ are, and should be alone visible.

Even the arrangement of the pews reinforces this architectural message. Look at the lay-out of the congregational seating. Do you see how the pews, both downstairs and in the balcony wrap-around the pulpit, font and table? The Reformers immediately and instinctively altered the pattern of congregational seating. No longer were the people to sit in parallel lines, gazing forward at mystery of priest and altar. Rather they saw the church as the "called out" and assembled people of God, gathered around the means of grace. Thus at IPC the wall pews are angled, and the side pews and balcony pews surround the pulpit on three sides. The people are thereby treated not as spectators of a special priesthood's performance, but as members of the family of God, in fellowship with Christ, and with one another, gathered before the symbols of Christ's presence.

Choir and Organ

Your next question might be, where is the choir and organ? To see them, one must walk into the center of the sanctuary and turn around. What are they doing back there?

The 16th Century Reformers encountered the split chancel choir, a practice which dates to 1130 and the innovations of Anselm at Canterbury. Prior to this choirs sat toward the front of the sanctuary (the eastern end of the cathedral nave), but with the people. The Reformation moved the choir to the back balcony or lacking such, to the rear or side of the sanctuary, to a position they called a "singing pew." The purpose of this move was to shift emphasis from a "beautifully sung service" provided by a religious elite to congregational singing. Protestant choirs then, according to Bruggink and Droppers were, "primarily to assist the congregation in its singing" (p. 393). The best position for doing so was in the back. In addition, the choir was thereby identified with the congregation, not with the clergy, and was not given a clerical status. This practice was true of Reformation era churches and was provided for architecturally in the centuries that followed. It can be seen in the churches of Scotland and Holland, those built by Sir Christopher Wren following the great London fire (1669), and the Colonial churches in America. The rear choir-gallery was typical of all Protestant churches until the 19th Century.

Organs likewise, when retained, were left in the back of the sanctuary, where they had been for several centuries. There, they do not compete architecturally with the means of grace. Like the choir, the organ was to assist the congregation in its praise of God, a task best done from behind.

Why is it, then, that so few churches today are designed in a manner consistent with Reformation principles? First, it should be noted that many, if not most in Europe are. It is only American Protestants who have so completely lost sight of their heritage. Second, Americans tend to be non-theological, and have given little thought to the meaning of their architecture. Third, there are historical reasons.

The split-chancel choir was revived in Protestant churches through the influence of the Church of England's "high-church" Oxford movement of the mid-1800's. Its leaders provided for the return of the choir to the Medieval position between the people and the restored "altar." What is regarded by many as "traditional" Episcopal architecture was actually a 19th Century innovation, inconsistent with Protestant, and even Anglican practice for 200 years. But it was consistent with the Roman Catholic leanings of the Tractarians. This architectural fashion has been unthinkingly mimicked by others since, without regard for the displacing of the pulpit, the restoration of the altar, and the undesirable distance it puts between the people and the Lord's table.

In recent years a "theater plan" of choir placement has become popular in "low-church" circles, that is, the placement of the choir behind the pulpit, in tiers. This, too, is inconsistent with Protestant doctrine. When so placed, the choir, with, perhaps, the organ pipes, "becomes the most significant visual element in the front of the church." Bruggink and Droppers comment that this practice is less than a century old and that "throughout the prior nineteen centuries of Christ's Church the choir was placed in almost every position throughout the church room except above and behind the pulpit" (p. 395)! They go so far as to call it "choirolatry." It is, for the heirs of the Reformation, an unthinking challenge to the prominence that ought only be given to the pulpit, table, and font, as the symbols of the means of grace. Yet today this arrangement is found in the vast majority of American Protestant churches.

How has this come about? Bruggink and Droppers cite the testimony of Joseph Edwin Blanton, of "wide architectural and musical erudition," saying,

"It is the ...desire of congregations to be entertained, I believe, which has fixed, more or less, the location of the choir in the chancel" (p. 398).

They see a connection between the innovations of the high-church party and the low-church in this respect.

"In low-church Protestantism, the pulpit may be central, but the parishioner, like his high-church counterpart, goes to church with the expectancy of the drama of the service, except that his drama is not one of ecclesiastical awe and mystery but of a performance by choir and minister in which the personalities involved are given the opportunity to play a larger part in relation to their function in the service" (p. 398).

