James Wetzstein

Couldn't This Have Been Sold and the Money Given to the Poor?
Is Beauty a Sin?

It seems that a thing of beauty always draws fire when it’s in a church. As soon as the work is completed (sometimes it’s as soon as the work is proposed), someone is drawing on the memory of that gracious, but unnamed woman from Matthew 26 and asking the question, “Why this waste? For this stuff might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor.”

The fact that this isn’t what Jesus had in mind when he declared, “… what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her,” seems beside the point. The fact that the question comes from the soon-to-be-corrected lips of the often-out-of-step disciples is usually lost on the one asking the question.

But it’s not a question at all. It seems to be an obvious fact: In a world where people are starving for want of food and souls are dying for want of the Gospel, original art (i.e.: expensive art) in the church seems like worse than an unnecessary extravagance. It seems downright sinful.

Is this so? Is it always improper for the church to spent its resources on art and design? Is it contrary to the Great Commission of Matthew 28 to seek out and provide things of beauty for the church?

In fairness, we need to return to the text from Matthew 26 and observe that the circumstances there described are somewhat specific and rather unusual. While remaining aware of the Eucharistic theology of some Christians, it’s fair to say that it’s not every day that Jesus is about to be sacrificed for the sins of the world. The account of the woman’s costly gift for the sake of Jesus’ preparation for burial in Matthew 26 and its parallels represent a unique event in human history and can hardly be seen as a prescription for Christian stewardship. Nor are Jesus’ responses to her action useful in any prescriptive sense, though it’s doubtless all sorts of obscene extravagances have been justified on the grounds that “the poor will be with us always.”

The Action of Yahweh and the Places of Moses and Solomon

Solomon, having received the divine project approval that his father longed for, seems to spare no expense on the construction of the Temple (1 Kings 5), though the biblical record is silent on the origin of the plans. Moses, on the other hand, receives clear instructions as to both the dimensions of the Tabernacle and its material (Exodus 25–28). Again, however, these examples seem to be more descriptive than prescriptive for contemporary Christians. Moses is given clear (and divine) instruction, to be sure. Judging from the materials list and the nature of the fabrication, it’s safe to assume that the construction of the Tabernacle consumed a substantial share of the resources of the Israelites. But the circumstances of their pilgrimage and the intended purpose of both the Tabernacle and its permanent replacement, the Temple, have little in common with Christian worship. Then the Levitical laws, which flow out of something of a manual for the use of the Tabernacle, spell out in great detail the moral responsibilities of the community toward those without resources.

There may be something in this arrangement.

Even a quick skimming of the chapters between Exodus 25 and Leviticus 25 will show that the plans for the Tabernacle, altar and priestly vestments are followed by descriptions of their fabrication and first use in the administration of a very specifically described sacrificial system. This system of sacrifices becomes the people’s participation in a relationship with Yahweh. These sacrifices are certainly an expression of thanksgiving, but they are also a means of making amends for failures to live up to their identity as a people with whom Yahweh holds a covenant. The sacrifices are followed by a clear and careful catalog of appropriate human action, much
of it social. The presence of Yahweh in the Tabernacle gives cause for human worship, but it also gives cause for acts of social justice, charity and mercy. The presence of Yahweh in the Tabernacle (as the sign of Yahweh’s saving action in the Exodus) is the foundation of lives of justice, charity and mercy.

**The Importance of Eating Together**

Luther recognizes that this pattern extends into the life of the Christian church when he argues that the Eucharistic table, not family relationships or guild covenants, is the foundation of Christian acts of charity and mercy. In *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*, Luther lays out his understanding of the sign, significance and human impact of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. He concludes with a critique of the fraternal organizations that were the established means of providing charity in his day. These brotherhoods, as they are popularly practiced in Luther’s day, were not expressions of Christian charity. Rather they were glaring examples of selfishness and pride. “For in them men learn to seek their own good, love themselves, to be faithful only to one another, to despise others, to think themselves better than others, and to presume to stand higher before God than others.” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 35, p. 69).

What is important for our consideration here is not so much Luther’s problem with the fraternities of his day, but with his conclusion that the sacred unity created at the Eucharistic table is the foundation and source of all acts of Christian service—especially those done for the sake of other members of the body of Christ.

The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper creates a fellowship, which, Luther explains, “…consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints (i.e. believers) are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament.” (*Luther* p. 51). Of the implications of this fellowship, Luther writes, “As love and support are given you, in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy.” (*Luther*, p. 54).

