

1.1. The Temple Reflecting God's Design

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Our conservative bent is such that we will do almost anything rather than invest time and money in property and buildings. One preministerial student commented, “I think it is outrageous that churches spend all this money on constructing fancy buildings when it could be used to buy food and blankets for the homeless.” Little did he realize that he was tapping into one of the most problematic and contentious issues that churches face. How can they justify spending scarce financial resources on properties and buildings when surrounded by so many urgent people needs?

God is glorified not only in caring for orphans and feeding the hungry but also in the quality and condition of “the LORD’s house” (Hag. 1:2). Some churches meet for years, even decades, in schools, theaters, and warehouses to avoid having to build. Church leaders sometimes promote building programs apologetically and defensively. That is why Haggai’s message in Hag. 1:1-15 is one to which we must be attentive.

Haggai prophesied after the Exile. Instead of preaching against the meaninglessness of the Israelites’ insincere worship rituals—the insincerity that ultimately led to their defeat and exile to Babylon—Haggai preached a different message from God. It was time to rebuild.

When the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, they destroyed Solomon’s Temple and left the city in ruins. Seventy years later, the Israelites were back, rebuilding their shattered lives along with their city. They laid the foundation for the new Temple.

Then opposition from the Samaritans arose. The Samaritans were not eager for Jerusalem to become their political and religious rival once again. So the Samaritan leaders wrote letters to their Persian governors and put a stop to the rebuilding of the Temple. When Darius succeeded Cyrus as ruler of the Persian empire, he ordered a stop to the Samaritan opposition. Instead they were to provide the people of Jerusalem both with materials for rebuilding and with animals for the sacrifices.

Then a strange thing happened: nothing. The Jewish people did not start rebuilding. So God raised up Haggai to remind the people that the Temple was the symbol of His presence among them. It was to be a constant reminder that God was with them and that He was to be obeyed in every area of their lives.

God Uses People (Hag. 1:1)

Soon after Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon in 538 B.C., he issued a decree, now preserved in what is known as the Cyrus Cylinder, that reversed Babylon’s policy of stripping conquered lands of their native populations (see Ezra 1:2-4). Nearly 50,000 exiles returned to Judah and gathered at the pile of rubble that had once been the “house of the LORD in Jerusalem” (2:68), Solomon’s great Temple.

Shocked at what they saw, “some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God” (v. 68). They did more than that. “Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD,

both the morning and evening sacrifices” (3:3). Then “they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles” (v. 4). A short time later, under Zerubbabel’s leadership, they “laid the foundation of the temple” (v. 10).

Opposition, however, soon reared its ugly head. The celebration died and their resolve drained away. We read these ominous words: “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill” (4:24).

It was precisely at this point that God raised up two prophets who would make all the difference. “Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet . . . prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them” (5:1). And what did God say through them?

“Build [my] house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored” (Hag. 1:8). Zechariah added, “You who now hear these words spoken by the prophets who were there when the foundation was laid for the house of the LORD Almighty, let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built” (Zech. 8:9). If Haggai and Zechariah had not boldly declared a message that the people were in no mood to hear, the second Temple (as it came to be known) would never have been constructed.

Human Resistance (Hag. 1:2-4, 10-11)

Whenever church leaders begin to talk about the need to remodel, rebuild, or relocate, there are always those who say, “The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built” (v. 2). “When we are bursting at the seams,” they say, “then we can add to our facilities or relocate to more spacious property. And if we wait, there will be more people to help us pay for it.” They overlook, however, a fundamental fact of physics: there’s no way 500 people can worship in a sanctuary that seats 50, no matter how tightly they are shoehorned in.

Then there are those who say, “We can’t afford a building program.” If there were ever a people for whom such a complaint was valid, it was those newly returned from Babylonian exile. Not only were they dirt poor, but they returned to a land devastated by war and neglect. They had had no time to create a thriving economy. Furthermore, they had just been hit by a killer drought, when “the heavens . . . withheld their dew and the earth its crops” (v. 10). When someone suggests a building program, there are always those who are ready to remind everyone else of how many members are on social security, how many are living below the poverty line, and how many are out of work.

