

Column

One thing that always seems to be present when you visit ancient churches and cathedrals in England and elsewhere is scaffolding. You might almost say, “Where the cross is, there will also be the scaffolding.” Reconstructing, shoring up, preserving and renewing is a never-ending chore.

Nor does a building have to be 500 or 1000 years old for maintenance to be required. This past week, as I came and went in and out of the church I serve (which is a little over a quarter of a century old), there were three men reworking the moldings around the pointed, gothic stained-glass windows. Such work requires brute strength and a jeweler’s touch. They had both.

Once, as I passed by, it occurred to me that there are similarities between Christians and church edifices. Both are in some sense God’s buildings and require constant care.

Imagine a church (a building) left to its own devices, no maintenance ever being carried out. What would happen to it? Well, it would first begin to look tired and shabby, and, if this lack of care continued, the structure itself would begin to weaken and eventually tumble in on itself.

Indeed, I can think of a church in my home city where this was exactly what happened. First, bits and pieces of architectural detail began to come loose and crash to the ground. After that, water permeated the roof causing the rafters and other supports to deteriorate. An ominous sag appeared in the roof line. Finally, the building had to be taken down. It’s sad to see a place once pulsating with faith and life end like that, but it happens.

What about one who names the name of the Lord Jesus? Is he or she not also God’s building, in reality more so than any brick-and-mortar structure? Are they not God’s true Temple? The Apostle Paul thinks so. In Ephesians 2:22 he writes: “Ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”

Do Christians need to be renewed? Ought they to be ‘made’ and then left to stand the best they can in the midst of the hostile elements of this world? No, they need to be daily renewed by the Holy Spirit. Left alone they become much like that building I have just described, feeble, decrepit, and yes at times an eyesore.

What is the answer? How are God's people sustained, maintained and fashioned more and more into a holy temple, a dwelling place fit for the Most High God, a place of beauty and grace?

The answer I am proposing does not involve any cutting-edge technology, fresh-off-the-press self-help books or spiritual gurus. Rather, it is following a schedule of maintenance God's people have used from the beginning. It includes: prayer, Holy Communion, Bible reading, service, witness, and fellowship with other Christian believers.

These practices are our 'scaffolding'. They say to the world around us that we are God's building and works in progress.

What is the state of your 'building', your Temple? Is the light in your tower burning?

*O LORD Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.
(Collect for Third Sunday in Advent, The Book of Common Prayer)*

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