

**[NOTE:** Posted here are two versions of my “Good Question” article that appeared in *Christianity Today*, May 2005, p. 54. The first version is the article as it was published; the second is the article as I originally wrote it. The original version provides more biblical basis but less application.]

## GOOD QUESTION

# God's Housing Crisis

(As published in *Christianity Today*)

*Why should church buildings get so much of the financial, physical, and social attention that is rightly due to the needs of Christians and others?*

—Kofo Olomu, Cotonou, Benin

Answered by Howard A. Snyder

Interestingly, church history shows an inverse ratio between dynamic church multiplication and preoccupation with buildings. Emphasis on buildings is generally linked with relatively slow growth or even decline.

Rapidly growing movements generally put little stress on buildings, tending toward pragmatism and flexibility, meeting wherever they can. The exception: If large subsidies are available, rapid church growth and focus on buildings may go together for a generation or two before the building-centeredness begins to sap church vitality.

Jesus showed a radical attitude toward the Jerusalem temple. He claimed that he himself fulfilled the temple's meaning and function.

Through Jesus true worship can occur any time, any place. Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The physical temple is now theologically unnecessary.

Through Jesus' incarnation and resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit, the church itself has become the temple of God. Since Pentecost, buildings are no longer God's dwelling. God now "tabernacles" and "temples" in communities of disciples who meet together in Jesus' name.

Why then do congregations devote so much attention to buildings? Buildings are places where ministry happens, so most congregations argue that they need to be good stewards of these facilities—and that takes time and money. But in some cases, presuppositions about what church ministries are supposed to look like—including athletic facilities, more and larger meeting rooms, etc.—put church leaders under pressure to build and build when it might not be the best investment for the church. Buildings are not wrong, but congregations, like everyone else, tend to have expectations. Expectations regarding facilities can easily grow out of proportion to ministry. It

would be a major task to retrain the expectations of U.S. Christians, but certainly one way is to ensure that the building (or potential new building) is a ministry tool. Leaders must help Christians perceive it in those terms.

Many Christians sincerely believe that church buildings are "God's house"—holy places, set apart for divine purposes. And many church buildings do indeed give glory to God in both their architecture and their use. Still, this view can easily distort biblical teaching about Jesus Christ and the church, causing an exaggerated focus on buildings and budgets, and eclipsing the biblical focus on Christian community (*koinonia*)—close Christian fellowship seven days a week, not just a few hours on Sundays.

The solution is to recover the focus on Jesus Christ and the meaning of Spirit-community in him. The earliest church thrived as a network of house churches, without church buildings. None of the New Testament writers complained about this lack. So churches today should sort out their priorities.

Churches can consider various options: turning buildings into seven-days-a-week multi-use facilities; sharing facilities with other organizations or churches; moving most church functions into homes or other venues. Some churches have found that the most faithful option is to sell their real estate and invest the money in missions and ministry to the poor, where the long-term dividends are much higher.

It is generally a sign of church renewal when a congregation rediscovers real Christian community and Jesus-like ministry in the world—and as a result, begins either to de-emphasize church buildings or turns "God's house" into a genuine resource for multiplied ministry to those in need.

This does not mean de-emphasizing worship; rather it means discovering the outward missional thrust of worship that we so easily lose when our focus is primarily inward, within four walls. The percentage of a church's budget spent on gospel outreach (locally and globally) is generally a good indicator of spiritual health. Lively churches typically spend more on missions, evangelism, and justice and relief ministries than they do on staff and facilities.

Jesus-centered churches know how to keep their priorities straight.

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## GOOD QUESTION

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## (Original Version)

*Why should church buildings get so much of the financial, physical, and social attention that is rightly due to the needs of Christians and others?*

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Howard A. Snyder

Interestingly, church history shows an inverse ratio between dynamic church multiplication and a preoccupation with buildings. Focus on buildings is generally linked with relatively slow growth or even decline. Rapidly growing movements generally put little stress on buildings, tending toward pragmatism and flexibility, meeting wherever they can. (Exception: If large subsidies are available, rapid church growth and a focus on buildings may go together for a generation or two before the building-centeredness begins to sap church vitality.)

### **What Jesus Taught**

Jesus showed a radical attitude toward the Jerusalem temple. He claimed that he himself fulfilled the temple's meaning and function. Consider John 2:13–17. After Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jewish leaders asked for an authenticating sign. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews were baffled, but John explains that Jesus "was speaking of the temple of his body." Only after the resurrection did Jesus' disciples get it: Jesus himself is the true temple. Wherever Jesus is, there we can say "Emmanuel," God is with us.

Jesus made a similar point with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7–26). Where should people worship? "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Through Jesus a new order of worship has come. The question is no longer *where*—some sacred building or site—but *who*. Through Jesus true worship can occur any time, any place. Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The physical temple is now theologically unnecessary.

The New Testament amplifies this new temple theology. Jesus replaces the temple (historically as well as theologically—Romans destroy the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD). A new community, a new Israel indwelt by the Holy Spirit is formed around Jesus. The church is a people and a household, "a dwelling place for God" by the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). Through Jesus' incarnation and resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit the church itself has become the temple of God. This truth is rooted in rich Old Testament teachings about tabernacle and temple—God's intense desire to dwell among his people, something never fully possible until Jesus himself opened the door into the Holy of Holies.

In the New Testament, "temple" is never used of church buildings. When the New Testament

refers to the temple it always means either the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, Jesus himself, or the church as the dwelling place of God by the Spirit. Since Jesus and Pentecost, buildings are no longer God's dwelling. God now "tabernacles" and "temples," as he always intended, in communities of disciples who meet together, wherever, in Jesus' name.

Why then do congregations devote so much attention to buildings? Well, we easily misunderstand what Jesus taught and what he did through the incarnation and the sending of the Spirit. Many Christians sincerely believe that church buildings are "God's house"—holy places in which God delights. Yet this distorts biblical teaching about Jesus Christ and the church, causing an exaggerated focus on buildings and budgets and eclipsing the biblical focus on Christian community (*koinonia*)—close Christian fellowship seven days a week, not just a few hours on Sundays.

### **A Question of Priorities**

The solution is to recover the focus on Jesus Christ and the meaning of Spirit-community in him. The early church thrived as a network of house churches, without church buildings. None of the New Testament writers complained about this lack.

So churches today should sort out their priorities. Various options can be considered: Turning existing buildings into seven-days-a-week multi-use facilities; sharing facilities with other organizations or churches; moving most church functions into homes or other venues. Some churches have found that the most faithful option is to sell their real estate and invest the money in missions and ministry to the poor where the long-term dividends are much higher, if less tangible.

It is generally a sign of church renewal when a congregation rediscovers real Christian community and Jesus-like ministry in the world—and as a result, begins either to de-emphasize church buildings or turns "God's house" (so-called) into a genuine resource for multiplied ministry to those in need. This does not mean de-emphasizing worship; rather it means discovering the outward missional thrust of worship that we so easily lose when our focus is primarily inward, within four walls.

The percentage of a church's budget spent on gospel outreach (locally and globally) is generally a pretty good indicator of spiritual health. I find that lively churches typically spend more on missions, evangelism, and justice and relief ministries than they do on staff and facilities. Jesus-centered churches know how to keep their priorities straight.

(Biblical quotations are from the NRSV.)

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