



A RESPONSE TO THE CENTENARY LECTURE

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**The Very Revd
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Professor Reymond is Professor of Practical Theology in the University of Lausanne, and what we have been shown today is the importance and the excitement of a critical theology of practice. The question of a critical Practical Theology is: "Is our practice really the expression of our faith or is it something else?" What we do needs to be examined as critically as what we say, for what we do always speaks louder. And among the many things that are done in the name of faith, the building of a church is not the least important.

The interest of the Practical Theologian in Church Architecture is different from that of the Church Historian or Architectural Historian. The Architectural Historian may be mainly interested in techniques, styles, materials, and may do us the service of reminding us of the importance of these things, and also that the architecture of the Christian church cannot be isolated from that of the public and domestic buildings of the same period. The Church Historian will, I hope, see the relation between the theology and the buildings, but is



mainly concerned to record and understand the past. The Practical Theologian will be indebted to the historians, but must go beyond historical study to illumine the present and suggest the future.

That is why what we have heard this morning is not only supremely interesting and informative, but also supremely important. We have been shown both the continuity and the discontinuity between the Roman (medieval) and the Reformed, and seen the theology and the principles which guided Reformed Church architecture. We have seen some of the distortions which that has suffered. Professor Reymond leaves us with the question: “Is a genuine reformed architecture possible today ?”

If I may respond to that question from the experience of the Church of Scotland, I would say that that depends on whether we still have a genuine Reformed understanding of the church and its worship, and of its place in the community. And I am not certain whether our recent practice enables us to answer with an unequivocal “Yes”.

The Reformed tradition is not a straitjacket. The theology of grace is a treasure out of which we may bring things both new and old. But the new things in the Church of Scotland today do not seem to be coming out of the Reformed tradition, but out of American fundamentalism and revivalism, on the one hand, and an



undiscriminating and uncritical ecumenism on the other. In a post-modern world, in which anything goes, so long as you like it, we need to sinews of a genuine Reformed theology if we are to regain strength. That is why today's lecture has been encouraging and refreshing.

Professor Reymond sees our buildings as the visible expression of the church in the community - the actualisation of what we are and of what we believe. They have the obvious function of housing, sheltering, the church and its activities - chiefly that of worship, and have to be designed conveniently for that. I found helpful his understanding of the "choral square" as the gathering of the community for worship.

People like myself who have written about Church Architecture have stressed, perhaps too exclusively, the internal arrangement of the building. For our buildings also have an expressive function. They make a statement about the church and about its presence in the community. They are, if you like, a symbol.

People outwith the church seem to understand this better than the church itself. When Mayfield Church in Edinburgh had lost its roof in a spectacular fire, Bill McDonald, the minister, saw from his study window a rather shabby figure hovering about before putting



something into the letter-box. Curiosity aroused he went out and took from the letter-box an envelope with money in it and a note which said: "I am not a member of the church, but I hate to see that building standing roofless. Here is a contribution to your restoration fund." The Church matters to those who don't go to it.

The Church of Scotland has shown an indecent zeal for closing churches. Closing churches is the great achievement of our time, and congregations who resist closure are regarded as delinquent. Our ancestors certainly had no compunction about pulling down a church, but it was to build a bigger and better one. Today we simply abandon them to the highest bidder, content that there is one less building to maintain. The high cost of maintenance is the current excuse for church closure. But what do people think when the church in their community is closed? No one thinks to ask them.

Nor do we seem to care much which building is closed. recently I visited St Andrews-Erskine Church in Dunfermline, a magnificent church on a fine site in the centre of the town. Built in 1800 it was the second church on that site, replacing the smaller one built when Ralph Erskine and his congregation were ejected from Dunfermline Abbey in 1740. The present building has a statue of Ralph Erskine at the top of an impressive flight of steps. It is in many ways a monument to the



Original Secession. The interior is breathtaking, but it seats 1700, and a congregation of 471 cannot afford the £500,000 needed to repair the roof. The building is to be closed and the congregation transported to a new church in a new area. One cannot blame the Presbytery and certainly not the congregation, but I do blame our church for not having an imaginative policy to preserve and use our historic buildings.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of this, the Scottish Church Society, the Scoto-Catholic wing of the Church of Scotland, was active in Church extension, and some fine churches were built to house its liturgy. St Kenneth's: Govan, St Bride's: Partick, St Oswald's: Edinburgh come to mind. Where are they now, and their congregations ? Churches closed, if not ruinous, congregations forcibly united, a tradition killed, because no one in authority cared about it. I have never been a member of the Scottish Church Society and I disagree with its theology, but I believe these fine buildings and their tradition of worship were worth preserving as part of the diversity of our church.

But can we recover a genuine reformed architecture in Scotland today? Only, I think, if we rediscover in our reformed tradition the confidence and the intellectual sinew to merit the name Reformed.



The Church Service Society, under whose aegis we meet today, began as an attempt to revitalise the worship of the Scottish church *through the recovery of a genuine Reformed tradition*. That was the aim of the early editions of *Euchologion*. Later a different direction was taken and an Anglicising archaism came in. The society has changed since then. Does it need to find new strength today from its Reformed tradition ?

In Scotland, as in Geneva, at the Reformation the medieval cathedrals and large city churches had to be adapted for Reformed use. One the principle that Reformed worship requires only one worship centre and not a plurality, the canny Scots either partitioned the church for use by two or three congregations, or used the nave alone or the chancel alone, leaving the other part to become ruinous. Communion was taken sitting at long tables, but these were usually set up only when communion was celebrated, and were not often a permanent feature of the church. 19th century restorations, as of the nave at Dunblane, produced 'vista' churches, lovely to look at when empty, but difficult to use.

The T-shaped church, itself a development from the medieval rectangular church, is perhaps the typical Reformed architecture of Scotland. Many other designs, square, octagonal and even circular,



are to be found in the 18th and 19th centuries, but still genuinely Reformed. However, last century the “platform pulpit” became a stage for the popular preacher in city churches, helped by the invention of gas-light. Later, under the influence of the High Church movement there were many “restorations” of churches, especially country churches, which all took the pulpit away from its traditional position in the middle of the south wall, put it in a corner, turned all the seating to the east, and built on a little apse at the east end. The belief that the Norman style, with a rounded apse, was most suited to Presbyterian worship was held with as much tenacity and as little theological foundation as the Cambridge Ecclesiologists’ adherence to Gothic.

In the period of Church extension building after 1945 the Church provided architects with a brief which told them how much the building was to cost, how many it should seat, and that there must be a hall in which you could play badminton. About the church’s worship, preaching, Christian education and theology there was not a word at all. Architects could meet the requirement for badminton quite easily, but you would think that the silence of the brief on other matters would allow them to go wild. Not so. When I saw a slide presentation of churches built in the 1950s, they were all, with minor variations, the same church: slender long-axis buildings, with a little



apse at one end. It was only after St Columba's: Glenrothes (a product of some theological reflection) broke that mould, and when the Church Extension Committee began to send to architects a theological brief (a paper that had been given to a conference on Theology and Architecture) that some interesting and original buildings began to be designed. Theology had not constrained them. It had liberated them from convention.

I am sure that you have all felt, as I have, the liberating and encouraging effect of Professor Reymond's practical theology this morning.

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