

THE EXHIBITION OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN TO THE WORLD: The 6th Great End

To refresh your memory, the six great ends of the church are:

The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;

The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;

The maintenance of divine worship;

The preservation of the truth;

The promotion of social righteousness;

And finally, our topic for today:

The exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

In the Book of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, there is a vision of heaven, a vision of the New Jerusalem.

It describes a city with walls made of jasper, and those walls are adorned with every jewel, including sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysopase, jacinth, and amethyst. And of course, the gates are made of pearl.

If the final great end of the church is to exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world, what then should the church look like?

If one goes back to the Age of Enlightenment, to the Renaissance, when the great cathedrals of Europe were being built, one can see that the goal of the builders was to exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world. The lofty spires reached up to heaven. The incredibly high ceilings soared to heavenly heights. The stained glass windows recalled the bejeweled walls of the Holy City of Revelation.

In a world in which the common folk lived in hovels, often with dirt floors and thatched roofs, a tile floor and a soaring ceiling represented what heaven must be like.

Our soaring steeples and bright stained glass windows of today are but a dim reminder of church architecture of the time long past when folks understood that the church building was done to the glory of God and for the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

The story is told of the Archbishop of Canterbury wandering through that great cathedral as it was being built. The first workman he saw, he asked the question, "What are you doing?" The man, with a trowel in his hand, described how he was laying blocks in a wall.

The second workman he stopped, with a hammer and saw in his hands, told of how he was crafting an altar rail.

The third, with lead canes and bright pieces of glass, said that he was making a stained glass window.

Finally, the prelate approached a man with a wheelbarrow, a dust pan, and a push broom. The archbishop asked his question yet again: "What are you doing?"

The workman stopped, straightened his back, wiped his brow, and answered, "I'm building a cathedral to the glory of God."

That man had seen the kingdom of heaven.

Now many of our modern churches don't look like churches. Many of our newest churches are in buildings that have been "re-purposed". And, sadly, many old church buildings are now museums, restaurants, antique shops, even bed and breakfasts.

They are building a new Presbyterian Church not too far from where our son works in Fort Myers, Florida. It is not of our denomination. It is being built in a row of other churches. Our son said of it, "I hope it is going to look like a church and not like another big box store."

The Puritans and the Quakers, the Mennonites and the Amish, in their desire for simplicity, in their desire to be plain, got away from the ornate and elaborate decorations of the Roman Catholic Church, and we have a strong strain of the Puritanical in our Presbyterian heritage.

Indeed, the stained glass windows that depicted saints and Biblical scenes were anathema to the Scots Reformer John Knox, who saw them as graven images. A sermon he preached so enflamed the Protestants of Scotland that they ran amuck through the land breaking out the windows of churches

But architecture and art are not the only ways we as a church can exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world.

In fact, it may be the worst way.

We exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world when we live as though we were living in the kingdom of heaven. We exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world when the church in the world lives in harmony and peace, when we treat one another as brothers and sisters, when we are, for lack of a better way to put it, "angelic" in our behavior.

Have you ever been to a church where you felt warmth and welcome, where there were smiles on every face, where love was expressed in word and deed? Then you were seeing an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

Our end, as the church, is to show the world what heaven is like, so that all the world will want to go there.