

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

■ THE CHURCH IS/HAS A BUILDING

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THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

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THE CHURCH IS/HAS A BUILDING

I had a friend in the ministry who bridled at the use of the word "Reverend" before a clergyman's name. He wasted no opportunity to straighten the world out on the fact that the word "reverend" was an adjective, not a title. Quite correctly, he pointed out that to speak of a minister as Reverend Smith was as wrong as referring to a judge as Honorable Jones. Did his campaign to abolish the inevitable accomplish anything? Apparently not. In fact, some of his brethren in the ministry, myself included, used to add to his woes and deepen the lostness of his cause by writing him letters that bore the salutation in caps, "DEAR REVEREND."

Today I may be off on an equally impossible rescue operation. The word I want to salvage is the word "church." Whether you misuse the word Reverend or not is relatively unimportant, except to grammerians or sensitive preachers. But how you use the word "church" has far reaching implications for the shape and direction of your life.

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Join me in sensing the problem by asking yourself whether it is more accurate to say "The church is a building," or "The church has a building." In common speech the assumption prevails that the church is a building. Why else would we ask a neighbor "Will you come to church with me today?" Why else would we turn to a colleague at work on Thursday morning and say "We had a good meeting at the church last night." Or why would a lawyer in San Francisco turn to his partner and say "When you go east and stop in New York be sure to visit The Riverside Church."

But in the Biblical and purer sense the church is not a building. The church is people who only incidentally have a building. Church is not something you go to: Church is something you are. It is not an

edifice but a fellowship. Its durability is not in the strength of its stone but in the commitment of its members.

The church is not a building, the church has a building. Any cause, to function in our world, needs place and location. It is a false dualism that would suggest that because the church's primary concern is with the kingdom of God it can exist in spiritual form alone.

It is not without significance that the Hebrews had first a tabernacle in the wilderness and in the Promised Land a temple. Jesus pronounced judgment on the temple of his day not because the building as such was wrong but because the temple had betrayed its purpose and been unfaithful to its vision.

The church is people who have a building. The people are primary. The building is secondary. But there is hardly a congregation of Christian people anywhere who do not have to fight continuously to subordinate the building in which they meet to the purpose for which they exist.

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It would be hard to imagine a place where greater vigilance against the equation "The church is the building," is more needed than here at Riverside. The least important part of a church's life is the building where it gathers; but the more beautiful and stately the building, the stronger the likelihood that this will be forgotten.

The magnitude and magnificence of this building grows on me with every passing day. There is no reason why museums, office buildings and concert halls should be architecturally compelling while churches forfeit beauty in the service of the good and the true. I rejoice in a church whose graceful form adorns the skyline of the city. A church that is worthy of a stop on the

Gray Line Tour. A church that can make the heart pound faster and the pulse race. If this church cannot turn you on, my friend, then you don't have any switches!

Nor is its beauty idle. Its height is appropriate to majesty. Its darkness appropriate to mystery. Its bells appropriate to joy. And its music appropriate to praise. What it cost is more than off-set by what it has inspired men to be and do. "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God."
(Ps 84:12)

But strangely enough this building which is our joy is at the same time our most formidable barrier to mission. How so? For one thing it can easily draw into membership people who are in love with stone, rather than in love with Jesus Christ. Just as a beautiful lady is never quite sure whether she is loved for her beauty or for herself, so a beautiful church is never sure whether people are drawn to her loveliness or to her Christ. The rock on which the church is built, and every branch of the church including this, has nothing at all to do with physical symmetry and form. We know what the rock is. Jesus turned to his disciples and asked "Who do you say that I am?" Peter stepped forward and answered "Thou art the Christ the son of the living God." Jesus responded to that affirmation, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock" (the rock of a man confessing his faith in the living Christ) "upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Mat 16:18) The most valuable asset of this or any other congregation in the Christian world is the number of people on its rolls who have pledged their "yes" to Christ.

But this building in which we gather today is also a barrier to mission in that it tends to draw people in rather than send them out. Many church buildings in this country simply and frankly do not say "come." They are poorly designed, cheaply built, uncomfortable,

uninviting. All across the nation there are people who go to such church buildings only out of a strong sense of duty. They go as late as they can and leave as early as they can because the buildings do not say "come."

