

The Religious Meaning of Our Church

By Rev. Roger Larson, Ph.D.

It has been said that man has never been so divinely inspired as when he builds a church. It is no wonder that the cathedrals of the world have been called “frozen symphonies.” This is true of all churches of creative beauty and dignity.

Indeed the design of this church is a creation. It is a copy of no other church. We began with the idea of building an English country church. The low walls and high roof suggest that. But we realized as we developed our plans that no idea from the past should be final. So while we have embodied the best of the past, we have also used the best of the modern. The design of our church, therefore, is predominantly modern and functional.

One of the religious qualities of this architecture is its sincerity. In this structure, nothing pretends to be what it isn't. Everything in this structure has work to do. There are no flying buttresses that do not butress, nor anything false. Architecturally, the building is sincere and functional.

There is no gingerbread in the structure of this building, nor ornamentation just for decoration. The beauty of this building is not in the frills but in the neatness of the design, in the strength of the structure, and in the beauty of the materials.

We have used the arts freely, as is evident in our altar, reredos, windows, and pulpit carving. But even here, we have not used art merely for art's sake or for decoration, though we believe that beauty and art are closely allied with religion. We have used the arts to help preach the gospel. Every piece of art in this church is symbolic of something greater than itself. Moreover, we have never resorted to cheap or inferior arts, or to manufactured imitations, as might be done by those who just want decoration. Because we wanted our arts to be creative, we sought out the best available artists in enameling, in etched and stained glass, and in wood carving, who could create beauty worthy to convey the Christian Gospel. So everything in this building either has work to do or has a part in preaching the gospel.

Now let us examine in detail our church building. The exterior of the church is neat, dignified, beautiful, and impressive. One knows it is a church. The red brick walls give strength and duration to the building, signifying the permanence of the church in the community, for the church survives all secular organizations which come and go with the passing of the years. The rockwork, beautifully done by one of our own masons, represents the native rock of this area, donated by one of our members, and thus introduces something of Alpine into the building. The open tower steeple exalts the bell, for which towers were originally constructed. The tower rises upwards as a flinger pointing to God and exalting the cross above all else. The tower is a testimony of our faith to passers by.

The front of the church is clear glass, admitting God's light. The church, with no secrets, reveals itself to those without and beckons them to enter. Then as the worshipper leaves the church he looks out through this clear glass at the world he is to serve. The narthex or foyer separates the church from the outside.

After passing through the narthex, we enter the nave, where we are seated for worship. The word “nave” comes from the Latin “navis” meaning ship. The church is the ship in which Chris-

tians cross the sea of life. Like a ship, the nave of our church is long and narrow and gives the long sweep of the aisle toward the altar. But the nave of this church is characterized primarily by its height. In our place of worship, we look upward to God, so the church should be tall to give us that lift. Our church is as high as it is wide, 32 feet. If it were wider it would have to be higher to preserve the cathedral proportions. We have achieved that vertical outlook through low walls and high roof as a matter of economy. We could not have afforded to bring our walls up to the height of the church as the great cathedrals do. But since roofs are cheaper than walls, we could do it with low walls and high roof. That is also more fitting for Alpine where the steep roof competes better with the hills than high walls would do.

As we look about the nave, we see above us four great trusses, holding up the roof and exposed to show the work they are doing. These four trusses symbolize the four gospels which through Christ lift our vision to God.

Etched Windows

On the south wall the windows are high and covered by the eaves for protection against the direct heat of the sun. These twelve etched south windows are symbolic of the twelve apostles.

Window #1: The first window represents Matthew. The three money bags remind us that he was a tax collector, and the pen and scroll suggest his direct or indirect authorship of the Gospel of Matthew.

Window #2: The next window is of James, the son of Zebedee. The white horse and crusader's flag portray the later legend that he appeared in 846 A.D. in Spain in the battle against the Moslems.

Window #3: Next is St. Jude (not Ischariot) whose symbols are an upside down cross, a club and a spear.

Window #4: The Simon window shows a fish in the Bible to suggest a fisher of men.



Window #5: The St. John window shows a pen for the direct or indirect authorship of the Fourth Gospel and the flying eagle shows the soaring power of the Holy Spirit of whom this gospel speaks.

Window #6: On the window of Peter are etched the keys of the kingdom, and the rooster which crowed when Peter denied Christ reminds us of our human fallibility as well as his.

Window #7: The Andrew window shows two fish, for Jesus called him to leave his fishing occupation to become a fisher of men.

Window #8: The Philip window shows two loaves which fed the multitudes when Philip declared that their 200 pennies could not buy enough bread to feed the group. The budded cross is the Pilgrims cross.



Window #9: Bartholomew was said to have been skinned alive, so a flaying knife on the Bible is portrayed.

Window #10: James, the son of Alpheus is symbolized by a windmill because tradition said he preached in a land of windmills.

Window #11: On the Thomas window we see the wounded hands of Christ because Thomas would not believe that Christ had risen unless he could place his fingers in Christ's nailprints.

Window #12: The final window represents St. Paul who spoke of the sword of the Spirit and wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer. The sword, the pen, and the scroll are depicted.



