

ARC 2017 – Sacred Space for the 21st Century: the Embodiment of Human Experience

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Introduction:

- **[SLIDE]** Good afternoon everyone. My name is Amy Lemke, I am a fourth year student taking a double major in Music and Christian Studies here at Ambrose and today I am presenting my paper entitled 'Sacred Space for the 21st Century: The Embodiment of Human Experience'.
- **[SLIDE]** The built environment is a fundamental aspect of human life and for the Christian community it can be as ornate as a Gothic cathedral or as simple as an arrangement of chairs set up in a field. **[SLIDE]** These environments are curated with many key features in mind so that they may serve the mission of the Church and the vision of the congregation.
- Sacred space involves seemingly benign logistical features like seating and sound amplification; those components of church life that play a background role in shaping a community of Christ-followers.
- Secondly, sacred space is the environment where people may spiritually attune themselves to God and have some experience of divine mystery.
- Finally, sacred space has temporal implications, in some cases serving as a monument that stands through the passage of time, commemorating those who have gone before, marking the place of believers in that town or city, and shaping the spiritual life of future generations.
- My paper argues that the core purpose of sacred space is to serve the mission of the Church, that is, for God to be glorified in his people through their worship, edification and outreach.¹ **[SLIDE]** In order to produce the kinds of sacred spaces that will facilitate the mission of the Church in the 21st century, church leaders should take the following three areas into account: human corporeality, spirituality and temporality.

[SLIDE] -- I will be using a church throughout this presentation as an example. The chapel team and I visited this church in Grand Rapids, MI back in January when we were attending the Calvin Worship Symposium.

I. Corporeality **[SLIDE]**

- **[SLIDE]** Corporeality has to do with the physical nature of humanity – an obvious aspect of our existence. When we arrive in a church building we touch the handle of the door, we speak to people as we enter, we smell the incense of the room (or perhaps just the upholstery on the pews), we hear the reverberation of sound through the room, and we taste the elements of Eucharist. The physical aspects of the service are certainly the most immediate, and perhaps also the most accessible to people of any level of development or capability in the congregation.
- In the last five chapters of Exodus we learn of the incredible detail that went into the physical aspects of the tabernacle. In Exodus 35-40 we read of the assembly of the finest craftsmen, the prescribed materials prepared and gathered, and upon completion the place was anointed and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. The God of such sensory elements as cloud and fire was present among his people amidst a highly material and multi-sensory structure.

- The material world has been a controversial theological topic for many centuries. Augustine (354-430), influenced by Neo-Platonism, viewed the body as a lower part of the human self. Therefore, humans must transcend the body in order to be united with God. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) reformed this view in the Middle Ages with a more positive view of the natural realm, arguing that while nature requires perfecting from God, God also uses nature as his tool.³
- If there is an over-emphasis on the building, we can slip into the same problems as the cathedral builders who constructed those buildings at enormous cost to the community. If there is an under-emphasis on the building, we may be slipping into degrees of Gnosticism, where bodily existence is subordinated in favor of attaining spiritual knowledge.⁶ The Gnostic is alienated from the sensual world in favor of a transcendent realm.⁷ An orthodox view of anthropology will entail a balanced fusion of both soul/spirit and body.⁸ If we desire to maintain this balanced view of what it means to be human, we should uphold the value of the built environment and the role that sacred space plays in shaping Christian life.
- Practical Implications [**SLIDE**]
 - **Accessibility:** In order for the 21st century church to affirm the role of the body in sacred space, I would suggest features like **ramps** that allow accessibility for people with **disabilities**, allowing all people to all parts of the church not just some. This is an imperative, powerful statement for the church to make.
 - **Nature:** the use of **earthy colors** that are vibrant and not bland can add to the vitality of the environment and also connect to the structure's natural surroundings. **Windows** can connect us to **nature** by enabling us to see out into our world while we worship rather than blocking us from it. Or they can simply allow sunlight to stream in and flood the space.
 - The most effective and widely applicable feature for the 21st century church is a **semi-circular arrangement of church seating** and even full circle/in-the-round seating. Seating arrangement is one of the most important features to relate to corporeality because it is directly connected to the body! Also, in a more abstract sense, it unifies the body of Christ in one configuration and directs them towards a focal point (i.e. cross, altar, pulpit). This arrangement also facilitates a deeper, more intimate sense of connection between congregation members because they can see each other as they worship.
 - According to Michael J. Crosbie, this feature is already being applied in a wide variety of Christian traditions; this feature does not need to be limited to one denomination.⁹
 - *The incorporation of Christian persons through seating has the symbolic potential to mirror the unification of the body of Christ and thus it is an essential feature for sacred space in the 21st century.*
 - EXAMPLES? [**SLIDES**]
 - Corporeality should be embraced as a gift from the God who himself became flesh and dwelt among us, as one of us. Since corporeal existence is central to the Christian narrative (not to mention Christology), we must have an appreciation of the material in our thoughts on sacred space.

