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Towards a biblical mind

Reimagining church buildings

The incarnation, embodiment and material culture

By Nigel Walter

'We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.'
Winston Churchill¹

Summary

As Christians, our approach to church buildings speaks volumes about our engagement with the world and those around us. Modern technology increasingly seeks to transcend place, but this sits uncomfortably with the scandalous particularity of the incarnation. Our God so loved the world – materiality and all – that he lived with and died for us at a particular time and place, literally 'putting a stake into the ground'. This paper argues that, while the veneration of place does carry dangers, people and place are intimately and necessarily intertwined. Reflecting theologically on placedness frees us to see places in general, and buildings in particular, more in terms of opportunity than of irrelevance or threat.

Introduction

I wonder what you think of the building in which your church meets, or indeed whether you ever give it a second thought. In one sense our buildings are incidental to the life of the Church. Yet in another sense we are shaped by them, first in the constraints and opportunities they present to our corporate life, and second in how they frame the way others see us. We know full well that the Church is the people not the buildings, yet those buildings nevertheless influence our life together as the body of Christ.

The Greek word for church – ἐκκλησία – describes the *gathering* of believers *in a particular place*: thus Paul's letters identify a recipient church by its city and not, for example, its leaders. Is a Zoom meeting of Christians still 'church'? However well we may have sustained virtual fellowship and teaching through the disruption of coronavirus, in disbanded form we are no longer church in the scriptural sense; being there 'in spirit' is not enough.

If churches are constituted in the act of gathering, then in most cases they will require (non-domestic) buildings. The way we choose to deal with those buildings – in their design, maintenance and alteration – speaks volumes about how our faith relates to the world around us. Sadly, their message often stands in stark contrast to our declared theology! This paper reflects on the relationship

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between the life of the Christian community and our need for buildings in which to meet. It argues that buildings, properly understood, are profoundly theological and play an important role in our mission and ministry wherever we meet, whether in a rented school hall or a 1,000-year-old listed structure.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Church buildings come in all shapes and sizes. Richard Kieckhefer, for example, offers a threefold typology: the 'classic sacramental', a linear building, perhaps with side aisles, and an apse or chancel at the east end; the 'classic

¹ UK Parliament, 'HC Deb 28/10/1943 Vol 393 C403', 1943, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/oct/28/house-of-commons-rebuilding>.

Evangelical', an auditorium for preaching whose focus is the pulpit; and the 'modern communal', which facilitates the gathering of people for worship and the constitution of community through generous social spaces.² Of course, while some buildings fit neatly into these categories, others are a mix of influences; but all, including a ('modern communal?') stadium church like Lakewood, embody theological ideas of who we are before God, and what it means to worship him.



Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas

Some buildings are hard work for their owners and users, perhaps being ill-conceived from the outset, or having developed a serious defect, or simply having become unsuited to the needs of a changing world. However, even difficult buildings present opportunities: beyond meeting functional needs, they often provide a sense of community identity, which may become evident when their future is thrown into doubt. One effect of the rampant individualism in our culture has been the thinning out of community services, and in many rural areas the church is the last communal building left. This gives churches the opportunity, where human and financial resources allow, both to address a broad range of needs and to return their building to its traditional role as the hub of communal life.

Just as buildings vary widely, so too does our approach to them. Some see them as a positive hindrance to ministry, and believe the Church should abandon its buildings and meet people where they are; at this end of the spectrum, there may even be the fear that engagement with buildings is idolatrous. Others might pursue their enthusiasm for the architecture into a love that verges on worship. This aestheticisation – fetishisation even – of church buildings formed a strong theme in the development of modern conservation, and endures to this day.

At the extremes, these approaches – absorbed directly from secular modernity – become idolatries of placelessness and of place respectively. Regarding the former, for example, we must acknowledge that the breaking of the people-place connection is intrinsic to modern capitalism's pursuit of labour productivity and economic growth,³ from which

some gain but others lose. These two positions mirror David Goodhart's analysis of the rise of political populism through the new tribalism of 'Anywheres' – mobile graduates at ease with globalisation – and 'Somewheres' – those more rooted in place and who value familiarity and security.⁴ The moderate position that treats buildings merely as a neutral backdrop or container for ministry is equally theologically questionable.

