

PILLARS OF WORSHIP

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This is a sermon delivered in the Nathaniel H. Parker Chapel of McMaster Divinity College on September 22, 2010, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of dedication of the chapel on September 22, 1960.

A day such as this brings different thoughts and memories. We have already heard many reminiscences by one of those who was here when this building was first dedicated in 1960. In some ways, those days were very much different from today—we like to think that they were a simpler and easier time. In other ways, however, they were very much like today—we think of fifty years and we realize that in the grand scale of time it was but a short time ago.

The Principal of the college at the time, Dr. Nathaniel Parker, after whom the chapel is named—although it was not named for him at the time of its building and dedication—gave an address on the occasion of the dedication and opening of this chapel. He entitled it “So Teach Us to Number Our Days,” after the sentence in Ps 90:12.

After reading his talk, I must confess that, surprisingly, it is a fairly discouraging sixteen pages. I won’t go into the details except to say that he exhorts that we should be sure not to be too self-congratulatory on our new building. Besides, we Baptists are used to dour and solemn conditions, what he calls “lowly chapels and meeting houses.” He eventually arrives at despair over the human race. He concludes with these perplexing words: “The erection of a new divinity college building at such a time as this requires both faith and courage. More especially it requires a firm conviction that the ills of this world can be healed by the

sovereign grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The next ten years, or perhaps even five, will determine whether or not the religion of Jesus Christ is still a power in human culture.”

Clearly Nathaniel Parker was not a prophet. As enticing as it may seem to hope to cure the ills of this world and to see Christianity become a force in human culture, I am far less concerned with that than I am that we are faithful to the task that God has called us to—to be witnesses to the life-transforming and redeeming power of the death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

I too wish to talk about an Old Testament passage for a few minutes. Parker briefly mentions Solomon’s temple in his talk, and notes that the temple distracted the Israelites from their focus upon God.

There is another perspective on this situation, however. I would invite you to turn in your Bibles to 1 Kings 6 and 7. First Kings 6 describes the temple that Solomon built for God. The temple was large—60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high—a cubit was about 44 centimeters or 18 inches (according to most scholars). So the temple was about 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet high. It was roofed with cedar and its walls were lined with cedar. The inner room of this temple contained the ark of the covenant and the cherubim overlaid with gold. The walls were covered in carvings, and there were olive wood doors. Perhaps you can even see in the picture of the Old Testament temple something of our own chapel here, both in its shape and in its construction.

This is a very aesthetically satisfying shape and design. It is essentially a rectangle, which has proven to be the best shape for acoustics. Many of the great concert halls of today—such as the Musikverein in Vienna—are designed with the rectangular shape because of how it preserves and transmits sound. It is also an uncluttered shape. There are no unnecessary walls or protrusions, just the straight lines of walls meeting walls. There is nothing to distract those leading and the congregation from viewing each other. There is also a very simple and enduring beauty in such a shape: straight line meeting straight line, reaching upward and forward in unbroken progression. The shape of the temple, and

of our chapel, is something that is well suited to its purpose—providing a means and place of worshipping God together in communal observance. That is what we do here every week, just as we are doing today. We are gathered as a community of followers of Jesus Christ, to worship God and to become better equipped to serve him in the world, as we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ—that salvation has been made available to all who come to him.

That is not all that we can say about the temple or our chapel, however. Solomon hired Hiram, a craftsman from Tyre in Lebanon, to make furnishings for the temple. Hiram made an interesting collection of furnishings. Most of them had clear purposes to perform in the worship ritual, apparently for ritual cleansing or to hold lamps. However, there were two things that he made that are a little more intriguing.

Let me read 1 Kgs 7:15–22:

He cast two bronze pillars, each eighteen cubits high and twelve cubits in circumference. He also made two capitals of cast bronze to set on the tops of the pillars; each capital was five cubits high. A network of interwoven chains adorned the capitals on top of the pillars, seven for each capital. He made pomegranates in two rows encircling each network to decorate the capitals on top of the pillars. He did the same for each capital. The capitals on top of the pillars in the portico were in the shape of lilies, four cubits high. On the capitals of both pillars, above the bowl-shaped part next to the network were the two hundred pomegranates in rows all around. He erected the pillars at the portico of the temple. The pillar to the south he named Jakin and the one to the north Boaz. The capitals on top were in the shape of lilies. And so the work on the pillars was completed. (TNIV)

Hiram was instructed by Solomon to make two pillars. In fact, he did not just construct two pillars, he crafted two huge bronze pillars.¹

These pillars were eighteen cubits or about 27 feet high. They were twelve cubits or eighteen feet around. According to

1. For information on the pillars, see Simpson, “First and Second Kings,” 418–19; LaSor, “1 and 2 Kings,” 330–31.

Jeremiah 52, the sides of the pillars were three inches thick, and they were hollow inside. They had capitals on each one, also made of bronze. Each capital was five cubits or seven and a half feet high, making each pillar over 34 feet high. There were lilies—probably something like the acanthus leaves on a Corinthian capital—adorning these capitals, each of them four cubits or six feet high—those are big lilies. There was probably a sphere nestled in the capital as well.

Each capital had a network of seven interwoven chains hanging from it. This network of chains was encircled with two rows each of pomegranates. There were two hundred pomegranates in all on each capital, draped over the sphere in the middle.