II. Spirituality [**SLIDE**]

- [**SLIDE**] While we affirm the corporeal nature of humanity, we must also affirm what I will refer to as the spiritual nature. This side of human nature is mysterious and difficult to explain and Christian denominations range in their views on the expression of the human spirit and its interaction with the Holy Spirit. The validity of charismatic experience is a very large topic that deserves a separate paper

devoted to it, so for this paper I am assuming the reality of both the human spirit and the charismatic experience as aspects of Christian life *today*. With this belief in mind, I will argue that spirituality is a second component to bear in mind when dealing with sacred space.

- There is an intrinsically spiritual or mystical component to sacred space. Certainly features like walls, windows or even trees contain a space, but none of these can be sacred without some kind of connection to the divine. Mircea Eliade explains the concept of hierophany, that is, the manifestation of the divine, as the defining feature of religion.¹¹
- Christians can draw connections between hierophany and the theology of revelation by which we understand that God has made himself known to us, foremost through his Son and the writings of scripture, but also through the natural world. Christianity orients itself to the life of the Incarnate Christ and subsequently we believe that universal space has become mixed with the profane and the sacred.
- Eliade refers to this as the “nonhomogeneity” of the universe.¹² The incarnate reality of Immanuel, “God with us” (Mt 1:23), is what sanctifies a space, and yet I think it is important to maintain that this could refer to a space as grandiose as a cathedral but also as humble as a patch of land in the wilderness. The omnipresent God dwells within his people (1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; Eph 2:21), and yet he also manifests himself at select times in ways that we cannot predict or explain. In addition, as N.T. Wright has noted, sacred space is fragile and easily corrupted. Ultimately, there is no aspect of this topic that is not enshrouded in mystery.
- The story of Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-22 is a key example of the interaction between hierophany and space. Jacob comes “to a certain place” (v. 11) in his travels and chooses to spend the night in that place. Thus, the story begins with a simple bodily need: to sleep. Notice that Jacob has no spiritual reason for choosing this place and he does nothing to provoke the manifestation of the Lord. However, as he sleeps he has a dream where angels ascend and descend on a ladder connecting this nameless place with heaven (v. 12-13). In this numinous experience, the Lord speaks, echoing and reinforcing the covenant made with Abraham many years before (v. 13-15). When Jacob awakens he declares, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (16-17). He marks the place with a pillar that it may be recognized for the coming ages as a holy place and he anoints it with oil. Hierophany occurs in a place without provocation or containment, rather it happens on God’s terms in the wilderness. This dream also illustrates an experience of sacred space where the body, spirituality and temporality are all incorporated.
- I would argue that this place was not intrinsically sacred before Jacob’s dream. Rather, the dream made it a place of significance to Jacob and his act of consecration made it a marker or monument to God’s covenant for years to come. Sanctity is transient rather than permanent, and it is directly related to human actions in response to the manifestation of God. This is demonstrated by commentator Victor P. Hamilton who explains that the site does not maintain its name of Bethel, but is referred to by Hosea as “Bethaven” meaning “house of nothingness/wickedness” (Hos 4:15; 5:8; 10:5). Hamilton makes reference to the destruction of the altar at Bethel during Josiah’s religious reforms (2 Kings 23:15).¹³ These passages demonstrate that the sanctity of this place changed over time due to human response to God – whether positive, as in Jacob’s case, or negative as with the Israelites in the time of Josiah.
- Eliade further encapsulate the idea of spiritual experience in space: “When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space: there is also a *revelation* of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse.” Thus, sacred space is the embodiment of the corporeal and spiritual experience of being human and it connects us with the absolute reality of the God of the universe.
- Practical Implications [**SLIDE**]
 - **Natural light** streaming in from windows or glowing from a candle can indicate the immanent presence of God with his people, but it also carries the transcendent aura of mystery. One writer compares the Old Testament pillar of fire (Ex 13:21-22) to the Christ candle common in many Christian traditions, indicating that Christ is the “new pillar of fire”.¹⁷ This candle also

symbolizes the ongoing presence of Christ who is with us through the Holy Spirit, and it links us to the long history of believers who have used candlelight to represent the divine presence.¹⁸ I would also argue that light from a candle or through a window provides a more particularly powerful contribution to the sacred space because of the primal quality of fire and of sunlight.

- One could also make an interesting argument for the campfire at the center of the church service on this basis... The use of these sources of light draws us into something elemental and mysterious, as well as linking us to what are gifts from God to us in nature. Windows (stained glass or otherwise), light bulbs, candles and projectors are all human technologies that shape our primary sources of light (i.e. fire, sunlight), and each can have a role in the sacred space. At the risk of arguing for a personal preference, I would state that the more primary the light-source the more powerful the atmosphere created because it can connect us to a past, primal existence that urbanites are particularly separated from.
- Purposeful use of natural light can represent the presence of God, with sunlight streaming through windows representing the light of God that permeates the world both inside and outside the building, and the candle representing the unique light revealed to us in Christ. I am inclined to think that these symbols do more than serve as visual aids for teaching theology. This is a topic deserving of further study but I would lean towards believing that these symbols carry deeper mystery in and of themselves and an engagement with the revelation of God in symbols like these can be a vital component of spiritual growth.
- EXAMPLES? [SLIDES]