Place in Scripture

How, then, does Scripture deal with buildings and place? The Bible starts in one place, Eden, ends with another, the heavenly Jerusalem descending to earth, and in between speaks incessantly of place, notably in its historical narratives. Walter Brueggemann has examined the three-way relationship between God, his chosen people and the land of Israel, arguing that the people only enjoyed God's peace while these three remained in balance.⁵ The landscape comes to embody memory (e.g. Bethel, Genesis 28:16-18; Ebenezer, 1 Samuel 7:12); by contrast, mortals are likened to flowers of the field – once gone, 'its place knows it no more' (Psalm 103:16).

Buildings are referred to both literally and metaphorically. The tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) was a physical manifestation of rebellion against God, an enduringly recognisable act of self-transcendence. In Psalm 127:1 – 'Unless the Lord builds the house...' – the building represents human endeavour, directed for good or ill; and Wisdom is portrayed with her house of seven pillars (Proverbs 9:1).

This concern with place is not limited to the Old Testament; time and again, the Gospels root Jesus' ministry in specific places, many of which have left archaeological traces. For example, one can still visit the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus preached (Mark 1:21-28); though the standing ruins in lighter stone are a later rebuilding, visible beneath these is the black basalt base of what is believed to be the first-century synagogue. Standing there, it is hard not to be moved by the placed connection with Jesus' own ministry, the remains literally earthing the Gospel narrative. And just



The Synagogue, Capernaum

² Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp.11–19.

³ Michael Schluter, 'Is Capitalism Morally Bankrupt?: Five Moral Flaws and Their Social Consequences', *Cambridge Papers* Vol.18, No.3, September 2009.

⁴ David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics*, London: Penguin, 2017.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002.

a few yards from the synagogue is what is believed, again with credible archaeological justification, to be Simon Peter's house, where his mother-in-law was healed (Mark 1:29-34) and where tradition suggests the Church subsequently met.

As the Gospels unfold, there is an undeniable move from the Temple as the focus of observance of the law towards Jesus as its fulfilment, as seen, for example, in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:20-24). The woman attempts to deflect Jesus' questions by appealing to the particularity of place, raising the conventional disagreement over where God should be worshipped. Jesus asserts the universality of his call by reframing worship as a question not of place but of 'spirit and truth'. Or again, when the wide-eyed disciples are overawed by the grandeur of the Temple in Mark 13:1-2 - 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' - Jesus predicts their destruction.

However, to argue that this justifies - necessitates, even - a detachment from place is simplistic. First, it was clear throughout the Old Testament that God was never tethered to Jerusalem; as Solomon proclaimed amidst the fanfare at the dedication of the Temple, 'But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens [...] cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built' (1 Kings 8:27). Second, despite being itinerant, Jesus was highly responsive to place, for example in his repeated visits to Bethany. His oft-cited comment that 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20) is not primarily about place, but about how we should relate. While he did prophesy Jerusalem's destruction, he wept at the prospect (Luke 19:41-44). And we see him repeatedly drawn to the Temple, both as a child to '[his] Father's house' (Luke 2:41-51) and regularly through his ministry. After the triumphant entry, for example, he went there and 'looked around at everything' (Mark 11:11); clearly that place was important to him.

One particular part of the first-century Temple - Solomon's portico, on its east side - offers another example of the continuing relevance of place. In John 10:23-24 we see Jesus challenged over his identity while walking there; the place, providing shelter in winter, was evidently congenial. It was to this same part of the Temple that Peter and John went to address the crowd after healing the lame man (Acts 3:11). And it's clear this is not a one-off, since the portico is mentioned again as the place the apostles continued to gather 'all together' (Acts 5:12), and where others could find them, if they dared. As the gospel is then preached to the Gentiles, the narrative remains rooted in specific places, and

in Athens Paul uses his context - the shrine to the unknown god - to engage his audience (Acts 17:19-34).

Incarnation and embodiment

These examples demonstrate an interest, a delight even, in the specificity of place. While the New Testament expresses the universal relevance of the Christian message to all peoples, this is a universality that remains doggedly rooted in place and local culture. (Indeed, this is a marked contrast between the canonical and the gnostic gospels, the latter speaking far less of place.) In the incarnation God willingly embraces, and constrains himself within, a specific cultural context; this demanded his embodiment, and therefore his placedness, even unto death. Jesus did not pass through the world, he *took his place* alongside us. Or, as John 1:14 so poetically puts it, he *dwelt* among us: more than a visitor, he settled into the neighbourhood⁶ including, let's not forget, making his living as a builder.