**Where Shall We Eat?**

This insight moves us one step down the road toward resolving what may seem to some to be an ‘either/or’ between art and mission. Such a resolution is found in the realization that at the core of the alleged conflict is an unbiblical anti-materialist presumption. The assertion that people are more important than things, or that mission is more important than things (certainly two unassailable positions) slides quickly and almost imperceptibly toward an assumption that things, that is material goods, are flawed or evil and that for the church to spend its resources on acquiring things, especially things of beauty, betrays a materialistic idolatry. The false assumption continues that if we were serious about mission we’d realize that the place and space are unimportant and that conceiving the space through design and adorning it with art is a dangerous, maybe even sinful misuse of the church’s resources.

**Holy, Holy, Holy**

But the place is important. The service mission (as well as the evangelistic mission) demands a Eucharistic table around which the community will be fed and thus equipped for service. This service will be done by physical people in a physical world among other folk who inhabit both time and space. The Eucharist must happen somewhere. Far from unimportant, the Eucharistic table and the place that houses it are of critical importance to the mission of the church. Since this is so, it is worth asking the question: “What is needed of such a place in order for the mission to be well founded?”

Such a question may seem, on the face of it, ridiculous. Further thought will bear out its importance. Through such thought we will arrive at an appreciation for at least three senses of the word “sacred.” Further, we will see that the best source for the mission of the church is found where these three senses
of the sacred are attended to in harmony, so that the reality of the sacred in that place is well attested.

God Says So

Of first and critical importance for the Eucharistic table is the presence of the Eucharist itself. Luther’s Small Catechism reminds us that the Sacrament of the Altar consists of bread and wine together with the Word of God. The Catechism concedes that Sacrament does not draw its power from the bread and the wine, nor from the eating and drinking, but from the Word of God that is spoken over the bread and the wine such that the promises which God speaks are attached to the bread and the wine and the eating and drinking of it. This brings us to the first sense of the word "sacred." In this sense, things are "sacred," that is, "set apart," special or holy by virtue of God’s declaration. The bread and wine of the Eucharist are declared, by the Word of God, to be promise carrying and grace providing. Of all foods consumed by humans, the bread and wine of the Supper are sacred by virtue of the declaration that they are so, by God. To this point, the place, even the quality of the bread and wine are unimportant and irrelevant; what is of critical import is the presence of the Word of God, for it is this word that makes the meal what it is and renders it sacred.

Thus, there is a sense of a “declared sacred,” and an example of it lies at the center of the Eucharistic table around which the congregation — the Eucharistic community — gathers.

We’re Here Doing This

As this community gathers around this sacred meal, another sense of the sacred comes to be at play. The very act of gathering for the meal (not to mention the service at which it occurs) with a community of people at a particular place for Sunday after Sunday transforms the place of the gathering by virtue of the experience of the community. Individuals see themselves as members of the gathering, experience the reality of the gracious presence of God in the gathering, find friendships among those gathered and mark the most
profound moments of life—birth and death—among the gathered. Individuals are formed in their faith and are formed into a community through such gathering. The place of such formation comes to be a sacred place, not only because things that God has declared to be sacred are present there, but also because it is a place set apart by the practice of that which is good by the assembly.

Such a sense of the sacred is not limited to churches. Schools, where the blessings of learning and friendship initiate individuals into the legacy of alumni, are described as “these hallowed halls.” Infield grass where records have been set and championships won are transplanted from old baseball parks to the new (perhaps soulless?) stadiums that replace them. Such sacredness, such set apartness, comes from commendable human activity. Such human activity does not work salvation, let’s be clear. But such human activity does render a place set apart and renders that place as sacred.

So the Eucharistic table and the place of its housing come to be sacred, and this “practiced sacredness” joins the aforementioned “declared sacredness” to bear witness to the presence of the Sacred.

**It’s Beautiful**

These things could happen in a barn. They could happen in a pre-engineered metal structure that was originally designed to warehouse plumbing supplies. Regardless of the environment, the declaration of God and the practice of God’s people would render such a former warehouse a sacred space. For the fully formed Christian and for those members of the household of faith who were formed in that place, the sacredness of such a place would be apparent and unquestioned. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which such an environment would be deemed inappropriate.

The Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, is quoted as saying, “I have not experienced the miracle of faith, but I have known the miracle of ineffable space.” (Kieckhefer, p. 229). One might not want Le Corbusier teaching Bible class, but one can’t fault this pioneer of modernism and the vision behind the 1955 Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp in France for his sense of the power of a well-ordered space that uses material and light well.

Human beings respond to their environment; and places of beauty, whether natural or constructed, have the power to trigger deep responses. Certainly one may treasure a painting of a landscape for the technical virtuosity of the painter, but the landscape itself is also the object of our delight. Roads now designated as scenic routes might have been constructed in their day as the most practical route through an area, but such roads are maintained and specially marked in this day of four, six and eight lane freeways because they afford the experience of beauty. Regarding the built environment, Le Corbusier stated, “Space and light and order. Those are the things that men need just as much as they need bread or a place to sleep.” (Wikipedia). The scenic route might no longer seem pragmatic but only if pragmatism is defined strictly by the stopwatch.

