

The Sacred and the Profane

Introduction

One of the things that saddens me greatly is the use of consecrated buildings for purposes other than for which they were intended. Indeed, television programmes like the BBC's Antiques Roadshow are periodically filmed in the cathedrals around Britain. And the use of consecrated buildings for non-religious events, including secular concerts, organ recitals, plays, floral festivals, etc., and even for multi-faith services is not unheard of either.

As a consequence, you could easily wonder why such buildings had been set apart for God at all. And yet the Bible describes God as being holy (Leviticus 19:2) and calls on his people to be holy too (Leviticus 20:26).

Furthermore, the Old Testament details God's instructions for the building of a Tabernacle (Exodus 25:8) and for it to be consecrated for his purposes (Exodus 30:26ff). And that meant that it was to be a structure to be used for God's purposes only, and there were serious consequences for straying from his precise instructions—as Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, found out when they offered a different incense to what was prescribed (Leviticus 10:1-3).

Relevance for Today

Now I know that today many would suggest that the Old Testament laws are no longer relevant. And they would be partially right. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ does mean that many of the laws have been fulfilled and no longer need to be practiced. But that does not mean that the principles behind the laws—including the need to distinguish between the sacred and the profane—are no longer relevant.

Indeed, the Old Testament puts the New Testament, and the establishment and purpose of the Church into perspective, and it is not something that should be easily dismissed or ignored. Furthermore, the New Testament teaches that Christians are to be holy too (1 Peter 1:15-16). Indeed, we are to live holy lives, and make clear the distinction between what is sacred and what is defiled or common. It even teaches that a Christian's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

And on those grounds alone, we still need to make the distinction between the things of God and the things of this world. We still need to distinguish between the things set apart for God and the normal everyday things of life.

And if that's the case, what does it mean to distinguish between the sacred and the profane? And do we always get it right?

The Sacred and the Profane in the Old Testament

Well, in Old Testament terms God gave Moses many laws regarding the need for the people to be holy. And they made the clear distinction between what was profane and was holy. Because if God was holy, then his people needed to be holy too. And although the people were stained by the

profane—by the ordinary things of life—when they approached God, they were supposed to be holy. They were to approach God in an appropriate way, uncontaminated by the ordinary things of life.

The people were also given a priesthood (and it must be remembered that the administration of sacrifices was only a part of their function). And their main role was to teach the people to distinguish between the sacred and the profane.

The Sacred and the Profane in the New Testament

So skip forward to the New Testament and what do we find? We find Jesus (and the early church) teaching the need to turn to God and to live lives that are holy, fitting for God. We have Jesus arguing with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the teachers of the Law, about the need to abandon their man-made interpretations of God's laws and to revert to the Laws as God had given them. And because the Temple was being abused by moneychangers etc., we have Jesus clearing out the Temple—twice—once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end (John 2:12-21; Matthew 21:12-13).

Implications

As a consequence, when it comes to the issue of the need to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, we are without excuse. Because if God is holy, then we need to be holy too. Yes, we will naturally be stained by the ordinary things of life—we get dirty, we get sick, things go mouldy, we have normal bodily functions, and we die. But we should not forget that if God is holy, we need to be holy too. And that, of course, means that we should at least try to be holy, and that our holiness should shine out into the world.

Being godly should make a difference to the way that we treat our own bodies—how we conduct ourselves, the way we dress, and the way we decorate them. And if property and buildings have been set apart for God's purposes, then we need to make sure that they are not being profaned by being used for other purposes.

This then has implications on the current practices of the church: conducting ceremonies involving non-Christians, accepting gifts and donations from non-Christians, and allowing consecrated property to be used by non-Christians or for non-Christian purposes.

Consecrated Buildings and Property

In regard to our consecrated buildings and property, we should take caution from a common theme running through the books of Kings and Chronicles. For they were times when the Temple was largely neglected, or used for the worship of other gods, and not for its intended purpose.

But if God is holy, and a building has been consecrated to God, then that building is holy. And the Old Testament is very strong on the need to be faithful to vows that are made freely and without compunction to God (Deuteronomy 23:21-23), which surely is the case in regard to all of the church's consecrated buildings.

Summary

Now clearly there is a marked difference between what was intended in biblical times and the practices of today. Indeed, it seems today that being holy or even consecrating something has taken on a whole new meaning. So what's going on? And how can we reconcile the differences?

Well it would be easy to say that the differences are because Christians now live under the new covenant, whereas in biblical times believers lived under the old. But it's not that simple. Because

even if we have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as our saviour and want to learn more about God, then we would be negligent if we failed to use the wealth of material available in the Bible.

Furthermore, if God was holy in the Old Testament and he was holy in the New—and he expected his people to be holy in both—then we shouldn't stop being holy either.

Challenge for Today

So what are we doing when we use our consecrated buildings for other purposes—secular or inter-faith? Well I believe that we are dishonouring God. We are lowering God, who is holy, into the realms of the profane. We are putting him on the same level of (so-called) other gods. And in doing so, we are effectively turning our backs on our commitment to God, and we are saying that it doesn't matter if a building is consecrated or not, we're going to use it for our own purposes anyway.

It's not rocket science to know what God thinks about the misuse of buildings consecrated to him. It's there in black and white in the pages of the Bible. It's also not rocket science to know what God thinks about us not keeping our vows. So, if we know how God thinks, and we still use our buildings for other purposes, then why do we do it?

Well I think there may be a tendency to rationalise the use of our buildings, in terms of inter-faith understanding, outreach to the community, or as a means to get the public to subsidise the local congregation. Consecrating a building may give us a warm fuzzy feeling, but I wonder how much we think about its intended use.

Of course the solution to the problem is simple. We could either restrict the use of buildings to the purpose for which they were consecrated, or we could deconsecrate the buildings so we can then use them in whatever way we like. The choice is ours. But if we do the latter, then what does that say about our relationship with our creator?

Conclusion

The importance of being able to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, then, is fundamental to the Christian life. Indeed it should be at the heart of our very being. Which is why it is so sad that people today—and the Christian church—have so much trouble in distinguishing between the two.

If the current dilemma is to be addressed, it will require a fundamental shift in the way Christians think, behave, dress, and decorate their bodies. It will also require the church to drastically change its thinking and practices with which it is very comfortable today.

As God's people we need to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. And we need to put it into practice regardless of the cost. Because for people who believe, how we live is important—and not just around God's people. We may be saved by faith, not works, but if God is holy, then we need to be holy too. And it's no good us just saying that, we need to believe and practice it too.

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