Not so this church. For many of us, and let us not blush to declare it, this building is the most beautiful thing in our lives - materially speaking. It is the cleanest, safest, most attractive building that we frequent regularly. There are men and women and boys and girls by the hundreds who come to this building week after week from roachy, cramped, poorly ventilated, undersized apartments. This building provides for them what might be called a ministry of place.

One of the most moving pieces of writing that Ernest Hemmingway ever gave us is his short story A Clean Well-Lighted Place. Two waiters in the late hours of the night talk with each other about why the café stays open so long. One waiter is impatient. He wants to close up and go home. The other looks at a lonely deaf man enjoying a drink on the veranda and feels compassionate. "Each night" he says, "I'm reluctant to close up because there may be someone who needs the café." "Hombre," says his partner, "there are bodegas open all night long." The first waiter replies "You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves." 1 As one reads on one senses that the sympathetic waiter wants the café open long into the night not only for the sake of the deaf man, but for himself as well.

That's just it, we come to this building and when we come we want to stay. When we go we want to return. We are handicapped in that coming to this clean well-lighted place we do not often see or feel the city round about us. It is possible to commute to this church on a Sunday morning from a suburb, ride down clean, well-traveled roads, slide into a parking place in a well-kept garage, come upstairs on antiseptically

pure elevators and never see the city at all. The first word of the gospel is "Come." But the second word is "Go." And that's the word we do not hear too well, much less obey.

Finally, may I suggest that this building in which we rejoice is a barrier to our sense of mission because it tends to blunt the urgency of our need to give. The most unbelievably words in any church bulletin in America, bar none, are these: "The services of worship and the work of this church are dependent upon the contributions of its members and visitors." Even people within the church don't believe it. It's bad enough when friends on the outside don't understand. Never does a week go by that we don't get two or three requests for financial aid from all sorts of causes in the city and beyond. The assumption seems to be that The Riverside Church has a bottomless treasury and unlimited funds. At first I was flattered by such letters, but now I'm getting nervous about them. Does Riverside have unlimited money? Apparently so, but actually no.

We who are members have difficulty believing this. The building we have "inherited" blinds us to authentic budgetary needs. I saw a clever ad in a paper in Columbia, South Carolina this summer, placed by the local bus company. It said "Ride a \$30,000 bus for 20 cents." Which being translated and applied to our situation means "Come worship in a multi-million dollar plant for a dollar a week."

One of our members said it for me when he said, "Riverside Church, in a sense, is stone poor." The building and its upkeep are safeguarded through endowment funds. The Trustees of this church deserve credit for keeping those funds adequate despite the inroads of inflation. But the staff and program of this church are dependent on what we give, and this is the way it ought to be. As the old saying has it, "Endowed cats catch no mice." If all we can do is gather in the luxury and finery of this place without making an adequate contribution to the on-going mission of the Christian

church, then we would deserve no better fate than to see it all close down!

There are many churches in this land, in fact most, for whom the current expense budget is a matter of life and death. "Where will we get the money to pay for the heat and the light and the insurance?" Providentially, in this congregation we are not beset by these concerns. Yet, our freedom from such worries has not sufficiently motivated us to support the program life and out-reach of this congregation as we ought. Building wealth, my friends, does not and will not carry over into program and staff expense.

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We have here, bless God, a plant that is second to none and open to all. But the plant is not the church. The church is people, people who know the Christ and yearn to make Him known. What we need now are men to match our building - vision, to match the height of our tower; beauty, to match the flowing gothic lines; harmony of communion, to match the anthems of our peerless choristers. Would that we were as true as the bells that ring in the Carillon, as straight as the aisles of the nave, as clean as the floors on which we walk, as attractive as the stained glass windows. Would that we could be to our city, to our country, and to our world in flesh and blood and spirit - all that this building means in stone.

It is wrong to say "the church is a building." It is right to say "the church has a building." Peter, himself the rock on which the church is founded, said to his fellow believers, "And like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house." (I Peter 2:5a)

CLOSING PRAYER


Lord, for every impulse to serve
generated in this place,
for every friendship formed,
for every stiffening of the will
for worthy ends,
we bless Thy name.

Nag us continuously about our
priorities - until what
matters most to Thee
matters most to us.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord
Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hemingway, Ernest, A Clean Well-Lighted Place,
p. 32, Scribner, 1927



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