To be embodied is to be contextually embedded and specifically placed; Jesus was necessarily a product of his time and place: first-century Israel. The incarnation thus demonstrates the enduring significance of cultural context - including, but not limited to, place - in God's dealings with humanity. And while Jesus tells his disciples that it is to our advantage that he will 'go away' (John 16:7) - thus relinquishing that constraint - immediately after the resurrection he sends them into the world 'as the Father has sent me' (John 20:21), presumably in the selfsame contextually embedded way in which he was sent. Hence Paul, in contrasting the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem, is not advocating placelessness for the Galatians (4:21-31), but a new relationship to the law which fosters, rather than diminishes, commitment to their locality.

There is, unsurprisingly, a correlation between our attitudes to place, to our bodies, and to heaven. If we see heaven as a separate place where God lives remote from the world and to which our disembodied souls escape at death - a view common in Western Christianity - then we will devalue the physical, including our own bodies and material culture. 'Disembodying' ourselves in this way leads to an incomplete and ineffectual life, for both individuals and churches.⁷ But if heaven is a (normally hidden) dimension of present reality - as N.T. Wright suggests, 'the kingship of heaven' - then having 'no lasting city' (Hebrews 13:14) concerns our relation to authority, not a withdrawal from place.⁸ Instead, we should be fully engaged with the material world, working for the renewal of creation - not only the natural environment, but also material culture, buildings included. We can expect to be

⁶ cf. Eugene Peterson's *Message* paraphrase.

⁷ Matthew Lee Anderson, *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011.

⁸ N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Grove Books, 2006.

recognisable in our resurrection bodies, as Jesus clearly was (e.g. John 20:16); perhaps the same will be true of the *place* prepared for us (John 14:2). Certainly C. S. Lewis envisaged the new creation in this way.⁹

From modernity to the Early Church

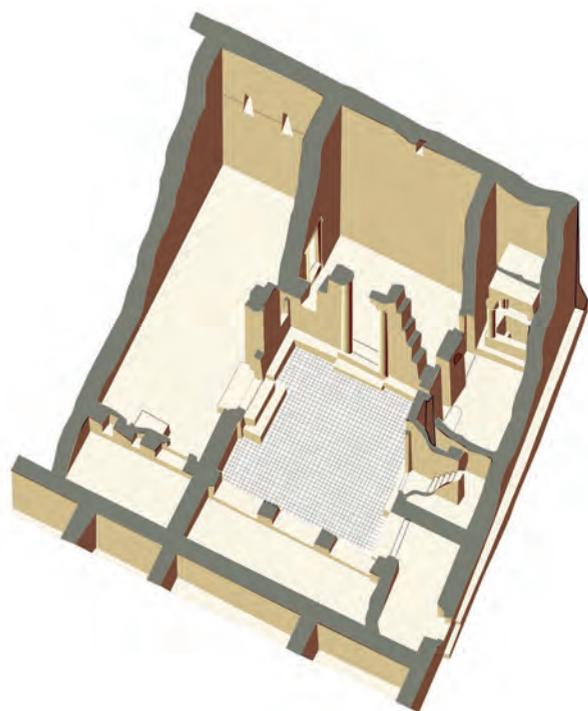
Where then does our withdrawal from *place* come from, if not from Scripture? Most pre-modern cultures structured the physical world through an articulated sense of place. Modernity, however, insists on separating the knowing subject from the object of its attention, and the social from the natural;¹⁰ the 'essence' of the external world is understood simply as extension, quantifiable by geometry and measurement, essentially non-specific, interchangeable and universal. So dominant has this understanding become that we struggle to see beyond it. Modernity also rebels against limitations of any kind, because it understands freedom as lack of constraint, whether temporal or spatial. Unsurprisingly, it therefore dreams of emancipation from both time and place;¹¹ modern technology's promise of unbounded internet connectivity is one expression of this.

For some, the simplicity of life and faith in the Early Church offers a benchmark of authenticity to which we should return. Peter Oakes, drawing on archaeological evidence from Pompeian houses, argues that the message of Paul's letters is transformed by understanding where the Early Church met.¹² Initially of course, the Church was frequently persecuted, and unable to put down roots. But it was not long before its buildings became differentiated. The earliest known church building – precisely because it was