These two pillars were erected right at the entrance to the temple, one on each side of the door. In other words, as worshippers approached the front of the temple, a façade that was 30 feet wide and 45 feet high, they were met by two giant pillars that were 34 feet high each, and nearly six feet across each. On top of that they were glistening bronze with ornately decorated capitals.

Scholars are not clear why chains, lilies, and pomegranates were used. The pomegranate is an intriguing fruit, with various popular thoughts about its symbolic significance. Some have thought that it was the original fruit in the Garden of Eden, others that its blood-red color symbolizes the death of Jesus and redemption.² In other words, no one is quite certain.

Do you know what these pillars were designed to do? Well, there has been a lot of speculation about that. Some think that they had fires in them, perhaps as a reminder of the fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt; others that they were like the obelisks that were in front of other ancient temples. The pillars also had names. Jakin is translated “he establishes,” and Boaz “in him is strength.”

I heard a sermon about these pillars once nearly thirty years ago. I don’t remember much from that sermon except that it was

2. A quick survey of various articles on the web will reveal these opinions and others.

clear then that, after all is said and done, scholars don't really have any idea what these pillars are for. I don't think that they have discovered anything further in the last thirty years either. But let me make a suggestion prompted by that sermon.

These pillars have no direct functional value whatsoever—they do not hold up a roof or support a crossbeam—but they do have an aesthetic and artistic and worshipful value. They were erected as objects of beauty to enhance worship—that is all, and that is more than enough. They were simply designed to *be*—standing in the front of the temple as worshippers approached, glinting with the sunlight as it struck off of the bronze, the various shapes reflecting the light in a myriad of ways. What an incredible sight this must have been as God's people approached the temple for hundreds of years to enter into his presence to worship. This is art without functional value, but full of worshipful purpose.

But why? Why would God require such an entrance? The reason seems to be no other than that God likes beauty, and he likes the place where his worshippers gather to be a place of beauty because it helps them focus on him and it reflects beautifully on him. Our God is a beautiful God who has created a uniquely glorious, ordered, and beautiful universe of which we as humans are one of his prized accomplishments. No wonder, when we were fallen because of our own misbehavior, he sent his very own Son to instigate the process by which this beauty could be restored.

Our chapel is like the temple in a number of ways. It is a building beautifully designed by Bruce Brown, the architect. Its perpendicular style has a sense of grandeur, but is also ideally suited to creating a worshipful experience. The windows on the sides—with colored pieces of glass numbering the congregations in the Baptist Convention at the time of its building—filter light through in a spectacular array as we worship during the changing seasons.

Our chapel is also a thing of beauty in itself—it is full of beautiful and artistically designed features created by William McElcheran, some of them with no other apparent use—and

none is needed—than that they are beautifully created to enhance worship.

As worshippers enter the building, they proceed through beautiful wooden doors with carved angels heralding their arrival, and the words “The Master is Here and Calleth for Thee.” They enter the sanctuary proper and they see the beautifully carved pulpit that depicts Jesus calling his disciples.

They look up further and see the communion table. Here the Lamb of God who gave his life for our sins is depicted, along with figures representing the twelve apostles. As our eyes are elevated by the stark and empty cross, we witness six distinct scenes in the life of our Savior—his baptism, the sower, the healing of the blind man, the breaking of bread, Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, and the resurrected Christ with his nail-scarred hands.

Could we worship in this chapel if it were not the finely constructed and artistically decorated building that it is? Surely we could, as others have through the centuries and continue to do elsewhere. But I don’t think we could worship as well or that it would elevate us to the same heights of reverence and even exultation as we are able to find in this environment. This is not art for art’s sake, but art that enhances worship for its sake.

But let us not forget—the purpose of this building is not architectural grandeur or artistic accomplishment—as much as we have and appreciate these. This building is meant as a splendid and continuous and active place of Christian worship. With the chapel enhanced by these features, members of our community and others from beyond gather regularly here to come before God, enter into his presence, and give him praise and worship for who he is. There is no other reason for this chapel to exist. As long as this chapel is dedicated to this purpose, it remains a lasting memorial to those who helped to create it for that purpose, to those who through the now fifty years have worshipped here together, and to those who will come after us and offer their worship. Once this chapel loses its purpose—no matter how beautiful or how grand it is—it will have forfeited its right to be considered beautiful and even its right to stand here.

So today we are gathered fifty years later to commemorate and renew the acts of dedication that occurred a half century ago. The people who have worshipped in this chapel are the same types of people as they have always been—people in need of God and who wish to worship him—even though their appearances have greatly changed and their worship styles have changed too.

Then the organ was used all the time; now we use it only occasionally, and mostly use contemporary instruments and music instead. Then everyone wore their uniform suits and dresses; now people wear uniforms of a different type, much more casual in nature. However, we worship in a building that remains virtually unchanged from what it was fifty years ago. We have even begun to play the carillon again. In the rest of the College, we are in the process of bringing the rooms up-to-date so that they are equipped for twenty-first century instructional environments. But the chapel remains as it was, and will remain so into the future, because, in a strange sense, this fifty-year-old building is already as up-to-date for its purpose as it could ever be. The chapel remains as it is, in part because, though there is change all around, we continue as before to worship a God who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

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