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# A Tale of Two Chapels

VICTOR FIDDES

ON AN UPPER FLOOR of Divinity Hall, McGill University, there is a chapel whose architecture admirably satisfies the popular conception of a church. Possessed of splendid proportions, dignity, and warmth, the building creates an atmosphere conducive to meditation and prayer, while it is also functional for preaching and praise: "This is what a church should look like."

Across the street at Presbyterian College there is a very different kind of chapel. It is a square, pagodalike structure, suggesting nothing of the traditional churchly shape. Only the cross into which its tapered roof merges identifies it as a place of Christian worship. While it is detached from the main complex of the college, it does not hide itself away; on the contrary, it thrusts itself against the curb of University Street in a rather bold and forward manner.

The inside of the building is as plain as the outside. The walls are unadorned. Natural light enters from a perimeter of clear glass just below the ceiling. The room is furnished with pulpit and table, on three sides of which seating is provided for the worshippers. I rather imagine that this Presbyterian chapel fails to meet popular aesthetic expectations of church architecture.

If one disregards, for purposes of this article, the distinction between a church and a chapel, these buildings which face each other on University Street provide an admirable point of departure for a brief consideration of the contrast between "traditional" and "contemporary" Protestant church architecture. In defiance of public opinion I should like to marshal three arguments in support of the proposition that the new is better. In doing this I am not overlooking certain faults in the design and furnishing of the new, including its misplaced organ and dubious balcony.

For one thing, the new is better theologically. It is a truism to say that church architecture should be theologically informed, but, the state of theology being what it is, this truism hardly simplifies the architect's task. Just what do we mean when we ask the architect to "communicate the sacred presence" or set forth the truth that "Jesus Christ is God and Saviour"? A theology that cannot make up its mind about revelation and the supernatural is hardly in a position to provide the architect with a helpful rationale for worship.

Where this problem is recognized, it is usually met with the rejoinder that in worship and the arts we are dealing with symbolic language rather than with literal truth, and that consequently the artist need not be implicated in

the dilemmas of the theologian. Thus the Bishop of Woolwich argues that "every generation, whatever the mould of its belief, whatever its projection of God," can make the traditional language of liturgy its own. "Liturgy, indeed, is the main medium of that transposition . . . whereby we can readily accept and use a notation that on the face of it belongs to an entirely alien thought world."<sup>1</sup> He quotes approvingly the remarks of Canon Hugh Montefiore, who says that our impasse today is primarily an intellectual one:

I does not immediately or directly affect Christian faith or Christian worship or the conduct of the Christian life. God is still at work. The old formulas continue to be used; they serve in worship, they comprise pictorial imagery useful for meditation, and they mark the continuity of our faith and devotion with that of our Christian ancestors. They preserve what may be meaningless to one generation but meaningful to the next. Our search is *FIDES QUÆRENS INTELLECTUM*; and so long as the search can and does continue, *the insufficiency of our theology need not affect Christian faith or conduct or worship.*<sup>2</sup>

May I suggest that this is not being quite honest to God? This kind of double-talk may serve for hermeneutics, but it is not the kind of language that commends itself to present-day architects and artists. On the contrary, the best of them regard intellectual integrity as a *sine qua non* of churchly architecture. Sobering in this regard is the statement of Edwin A. Sovik:

I think it is because some of the architects who have no membership in the Christian congregations still have this great passion for integrity that they have been able to do some of the best churches of our generation. They may not be theologically sophisticated, and they may not be liturgically oriented, but their immense passion for the truth and the whole has given these artists the capacity to design convincing churches.<sup>3</sup>

Even if it is possible, as apparently it is, for the church in its architecture to use forms and signs that belong "to an entirely alien thought world," why should it want to do so? A basic axiom of architecture is that it tells the truth about the community it serves. Is it to be an axiom of sacred architecture that it perpetuates unbelief? Eutyclus was not being entirely facetious when he asked what the theology of Paul Tillich would do to church architecture: "Since God is not up there shall we remove the pointing finger of the steeple? Maybe the church of the future will have us sitting around a pit looking into the ground of being."<sup>4</sup> If this is where theology leads, this is where architecture must follow. The ironical thing here is that Paul Tillich, who was vitally concerned with the subject of communication through architecture and the arts, left us in a quandary as to what we are to communicate, whereas Karl Barth, who alleges indifference to the

1. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), pp. 132f.

2. *Ibid.* (italics mine).

3. From an address, "The Faith our Forms Express," delivered at the Annual National Conference on Church Architecture, Dallas, Texas, 7 April, 1964.

4. *Christianity Today* (Washington, D.C., April, 1964), Vol. VIII, No. 15, p. 686.

subject, provides architecture and the arts with responsible frames of reference in a theology that is "scientifically" self-determined. But this is an aside. The point is that church architecture must not assume a theological expression which theology itself cannot deliver or sustain. With things as they are in the church, any theological statement that architecture makes had better be an understatement.

Edwin Sovik has said that we ought to think of the church building as a house for God's people rather than as a place to house God. While this is an oversimplification, it does point up the emphasis needed today. The present concern of the church is to communicate the fact of the incarnation. This means, surely, the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst of his people. The building should express this reality without assuming too much in the way of the sacred "Presence." In this respect the chapel of Presbyterian College makes a better statement than the building across the street.

An architecture that is honest to God will also be honest to man; and here, too, one is constrained to say that the new is better. The gothic of Divinity Hall chapel expresses man's religious certainty. Man is sure of himself because he is sure of God. The form, accordingly, is aspirational. The thrust is upwards. The gothic can be utilized honestly in a situation, such as the medieval, where the objective reality of God and the *imago dei* in man are taken for granted. In this confident situation man has no alternative but to respond to God's self-revelation in adoring self-offering—the kind of offering that embraces the dedication of man's highest gifts and skills, in art, sculpture, and architecture.

But this is not man's situation today. Today man is no more sure of himself than he is of God. Man today is lost, but he is not lost in wonder, love and praise, even in his worship. There is no point, accordingly, in imagining that sacred architecture can create for man at his worship a kind of sabbath effulgence that compensates for meaningless existence elsewhere. In this respect some of our contemporary church architecture, in its flamboyance and flight of fancy, is as wide of the mark as sham gothic. A merit of Presbyterian College chapel is that it avoids this kind of overstatement. In its "empty holiness" it meets man where he is rather than where the church nostalgically would like him to be.

Finally, the new is better in its orientation. This world is the place where the church has to proclaim its message and make its witness. If it cannot come to terms with this world, at least it should not turn its back to it. Is it merely an unfortunate accident of location that the fine McGill chapel is hidden away on the second floor of Divinity Hall? Not quite! That is where its kind of architecture belongs. Gothic is significant only for the environment it can dominate. But the church no longer dominates society, and the perpetuation by the church of a dominant style merely accentuates the irrelevance of the institution. The new Presbyterian chapel is in the right place. It makes no attempt to impose itself on the community or even to

impress the passer-by. But it has not fled the world. On the contrary, it has got itself as close to the curb as it can. Any person passing by may enter if he wills. But if he enters, it will be because he is drawn to a fellowship to which he either belongs or craves entrance, not because he is attracted by the superficial appeal of the arts. Pharaoh's magicians can pull the artistic stunt as well as the Christians.