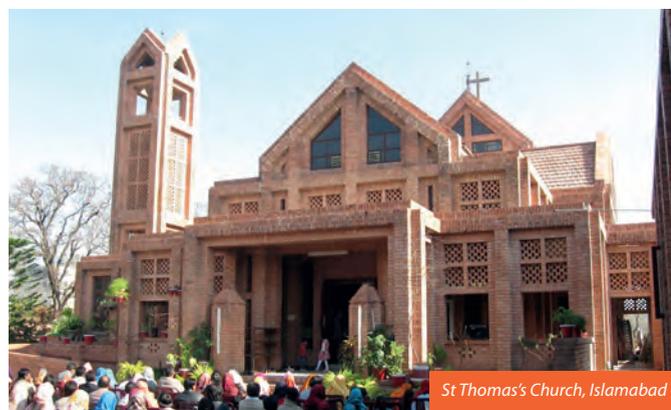
differentiated in this way – is at Dura Europos in modern-day Syria; converted from a house in 232, it includes a large assembly room and a smaller, separate baptistry.¹³

To argue against church buildings because the Early Church met in homes is anachronistic, and stems from our modern appetite for mobility. Dura Europos demonstrates a clear commitment to place – expressed through a dedicated/customised building – by those early believers. Similarly, a commitment to place by individual Christians and church communities speaks volumes to our neighbours today. As newer churches grow, it is common for them to seek a permanent home, even to build one from scratch. For some, this is a practical consideration: the work involved in setting up and breaking down in a rented space is considerable. Others may worry their use of a rented space may be curtailed at short notice. But there is also positive value in having a base which allows us to bed ourselves into the community, and where we are readily discoverable, as the apostles were in Solomon's portico. While perhaps impossible amidst persecution, 'taking our place' through personal and (often) geographical commitments is generally a healthy process, analogous to growing into adulthood.

In the late 1980s I was involved in the design and construction of a church in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. From its foundation, St Thomas's Church had met in a house until it was able, against considerable local opposition, to build its own building. This was recognisably Christian, but also drew on local Moghul brickwork tradition; the building has given that beleaguered church community a stronger sense of identity, helping establish its place within a sometimes hostile broader culture.



The domus ecclesiae in Dura Europos



St Thomas's Church, Islamabad

Whether the Church's mission is international or local, it is always intercultural, involving engagement with local context. Indeed:

Contextualization takes place only when the faithful exegesis of the text enters into a dialogical encounter with the issues of the human situation. This encounter will be both

9 'Our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world'; C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, London: HarperCollins, 2009, chap. XV.

10 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

11 Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

12 Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*, London: SPCK, 2009.

13 The building's frescoes of the Good Shepherd, the healing of the paralytic and Jesus and Peter walking on water – now in the Yale University Art Gallery – are the earliest surviving visual depictions of Jesus.

theological and ethical, in which belief and action are interdependent. It takes place in dependence on the Holy Spirit who is the hermeneutic key to relating text and context.¹⁴

Whatever our situation, belief and action should be interdependent, mutually informing, and always located. Contextualisation will often involve buildings because they take us to the heart of that relationship between belief and localised action. As John Inge suggests, the particularity of the incarnation indicates that place retains 'vital significance in God's dealings with humanity'.¹⁵ Buildings are theologically potent because they are an outworking, par excellence, of the Church's hermeneutic task of relating text and context.

Tradition and historic buildings

But what about really old buildings? Because some buildings endure for a very long time they force us to engage with the question of tradition, now widely misunderstood as an exercise in keeping things the same. But this idea that tradition and change stand in mutual opposition is a *modern* innovation; indeed, labelling old buildings as 'historic monuments' only began after the French Revolution.¹⁶ Rather, tradition is better seen as an ongoing intergenerational conversation which shapes our worldview, something fundamentally dynamic, not static. G. K. Chesterton helpfully described tradition as 'democracy extended through time',¹⁷ while the church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously differentiated traditionalism – the dead faith of the living – from tradition – the living faith of the dead.¹⁸

In some sense, traditional buildings link us to previous generations – in the case of a medieval parish church to the communion of saints in that place. Such buildings cannot be adequately understood *except* as living expressions of an ongoing tradition; and the *present* generation should be honoured as integral to the heritage. By contrast, modern conservation, which developed as an expression of traditionalism, typically understands historic buildings as completed works of art. Indeed, the urge to preserve historic church buildings was the initial impetus for modern conservation, for example in the 1877 Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Manifesto,¹⁹ which retains credal status for many in conservation.

