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Korean Preachers & Worship Leaders

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Architecture & Space

Keedai Kim

Abstract

The use of space teaches people who use it. This is especially true for the Christian church in employing sanctuaries and buildings for worship. James White argues that a reconsideration of our use of space is necessary to accommodate the adage “to move people spiritually we need to move them physically.” He does so by delineating six liturgical spaces and three-to-four liturgical centers that all churches should have. The careful planning of the use of church space and the placing of liturgical furniture will aid the church in producing a space conducive for worship.

Introduction

James F. White is Bard Thompson Professor of Liturgical Studies at Drew University. In his book *Introduction to Christian Worship* he argues that Christians need to take space seriously in its worship. Taking portions of scripture throughout the Bible White formulates a biblical syllogism for a deeper consideration of architecture and the use of space when constructing a place of worship. He does this by laying out three different aspects the worship space needs to reflect: the function of the liturgical space, the different components of liturgical space, and the use of liturgical art. For the sake of space we can only focus in on the first section, but this paper will hit on the different sections because of overlap. This introductory paper will tease out White’s thoughts and draw the necessary conclusions the Korean American Church can learn from him.

White’s philosophy

White’s premise is that “in worship we speak for God, to God, and to one another as well as reaching out to touch others in God’s name.”¹ The liturgical space in worship centers itself on its use. The space must be useful and conducive to fleshing out the above premise of worship. White submits six liturgical spaces and three to four liturgical

¹ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 81.



centers all Christian places of worship should have. The six liturgical spaces include gathering space, movement space, congregational space, choir space, baptismal space, and altar-table space. I would argue from my own personal experience that the Korean American Church does quite well with three (maybe four) of the six aspects and poorly with the other two to three.

Six liturgical spaces

The Korean American Church knows how to delineate space for gathering the Body for worship, the congregation itself, and the choir. White says that there needs to be a space that marks the temporary separation of the community from the outside world.² This space is set aside for the use of the congregation in gathering as the Body for the purposes of worship. Judging by building projects that I have either been a part of or seen firsthand, Korean American churches are quite zealous when it comes to building churches that are clearly demarcated from the outside world with its great walls and clearly marked signs. The massive pews in the sanctuary also designate the place where the people of God are to congregate and worship. These pews are both a blessing and a curse; God's people are "marked" so-to-speak, but oftentimes the pews can become a hindrance to the worship of God (more on this later). Choir space is also important when considering liturgical space. The fundamental question that must be raised when dialoguing about choir space is "What is the role of the choir?" The chief role or roles assigned to the choir should determine the location and design of this type of space.³ White confesses that choir space is the most difficult space to deal with because of the uncertainty in its role. Choir space in the Korean church is usually set-aside with its own seats on or alongside the main stage area. Depending on the size of the church and the congregation, the choir may remain there the entire time or move into the congregational seats during portions of the worship when they are not singing. Judging by the pomp of many Korean choirs with their robes, seating arrangements, and perhaps grand entrances Korean churches love to emphasize choirs indeed. They are a key liturgical element in Korean worship.

² *Ibid*, 86.

³ *Ibid*, 87.

Korean American churches do not do so well when it comes to movement space, baptismal space, and altar-table space. White made a comment that caused me to do a double-take when he said “to move people spiritually we need to move them physically.”⁴This is an idea that I have not truly wrestled with and it got me thinking. White argues that Christian worship demands considerable movement so the liturgical furniture and layout should engender this principle. If we were to use White’s thoughts as a rubric, I would say that many Korean churches and churches in general would fail. Never mind the stereotype that Asians could be stiff. I’ve been to first-generation Korean churches where the place is rocking with praise and worship. I speak more of the layout of the liturgical furniture. The movement needed for the Body is in the walking about for the sharing of communion and the participation in the baptism. Massive pews and other liturgical furniture block members from being able to freely move about. I would argue that movement is hindered when it comes to the sacramental practices of many Korean churches.

In my experience there is a primacy placed on the Lord’s Supper but not on baptism. I say this because I am used to massive altar-tables that require three-four members to move. The altar-tables are also highly decorated with engravings and cloths. The ceremony of the Lord’s Supper itself is also a bit grander and more involving. Its holiness is punctuated by its “set-apartness”. Though the altar-table is usually situated in a place of high visibility it is too well guarded to be a table that is accommodating to the whole Body of the Korean church. The table is meant for the pastor and the elders in the Korean church and they distribute the elements for the members. Members do not approach the table and are not expected to. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why movement is so restricted by the ill-placed liturgical furniture. Movement is not needed when members have nowhere to move to.

Baptism is relegated as a second-class citizen. The font is usually not noticeable. In fact, many baptisms that I have observed in the Korean church do not even employ a “full-time” font. A simple bowl or kettle is used by the pastor and then whisked away to the kitchen when not in use. The church that I currently worship in has a font but you would not know it by looking at it. It is a narrow wooden box with a lid on top of a cross.

⁴ Ibid, 86.

You would have to open the lid in order to see the vessel that would hold the water and even then it might be difficult to ascertain what it was without being told. When the font is not in use it is not put away in a closet nor is it located in a place of importance. We used the font last week and it was summarily placed next to a side entrance in the sanctuary after we were done with it. It was both a sad and frustrating sight. Because the font is not seen as too important, baptismal space is not really something that can be spoken of.

Liturgical centers

In addition to the six liturgical spaces, White talks about three to four liturgical centers that a church must have. The use of these centers reflects how we perceive the presence of Christ in our worship.⁵ They include the baptismal font, pulpit, altar-table, and the presider's-chair. Ample space has been given to the baptism and table so we will focus in on the pulpit and the presider's-chair.

White refers to the pulpit as more of a convenience than a necessity.⁶ Though it is not a necessity White says the pulpit is useful in that it is the physical testimony to a fresh theophany each time the people of God gather.⁷ The thinking is that Christ is present when the Holy Scriptures are read in Church and the pulpit can be seen as a visual representation of that presence. White calls for the removal of the lectern as it is “unnecessary” and instead the pulpit should have a place for the Bible to be held at all times. Pulpits in the Korean American church are massive monuments and nearly all of them have lecterns. There is some value in reconsidering the kinds of pulpits that the Korean church employs, however it is difficult to be dogmatic on this issue. Perhaps the one lesson the Korean church can learn from this section is to carefully consider the presentation of a larger Bible as a visual representation of God's Word. I have seen this in many churches but it is not as common as it could be.

The presider's-chair is more commonly known as the chair that the preacher sits in. It can be a symbol of Christ's presence in the preacher but White wonders if Christ's presence actually needs furnishing in order to make it visible. The chair should not have

⁵ Ibid, 88.

⁶ I wonder how many Korean pastors would balk at the idea of not having a pulpit at all.

⁷ Ibid.

a high place of importance and should certainly not look like a throne. My father (who is a pastor) once remarked that the only distinguishing feature the chair should have are the grooves in the floor in front of the chair from the hours of prayer the pastor has committed to on his knees. Not all Korean churches place such importance on the chair but it is certainly there, usually in a grouping of three. The middle chair is designated for the pastor and is set apart from the other two by being larger or more adorned. Oftentimes, it can look like the throne that White is so averse to.

Resource:

White, James F. *Introduction to Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