Haggai cut the legs from under that excuse with a simple question: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (v. 4). The expatriates considered themselves too poor to rebuild the Temple, but they had managed to scrape together enough resources to build fine houses for themselves. Moreover, God revealed to them that the devastating drought they had suffered recently was a direct result of their lack of attention to their responsibility to build the Temple (vv. 10-11).

Is it right, God asked, that “my house . . . remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house?” (v. 9). An uncomfortable question.

Then there are always those who say the church ought to invest in people rather than in buildings. To which Haggai might well have responded: What could possibly be more people-centered than a church facility? The sole reason for church buildings is to provide a community center for God’s people—a place to be in God’s presence together: to worship, to learn, to break bread, to celebrate, and to serve the homeless and destitute.

Build for the Glory of God (Hag. 1:5-9)

Haggai challenges us to get our heads out of the clouds and face some hard but ultimately ennobling realities. First, it is because God is supremely interested in people that He is concerned about the buildings in which we worship. The realm of the physical was, after all, His idea. After creating the heavens and earth along with its trees for lumber, stones for walls, and clay for mortar, “God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:10). God is concerned about not only the quality of our worship but also the beauty of the houses in which we worship. “Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house,” says the Lord God, “so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored” (Hag. 1:8).

Second, our houses of worship reveal what is most important in our lives. In that rebuilding the Lord’s Temple was not a high priority for the returning Jewish expatriates, it is not surprising to read Haggai’s harsh critique: “You have planted much, but have harvested little” (v. 6). Everything about their lives betrayed futility, discouragement, and defeat. When the Lord’s Temple lies in ruins, the quality of life deteriorates.

Buildings communicate. Even as the attention people give to matters of hygiene and dress are telling indicators of their level of self-esteem, so it is with believers and their houses of worship. Either a congregation takes bold steps of faith to raise their facilities to a level of attractiveness that reflects the dynamic quality of their worship life, or they will sink to the level of their church’s shabby appearance. Many chapters in the Bible are devoted to instructions regarding the construction of the wilderness tabernacle, and later the Temple. God is glorified not only in the lives we live but also in the houses of worship we build and maintain.

Third, God is concerned about aesthetics. When Mary, in an extravagance of love, poured “an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume” (Mark 14:3) over Jesus’ head, some of the disciples grumbled, saying, “Why this waste of perfume?” (v. 4). Jesus’ response, given His concern for the poor and disadvantaged, is surprising: “Leave her alone . . . Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me” (Mark 14:6).

Jesus is deeply touched by that which is beautiful. Even though earthly sanctuaries are only “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Heb. 8:5), surely we ought to devote our artistic and creative energies to make them not only functional but as aesthetically appealing as we possibly can.

Two prominent Italian sculptors, Bramante and his kinsman Raphael, were jealous of a rising young sculptor by the name of Michelangelo. They hatched a plan that would remove him from competition to sculpt Pope Julius II’s tomb, the most coveted artistic commission of the time. They got the pope to assign Michelangelo the impossible task of painting frescos on the curved tunnel-vaulted ceiling of the Vatican’s private chapel used only for special events. Since painting was not Michelangelo’s art, and the sheer physical challenge of such a project posed insuperable difficulties, they would not only remove him from public view but doom him to undertaking an impossible task, and thus discredit him.

Though Michelangelo knew he was the victim of dirty politics, he threw himself into the project with zeal. After four years of furious solitary labor, doing most of his work while lying on his back, Michelangelo had created what many art critics believe to be the superlative masterpiece of all time. The Sistine Chapel, with its frescoed ceiling, continues to draw more people than any other work of art in the world.

Do our sanctuaries create an environment where we, like Isaiah, can testify, “I saw the Lord

seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isa. 6:1)? When we come into our churches, are we inspired to “worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (1 Chron. 16:29, KJV)?

Previous prophets, such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, had reproofed the people for observing empty rituals at the Temple without obeying God in their everyday lives. After Haggai, Malachi would also rebuke the people for falling back into empty ritual. But Haggai reminds us that there must be a place for corporate worship to happen. Worship abuses cannot happen if the people aren’t worshipping. This has been a fine line the people of God have walked. There must be both corporate worship and personal obedience. One cannot survive apart from the other.

We glorify God not only by the purity of our lives and the quality of our service but also by the attention we give to the visible symbols of His presence among us.