At the back is the Trinity Window, the Triangle reminding us of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Clerestory window at the top is the Interdenominational Window with its different sections representing the different denominations found in this community church.

Stained Glass Windows



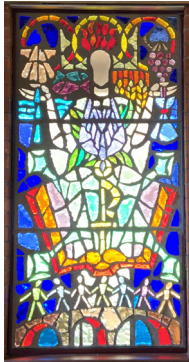
Along the north wall are the large stained glass windows representing the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ.

The rear window depicts God the Creator who calls the worlds into being, creates man in His own image and sets before him the ways of life and death. Here is outlined a figure that represents the invisible God. A crystal without facial features is used to represent that face of God through which light shines to us. The window pictures the atom, the basic structure of the universe, and shows matter coming into being by the whirling mass of atoms. The compass represents the great architect of the spheres and we see planets, the moon. A new baby shows the created image of God. In the same window is pictured



the scales of justice by which God judges men and nations. The tongs and the coal, from the Book of Isaiah, stand for forgiveness and salvation from aimlessness and sin. The scroll of the prophets and the book of the Apostles declare God's righteous will. A picture of the Keys of the Kingdom unlock the mysteries of the ways of life and death.

In the center window we see Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, who came to share our common lot. The broken chain suggests the conquest of sin and death. Around Christ is wrapped the rainbow, the Old Testament symbol of reconciliation of man to God. Below Christ stands the Church on the rock, and floods and waves cannot undermine it.



The front window depicts the Holy Spirit which He bestows upon us. We cannot see a spirit, so no face is shown. The tongues of fire that came upon the Apostles at Pentecost rest on his head. The dove suggests the descent of the Spirit at Jesus's baptism. The open Bible and the four arrows proclaim the Gospel to all the earth. The arrows also form the letter Chi (χ) the first letter of Christ in Greek, and the letter Rho (ρ) is the second letter of Christ in Greek. In response all races and nations join hands in a common bond as they cross the Bridge of Life. At the top of the window the shell and the dripping water symbolize baptism. The fish, the early symbol of Christ is next to it. On the other side the grapes, the dripping wine, with the chalice, and the wheat suggest the communion. The statement of faith concludes with the promise of Eternal Life, represented by the three circles at the top, and the palm leaves behind the dove.

Through the nave runs the center aisle, the straight and narrow pathway from the entrance of the church to the altar of God. That aisle leads to the three chancel steps, symbolizing Faith, Hope, and Love.

Below the chancel stand stands the baptismal font. It is eight sided to represent the seven days of Creation plus the new creation in baptism. On the front of the font is carved a dove descending on a baptismal bowl, the Spirit descending like a dove at the baptism of Jesus. On the font is carved three rings to suggest the Trinity in whose name baptism is performed. On top of the font is the cross.

The chancel, the part of the church reserved for the clergy and choir, is separated from the rest of the church by a rail. The word chancel comes from the Latin word "cancelli" which means lattice screen. In the churches of the western world this screen is now a rail.

On one side of the chancel is placed the lectern from which the minister performs his priestly function of conducting worship and prayers. On the other side is placed the pulpit. It's large and elevated to exalt the gospel, and on it is carved the figure of Christ, the Master Preacher, reminding us of the teachings of Jesus and the ideals he taught us as motives for our living. The choir is placed on the two sides of the congregation to face the altar aisle and not the congregation, for it's function is not to perform a concert, but to offer its sacrifice of praise to God.

At the center, in front of the reredos, stands the altar, our place of worship and spiritual sacrifice. The altar is also our communion table and place of fellowship with Christ, and with each other. On the altar are the missal stand with the open Bible and the candles, symbolic of Christ

as the light of the world. On the front of the altar are the Greek letters Chi Rho (X, P), the first two letters of Christ in Greek, and the smaller letters of Alpha (A) and Omega (Ω), the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, suggesting Christ as the first and the last. So Christ becomes central in our chancel as the host of our fellowship.

On each side of the altar are two panels with various symbols of our faith and fellowship and worship. Both panels are dominated by the vine and the branches, symbolic of Christ the vine. This depicts the words of Christ from the 15th chapter of John, "I am the vine. Ye are the branches. He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit, for without me ye can do nothing." We are reminded by that scripture pictured here, how closely we must live to Christ to live fruitful Christian lives, and that we must have the very roots of our motives in Him. An independent, isolated Christian life is impossible. Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and the grapes are the fruit of our relation to Christ. The grapes also are symbolic of the wine of the communion and thus of the very blood and life of Christ. So the vine and the branches also give meaning to our communion table.