III. Temporality [SLIDE]

- [SLIDE] This paper has argued for an understanding of sacred space that reflects the human experience of being both body and spirit. We must also account for a third aspect of human experience: the relationship between sacred space and time. Sacred space has a direct temporal function because it memorializes events of the past, encompasses the community in its present state, and promises to shape future generations according to those boundaries of the space that were imposed in the past.
- Buildings stand as monuments in and of themselves that, even in ruin, leave traces of those who built them and how they thought about the world. They are the units of a community that contain a wide variety of social experiences. As theologian T.J. Gorringer states: “People ensoul not only their houses but the settlements in which they dwell. At the same time their settlements shape their souls.”¹⁹ We put buildings into effect; buildings affect us. This is why a church building should be built with an awareness of the past, in service of the present and with prophetic vision for how the space will shape its future community.²⁰ However, as churches look to the past, they should do so with honesty – being open to all streams of the Christian narrative. Sacred space needs to come from an awareness of church traditions as well as look for points of convergence and mutuality for the future.
- Adapting a model that seeks to integrate Christian traditions would be to take an ecumenical stance to sacred space, one that, for Robert Webber, will “call evangelicals to recover their place in the community of the Church catholic” through an “ancient-future” approach to ministry in the 21st century.²² Embracing an ancient-future model of sacred space involves the confluence of culture, tradition, and inter-faith dialogue. A sacred space with a connection to the past has the potential to draw a community together based on their shared history, and it can also open up the Christian community to continued dialogue between traditions in years to come.
- The church must look to the past for the foundation of sacred space and in order to build bridges between traditions across the globe. We live in an age where the church is becoming ever more globalized, and so this wider understanding of Christian tradition is becoming ever more necessary.²⁴ The church will likely need to make accommodations in order to welcome Christians coming from the global south with all kinds of variations on Christian liturgical practice. However, as we incorporate our past and our present into our church environments, we must also keep our eye to the future or, in the eschatological sense, to the end of time. As Grenz states: “Only with the coming of the gloriously recreated cosmos will God make his dwelling with us.”²⁵ This ties in to the multiple places in the New Testament where Paul reminds believers that in this age between Christ’s ascension and his return, God

dwells within the temple that is the body of believers rather than a building (Acts 17:24-28, 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19, Eph 2:21). The church and its built environs are only hints at the glory of what is to come when God dwells with us in completeness and fullness, and yet the building also makes what A.N. Williams calls “an eschatological statement” that unifies time and space.²⁶

- Church buildings, in their permanence, connect us to the past, shape the present and cast a vision for the both future congregation and the eschatological consummation of history. But what does this mean for churches that do not have a church building or who meet in such “unorthodox” places as warehouses, homes, gymnasiums, cinemas and campgrounds? Personally, I think that there is tremendous value in having a building set aside and designed for the purposes of the church, but I also realize that this is not always a possibility – particularly when thinking of budgetary restrictions or of the regional challenges that people face around the world. Long-term use of a space that was meant to be temporary (or for alternative purposes altogether) may detract from a sense of the church’s rootedness in time.
- **Practical Implications: [SLIDE]**
 - The mission of the church – to worship together, to edify one another, and to reach out – can still be accomplished even in the most creatively repurposed sacred spaces. Take our gym here at Ambrose and the chapel services that occur therein. Many of us chapel attendees, myself included, complain about the acoustics in the gym and a variety of other problems that come along with a temporary set up in a space meant for sports events. However, I was challenged last semester when James K.A. Smith was here for Spiritual Emphasis Days and he made a comment about the appropriateness of having a spiritual service in a gymnasium. We are working out our faith in this place, being edified in the race that is each our call to sanctification. Thus, I conclude that through the application of creativity it is possible for churches to still connect themselves to the Church that spans time and space – even without spending vast amounts of money on iconography or architecture. However, my inclination is towards a church facility that is intentional and reverent in how it engages the artistic environment and Christian tradition.
 - Examples [SLIDE]

CONCLUSION [SLIDE]

- This paper has sought to explore three major aspects of the human experience and outline how they should be integrated with sacred space. Without an awareness of sacred space, churches run the risk of dividing up the human experience into one that is only bodily, where comfort is paramount and people are never challenged to read their surroundings (this would also indicate a diminished engagement of the mind in sacred space – an area for continued study). Further imbalance could be indicated by an overt emphasis on spirituality where the building is diminished almost entirely and subordinated to charismatic experience rather than incorporated into it. The church’s place between antiquity and the future can also be undermined when the sacred space remains a monument to congregations past while the current congregation is alienated, or by constantly looking for the newest features and technologies with no thought to linking the church architecturally to its ancestry. Sacred space has tremendous power to shape us and connect us to one another, and thus it must not be neglected by Christian leaders who have the responsibility of caring for a group of people who are altogether corporeal, spiritual and temporal. Thank you. [SLIDE]