This does not mean that church buildings need to be lavish or imposing. In his little book, *Architecture for Worship*, Lutheran architect E. A. Sovik argues for simple buildings that express the reality that the church is the people and not the building, and that this church is called to a life of servanthood. Of traditional church architecture, Sovik observes, “... there is so much similarity between the structures of the church and those of temporal majesty that we Christians have made generally and for centuries the assumption that church buildings should be grand if resources allow and grandiose if they are not. And while churchmen have asserted that good people should be humble and kind, they have
built churches which are presumptuous and unkind.” (Sovik, p. 58).

Nevertheless, Sovik makes a compelling case for careful design and the thoughtful use of natural materials in order to create places that, while not ostentatious, are beautiful and hospitable.

In a section under the heading, The Place of Beauty, Sovik borrows from the influential work of an early 20th century theologian and philosopher, Rudolf Otto, when he argues that aesthetic beauty is a tool of the artist by which the experience of “the Holy” might be made evident to human beings. (Sovik, p. 60). Otto, in his book, The Idea of the Holy, observes that along with a rational/doctrinal component and a moral/ethical component, the experience of God by human beings—the act of worship—brings with it a feeling of God’s holiness, a feeling of the numinous. It is worth observing at this point that Otto’s categories find their expression in the three senses of the sacred. Sovik contends that the experience of beauty, of places and objects that are well designed and crafted, that use materials honestly and without ruse or pretension, that employ long-tested principles of proportion and balance (which is not to be confused with symmetry), that such examples of beauty are able to mediate (not present or create) the experience of the numinous. Music is another discipline that serves in this capacity.

Well-designed buildings, not just churches, have the ability, by their use of space and light, to trigger the experience of the sacred. They are places, which by the way they present the physical reality of space, are places set apart. No one needs to tell us that such places of beauty are special. Just as surely as we recognize the point of the scenic turnout on the side of the road, we know a special building when we experience it. A building that humanely houses the life of the church which is the reception of the gifts of God for the life of the world, that provides an environment that honestly and directly uses natural materials that feel good to the touch and invite such touch, and that by very design calls one to consider realities beyond one’s self, such a place is an example of what one might call the aesthetic sacred.
The Pursuit of Beauty

The pursuit of such beauty will always consume the resources of the church, but such a pursuit need not take on a consumptive role out of balance with the rest of the church’s mission. Neither is such a pursuit merely decorative, a pleasantry but unnecessary to the core of the mission. As much as good grammar in the proclamation is necessary, as much as actions of justice and mercy are necessary, so is the quest of beauty in the place of the assembly. None of these things will save us, but all of them bear witness to that which saves.

This then is the point: that in order for the church to receive that which has been given by God and bear witness to the fullness of what it believes about the Gospel and the presence of God, these three senses of the sacred—the declared, the practiced and the aesthetic—must be present.

The Gift of Vocation

There are those within the church whose vocation it is to master the expression of the aesthetic sacred. Liturgical design consultants, artists and architects are living their lives in pursuit of that which is beautiful. Each of them work in their discipline to help the congregation find the means by which all the senses of the sacred may be present in the house of the church.

Consultants work with planning committees and in the context of large congregational meetings, helping a congregation reflect on and take hold of their theology of worship so that when it comes time to communicate with artists and architects, the congregation will have clarity and consensus around their values and programming needs. A time of building or renovation in a congregation ought to be a time of renewal. A liturgical design consultant can help to make the most of this opportunity.

While it’s said that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, it’s also true that particular shapes, proportions and plans are consistently pleasing. The world of our creator God is full of models and patterns worthy of analysis and adoption. Artists and architects make it their business to see and reflect on these basic structures and principles. As surely as it’s a blessing for a congregation to receive the services of a well-trained and practiced theologian, so the services of a diligent designer who brings to the congregation’s values and programming a practiced eye are a true gift.

The work of such persons is certainly an asset to a congregation with plenty of resources to bear on the work of design and construction. Such work is absolutely critical for those communities whose limited resources will not be capable of absorbing mistakes and ill-conceived experiments gone awry.

Should these things be sold and the money given to the poor? It’s a flawed question. The beautiful place where God and the people meet and the gifts of God are received is the means by which we will not only express and understand the church’s mission. It is that place where such a mission will be supplied.

Besides, allowing for a moment that the antimaterialist premise is valid, such a solution would merely shift the sinful burden to the accursed purchaser of such beauty.

Works Cited