They trace this development to the late nineteenth century revivals, when preachers (such as Moody and Sunday) and choirs were viewed more as performers on stages than servants and worshipers of Christ. In less than 100 years this aberrant fashion has swept the field and become the norm among

Protestants, and in so doing obscures the clear message communicated by the older Protestant architecture.

The IPC stands clearly on the side of the older tradition. The choir and organ are in the back, where they not only do not compete with the pulpit, but also send the clear message that they are there to worship God, not entertain the congregation.

Art and Symbols

Look around now at the interior of the sanctuary, not looking at any particular item, but taking it all in at once. What is missing? The Reformers removed most of the statues, art, and symbols from their churches. For them, the temptation toward idolatry, warned of in the 2nd Commandment, was too great to allow their continued presence. Worship, to be God pleasing, must be "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23,24), and must be unaided by any physical objects except those ordained by God. Our hearts must be moved by the Holy Spirit, not by beautiful art; by the beauty of holiness not the holiness of beauty. Since God had ordained only baptism and the Lord's Supper as external symbols of grace, no others could be permitted. Thus in the Protestant churches of Europe and Britain, and the Colonial churches of America, one will find a nearly complete absence of pictures, stained glass, candles, icons, symbols, crucifixes, and even crosses.

The Reformers spoke of the "regulative principle" of worship. The elements of true worship are those commanded by God, and those alone. It is not for man to devise new ways to worship. We are not to "add to nor take away from" His command (Deut 12:32). "The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men...or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture," says the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (XXIII.I). Innovation has no place here. God alone determines how He is to be worshiped, and He communicates that manner of worship which pleases Him in His word. Their sanctuaries therefore were places of simple, unadorned beauty. The plain beauty of IPC is a reminder of the regulative principle, and the necessity of spiritual worship.

Elder's Seats

Finally, come back to the pulpit and note the chairs placed beneath it. What are they doing there? Many of the Reformed churches added special seats, or an "elder's pew," for the session of the church. Ours is not a congregational/democratic form of government, where authority rests in the mass of the people. Nor is it a episcopal/hierarchical form of government, where authority rests in individual clergymen. Ours is a representative government, where the people elect their officers, but who, once elected, do have genuine authority. These elders are responsible for the discipline of the church, both in maintaining the purity of the doctrine preached, and the purity of the conduct of the membership. Therefore they were to be "on duty" on Sunday morning, actively fulfilling the duties of their office. Bruggink and Droppers comment:

"Truly, no church order has elevated the elder to a higher plane of responsibility than the Presbyterian. Where else has the elder been given the responsibility of oversight, not only of the conduct of the members of the Church, including fellow officers and ministers, but also of the preaching of the Word...Here the elders are to sit, with their Bibles and their Standards, exercising their responsibility for the right preaching of the Word" (p.339,340).

Thus even the Presbyterian form of church government received architectural expression. The elders were placed where they might listen to the doctrine preached, as well as observe the attentiveness of the congregation. In the Puritan churches of New England the officers of the church either poked with a stick or tickled with a feather those who dozed during the sermon. There is no evidence that this was ever done here (though the seats do face the congregation!), nor is it a practice that commends itself to us, but it does give an indication of the importance of the office of elder to the early Presbyterian churches. We continue to hold the office of elder in high esteem today.

While many churches give what Bruggink and Droppers call "a garbled account of the gospel" in their architecture, this is not so in the case of the founders and builders of the IPC of Savannah. It stand as a supreme example of a church that is Reformed according to the Scriptures. At the center is the Pulpit, the unambiguous focal point of the sanctuary, symbolic of the primacy of the preached word of God. At its side are the sacraments, symbolized by the font and table. Beneath are the elders, under the authority of the word, and yet responsible for right doctrine and practice. Together the three primary means of grace, administered by men ordained to do so, stand devoid of competitors. No choir, no organ, no organ pipes, no symbols. They are in the back, assisting the congregation in its praise of God, leaving the word and sacraments, the means by which Christ is communicated to sinners, stand unobstructed and undiminished before the eyes of God's worshiping people.