On the south panel, above the memorial tablet, are the Ten Commandments written in Hebrew, their original language. The next symbol is the fleur-de-lis, symbolic of the trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Above that is the communion chalice which gives meaning to our communion table and represents the sacrament. Then above the grapes is the star of Jacob, symbolic of the Old Testament hope for a coming Messiah, or the Star of Bethlehem which announced to the Wise Men the birth of Christ. As the Wise Men found the star and Christ through their study of the stars, this symbolizes to us the consecration of learning and wisdom to Christ. The Christmas message of the birth of Christ is the Christian message for the whole year. Above the star is the Lamb of God. This is based on the passage from the Gospel of John, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world." This stands for Christ, who became to the Christians what the paschal lamb was to the Hebrews who offered the lamb to atone for sins. But Christians found Christ as their Savior from sin. So Christ became to them the Lamb of God. The lamb may suggest, not only Christ, but the flock of Christ's followers to whom he is the Good Shepherd. Sheep are mentioned often in the Bible, for Judea was a sheep raising country. The 23rd Psalm refers to the Lord as my Shepherd. Jesus told the parable of the Lost Sheep which went astray and was found by the Good Shepherd who left the ninety and nine to seek out the lost. The lamb then can remind us of many things in the Bible. At the very top is the pomegranate with its many seeds suggesting immortality. So it testifies to our faith in life after death.

On the north panel at the bottom is the Mayflower on which the Pilgrim Fathers crossed the ocean to found the Congregational Church in America. As a Congregational Church we recognize our heritage of freedom and venture, representing the Mayflower. The Pilgrim Fathers were the liberals of their day who broke from the past and sought new lands and new ideas, inspired as they left Holland by the words of their pastor Robinson, "God hath more light and truth yet to break forth from His Holy Word." Modern Congregationalism still remains a liberal church open for new truth yet to be revealed. The Mayflower remains as a symbol of freedom and venture for our Congregational Churches. Above the Mayflower is the open Bible, symbolic of Protestantism which the Bible to the people directly and presented it, not in Latin, but in their own languages. On the open Bible appears the scripture passage, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." We are reminded that the Bible is the source of our Christian faith and the light for our Christian living. The Bible remains open to Protestants with the right of individual interpretation without the restriction of either Pope or infallible clergy.

Above the Bible is a rose, a symbol of the beauty of Christ. Then, above the grapes, is the wheat, symbolic of the bread of the communion and of Christ, the Bread of Life. So this also gives meaning to our communion table. The wheat also reminds us of the abundance of God's providence, and of our daily bread for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Above the sheaf of wheat and the grapes is the lily, symbolic of the purity of Christ, and also of the resurrection. So the Easter symbol is opposite the Christmas star. Above the lily is the crown, symbolic of the kingship of Christ and the Kingdom of God. It is the symbol of our hope for God's rule in our lives, in our nations, and in the world. So the crown suggests the Kingdom of God with the ideals of Brotherhood, Peace, and Justice for all. It is the eternal crown of Christ's kingship. Above that is the fish, an early symbol of Christ. The first letters of the Greek word, "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior" spelled Ichthys, the Greek word for fish. So early Christians, under persecution, drew a fish at their meeting place to identify it to fellow Christians who knew its meaning. It was in deep reverence that Tertulian referred to Christ as "Our Fish." It was a short way of saying, "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." We have preserved that early symbol of the Church under persecution.

At the very top is the dove, symbolic of the Holy Spirit which descended on Jesus like a dove at this baptism. The dove is thereupon a symbol also of our baptism and consecration to Christ. The Spirit of God, indwelling in our hearts, is our source of inspiration and guidance. It appropriately belongs at the top.

At the center, above the altar, hangs the cross, the central symbol of Christianity, reminding us of the sacrifice of Christ in his death. As Protestants, we use the cross rather than the crucifix, for the empty cross also suggests the Resurrection. The cross, the symbol of hatred, torture, injustice, and death, becomes in the Resurrection the symbol of love, victory, and of hope in a new life. The cross is the central meaning of our way of life – a life of self-giving love, and in that it becomes the symbol of Christ's Saviorhood, and makes man worthy of life eternal.

At one time Heinrich Heine, one of the great German poets, and a friend of his, were looking at one of the great cathedrals of Europe. The friend asked Heine, "Why do we not build such cathedrals today?" Heinrich Heine replied, "The people of those days had convictions. We just have opinions. Opinions cannot build cathedrals. That takes convictions."

Heine was right that it takes great convictions to build a cathedral. But he was wrong when he assumed that that belonged to the past. The Christian Church of today stands out with great convictions. This little cathedral is the embodiment of the convictions of our people. No voluntary organization of this size, except a church, could command the consecration, devotion, generosity, sacrifice, or leadership necessary to build a structure of this magnitude. This church building represents the cooperative generosity, labor, thought, and faith of many people who knew it could be done. Shallow opinions could not have built this church. This building, then, is the embodiment of the deep convictions and profound faith of the people of this church, and of others in the community who are outside of the church but had a faith in our church and gave it their support. A cathedral alone will probably not create a faith. But a great faith and profound convictions can build a cathedral. This cathedral is the outcome and expression of such a deep religious faith on the part of many people. We pray God that faith may grow among these people and contagiously spread, that others may share the great potentialities of the Christian faith and fellowship with Christ through his Church.

Craftsmen

Architect — George Hatch

Enameled Copper Altar and Reredos — Margaret Montgomery

Woodcarver — Joseph Auer

Stained Glass Windows — Judson Studios

Etched Windows — Bryon Rodarmel

Antiqued Copper Doors — Jack Boyd

Written in 1953