



An empty building

The city of Amsterdam is renowned for its rich cultural history, museums, breathtaking architecture, and its deep religious roots. If you walk around Amsterdam Centrum, amidst centuries-old buildings, along cobbled streets and tree-lined canals, you will see many old church buildings. Some are magnificent structures. Others are sandwiched between other buildings – you hardly see them until you are walking by. They are everywhere. But the sobering reality of these church buildings is that many are no longer used for worship services. Some simply stand as a monument or museum; others serve sinister purposes.

As you pass by one older church building along a quiet street and canal, you read on the building, Anno Domini 1685 – the year of our Lord 1685. That's a fairly old building. You also read in an older style of Dutch – and here I will translate – “God is our refuge.” It is a beautiful confession. These words cannot be removed because they are deeply inscribed on the stone façade of the building. It is not impossible that some of our ancestors worshipped in this building. But there is something else about the building. There are two entrance ways. Over the left front door of the building is a neon sign to which every eye is drawn, with these words spelled out: “Erotic Museum.” And to the side, inscribed on two doors which stand wide open are the words: “De Burgh.” This means, “The Refuge.” This was now a pub – the kind of pub where you not only can get a glass of beer but also marijuana and other drugs. The warped irony in the name of this pub is that one does not find refuge in God but in a glass of beer or a joint. You almost have to see it to believe it. This old church building with a beautiful, scriptural confession carved into its stone has been turned into a building of immoral filth.

Nothing new

It is quite shocking to think that in the very building where sermons were preached, sacraments administered, weddings and funerals held, one can now find a place of such blatant immorality. But it is hardly unique. In Edmonton there is an old church building (old by Edmonton standards = ninety years) which eventually became a lounge and then a bar, and then it lay vacant for years. Recently it was revived as the Mustard Seed Church which ministers to the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of the downtrodden in the inner city. That's a happier ending. However there are many church buildings in Canada which stand empty, and not because they are structurally unsound: attendance has dropped off.

We should not think that we are dealing with a twentieth or twenty-first century problem. There is nothing new under the sun. We read in 2 Kings 21:7 about King Manasseh:

He took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple, of which the Lord had said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever.”

We read of Manasseh and his son Amon that they introduced a type of paganism to Judah and to the temple that was more horrible than anything that was practised by the Canaanites whom Joshua was to drive from the Promised Land. How bad did it get? It came to the point that Manasseh sacrificed his own son.

Now we learn that the Lord God effected a great Reformation through Amon's son Josiah. But it is clear that God was deeply offended by the paganism which was introduced to his people and into the temple itself. We hear the Lord saying as He looked at this paganism going on in his temple: *“In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever.”* Even though the temple was but a shadow or copy of the true dwelling place of

God in heaven, it showed Israel what God was like and what was needed to deal with sin. It symbolized what the coming Christ would do for man's salvation. Everything about the temple, particularly God dwelling among his people, was designed to draw the people in faith to Jesus Christ. At the temple they had communion with God, they trusted in the coming Messiah, and so they were saved through faith. All of this was being mocked, trivialized, and rejected by means of Manasseh's and Amon's paganism.

Something different

However, one cannot draw a straight line from the temple in Manasseh's day to the church building in Amsterdam which serves an unholy purpose or the empty church building in Canada. We have said that the Old Testament temple was a shadow of what was to come. With the coming of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit there are new realities. In the Old Testament believers went to "the house of God" where God dwelt. In the new covenant era we do not go to a building which we call "the house of God" or where we claim that God dwells. Think of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17:

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

Think also of 1 Peter 2:4, 5: As you come to Him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Today, the temple of God or the church of God is not a building of stone. God's dwelling place is in his people who are washed in the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ and are gathered together in the unity of a true faith. Believers are filled with the Holy Spirit and are like living stones built into a spiritual house.

What this means

What this all comes down to is this: the holiness of the church does not depend on keeping church buildings intact for their intended purpose. It could happen – and it has happened – that church buildings are physically taken away from us and we are forced to gather in secret, in a barn, in a gym, or even in an open field. This will not break up the church as the assembly of true Christian believers. Nor will it affect both the blessing of God and the call of God for the church to be holy as He is holy. God's blessings are administered through his Spirit and Word. God's call is for his people to respond in faith and obedience.

Therefore, as deplorable as it is to see what happens in some church buildings in our modern world, it cannot be our primary concern. What sometimes happens to church buildings is but the symptom of a deeper problem. The crucial concern is what goes on in the true dwelling place of God.

In addition to the texts we mentioned above, there is also Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body." In the Old Testament God dwelt in the temple; today God the Holy Spirit dwells in us as believers. We are to keep that dwelling place holy in all that we think, say, and do. We are to refrain from every form of immorality and in concrete ways show that we wish to glorify God with our whole life.

In this way God prepares us for the great fulfillment when the dwelling of God will be in the midst of his people in the New Jerusalem.

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