These divergent understandings of tradition become manifest when a church community proposes change to their historic building, and this is the focus of a contemporary argument within conservation over so-called 'living buildings'. These are generally defined as buildings which continue in use, particularly the use for which they were originally built; the English parish church is perhaps the pre-eminent example. These buildings have survived multiple episodes of change; but more than that, they owe

their survival to having adapted to changing needs. Further, the richness of their character is precisely the collective product of this varied history of change. Better, I suggest, to see such buildings as unfinished narratives that are:

- intergenerational – seeing the past in dialogue with the present;
- communal – created by and in turn creating a coherent community across time; and
- ongoing – accepting that those who follow will add further chapters to the story.

If change is in the nature of these buildings, then arbitrarily preventing change does violence to them. Clearly not all change is good; the issue – difficult for us moderns to grasp – is how creativity operates within tradition. John Henry Newman said of church history that 'to live is to change'. But more than simply expecting living things to change, he went on '... and to be perfect is to have changed often'.²⁰ Our concern should be with the intimate relation between the physicality of a historic building and the community whose activity sustains it; appropriate change is proof of the building's ongoing vitality, and should be celebrated.

My practice has recently completed alterations to the listed, medieval St Nicholas's Church, Great Wilbraham. The scheme created a WC and kitchen in the base of the west tower, a new open ringing gallery above and, with the limited removal of some Victorian pews, an open space at the rear of the nave. These changes are unmistakably of their age, with a glass balustrade to the gallery and modern detailing to the oak staircase and partitions. In practical terms, these changes enable the building to host a broader range of community activities (catering included), while extending its narrative by reincorporating an earlier understanding of what church buildings are good for.



St Nicholas's Church, Great Wilbraham

14 Bruce J Nicholls, 'Contextualization', in *New Dictionary of Theology Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie et al., 2nd ed., London, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016, p.216.

15 Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, p.58.

16 This was a means of rescuing some notable historic buildings newly divorced from their cultural (aristocratic/ecclesiastical) contexts; see Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, trans. Lauren M. O'Connell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

17 Gilbert K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1908, p.82.

18 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1984, p.65.

19 William Morris, 'The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Manifesto', 2018, www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto.

20 John Henry Newman, 'An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine', 2001, 40, www.newmanreader.org/works/development/chapter1.html.

Historic buildings like St Nicholas's force us to consider tradition as something dynamic, active and ongoing. For some within the Protestant churches, tradition is theologically freighted, exclusively associated with Roman Catholicism; and indeed it is Roman Catholic thinkers, not least the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who have done most to rehabilitate tradition.²¹ But just as tradition cannot be confined within political philosophy – for whom we have Edmund Burke to thank²² – so it is of relevance across all denominations, because Christianity is an embodied, Scripture-formed tradition, not merely a set of abstract propositions.

Precisely because of their intimate relationship to cultural context, changing historic buildings is not easy. We often resent the expense: building work is *always* expensive, but only because engagement with the material world involves time, care and skill. Leaving aside cost and the complex permissions process, the pastoral reality is that there may be some within our congregations who see the local church, and by extension its building, as something unchanging, a haven of stability in a confusing world. This helps explain the strength of opposition that can be aroused when change is proposed, and needs sensitive handling.

Conclusion

Returning to the Churchill quote with which we began, our buildings shape us because we are embodied creatures made in God's image. They force us to dwell locally, and facilitate our creative action in the world. They are relevant for every church community, whether we are creating a new building, changing or maintaining an existing one, or renting someone else's. We should therefore be theologically intentional in our stewardship of them. Reflecting theologically on our buildings enriches how we relate to our place and the people around us, but I wonder how many church fabric committees ever conduct such a theological review...

Buildings are important in the countercultural work of

transforming groups of individuals into church communities. They demonstrate commitment to locality, and an investment in it; they project a visible identity within the wider community; they equip us to serve those around us; and they express our theology. When working as they should, they speak of radical hospitality rooted in a localised articulation of the Christian story. As 'storied places', these are buildings that we should expect to flex and change, reassuring us that it is possible to navigate the inevitable changes of life, with God's help and rooted in Christian community.

For modernity, the universal is an abstraction away from the specific context, and something the Church – particularly the Evangelical Church – has been far too ready to condone. We have 'mis-placed' ourselves. Abstraction of this sort, often expressed in the idolatry of placelessness, is a form of secular transcendence and quite different, therefore, from the universality claimed by Christianity which is always invested in the particular and local, often at great cost. While there remains a danger that material culture becomes the object of our worship – the idolatry of place – that is no reason to avoid the urgent and transformative work of engaging with buildings as practical theology.



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21 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. London: Duckworth, 1985, ch.15.

22 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790; repr., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.

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