

## **Steeple and the Church**

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This paper reviews a document titled "Church Steeple Study," dated June 10, 1986, and presented to the Mount Vernon, Ohio, City Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although the document of 54 pages bears no author's name, auxiliary information suggests it to be the work of Mike Hodges, sometime pastor in the Illinois Conference.

### **The Document and Its Arguments**

"Church Steeple Study" opposes the use of steeples in connection with Christian churches on the grounds that incorporating a steeple into a church building plan compromises the proper Christian rejection of paganism and permits the encroachment of apostate attitudes and practices.

Its principal argument rests on the following series of major points:

1. A steeple or tower in association with a place of worship was a feature of ancient paganism, oriented to sun worship and fertility cultus. A common form, especially in Egypt, followed the geometric figure known as obelisk, which in places served also as a phallic symbol. Such pagan symbols are inappropriate in Christian churches.
2. The Bible presents in much detail the struggle of Israel to preserve the place of traditional worship of Yahweh in face of the influence coming from surrounding pagan religions. Many biblical passages warn of the danger that these elements posed to the faith of Israel. These warnings are applicable today as churches are tempted to use symbols, the steeple being one of them, whose origins are pagan.
3. Ellen White's testimony in favor of simplicity of church buildings should be

interpreted to suggest she would be opposed to the use of steeples.

4. Principles of Christian stewardship should govern construction of church buildings and preclude investing funds in a steeple.

5. The Battle Creek Dime Tabernacle, with its steeple 110 feet in height serves as an example of what to avoid. Its construction drew the criticism of Ellen White,

6. Those who made decisions about steeples on churches need to consider the sensitivities of others who have conscientious objection to them. This is in harmony with Paul's counsel on how to deal with sincere dissenters.

### **Examination of the Arguments**

Although several of these arguments contain elements that are factual, each has weaknesses to be taken into account as the evidence is weighed.

1. Towers were a feature of places of ancient pagan worship. This observation must be accepted as correct, for there are records of numerous examples in ancient temples and the open sacred places of certain ancient cults. Careful examination of their function, however, often reveals no evidence of involvement in either sun worship or fertility rites. In many cases they seem to have served simply as attention-getting architectural devices to mark special buildings. Although it is possible pillars were used for sacral purposes in some places, to treat them widely as sun-worship or phallic symbols is unwarranted. Reliable evidence of such use is sparse.

But a greater problem lies in logic of this argument. If one grants such pillars to be symbols significant to ancient pagan rites, the question then must be addressed, Did such use in antiquity mark them forever as evil, a continuing residue of paganism? This is the major contention of "Church Steeple Study."

Such reasoning is unsound on several counts.

a. It is widely recognized that in the teaching of the Bible, particularly Jesus' interpretation of the law, the essence of worship is to be found in inward acceptance and commitment, of which outward manifestations are reflective (1 Sam 16:7, Matt 5:20-37; 12:34-35; Mark 7:21-23). This principle appears in many different biblical settings addressing different issues. To recognize this is not to depreciate the importance of correct worship practices, but to establish biblical priorities.

b. Does an element once applied to pagan purposes stand henceforth marked by its pagan meaning? Clearly any form used to represent God is prohibited by the second commandment, ruling out the use of images of God. This principle extends beyond sculptural three-dimensional forms because to reduce God to any visible form both limits our concept of Him and misrepresents His nature. Artistic representations of angels and other creatures have biblical precedent, but never as objects of adoration.

Aside from second commandments prohibitions, the key question is what an object means within a given culture. Clearly, condemning modern practice on the basis of former pagan use is untenable. To do so would disqualify virtually every object and practice in current use, for almost everything in worship today once was used in some ancient pagan religion. Examples come to mind easily. Most modern church buildings borrow architectural features refined in antiquity for pagan temples, including colonnades, pilasters, the arch, and even the pitched roof. Ancient writings describe the use of books, music, lamps, water, tables, chairs, wine, and bread in heathen rites prior to their mention in Hebrew practice. Yet wine and bread were selected by Jesus Himself as symbols to represent His blood and body, despite a history of their ritual use in pagan temples for thousands of years beforehand. To apply today the standard of whether an object or practice had pagan uses in antiquity is to establish a standard not demonstrated in the Scriptures themselves.

Readers of the Old Testament Scriptures will recall that the temple of Solomon was

flanked by two tall pillars set in the porch at the front of the temple (1 Kings 7:21-22).

Crowning these pillars was lily work, which recalls the style of certain Egyptian pillar motifs.

If pillars are evil in themselves, we are confronted with the irony of seeing them incorporated into the design of the temple of the Lord as constructed by Solomon. Nor should we forget God's acceptance of that temple (with its pillars) by setting His Shekinah presence in it.

As a matter of historical fact the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem was far from unique when compared with other religious buildings of the time. Numerous architectural parallels are described in Lawrence T. Geraty's essay, "The Jerusalem Temple of the Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context" (in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, ed. A. V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner. Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981. Available from the Biblical Research Institute). Multiple architectural parallels between the temple in Jerusalem and other contemporaneous religious structures support the idea that it was not the physical structure that determined acceptability or lack of the same, but the purpose to which the structures or features were put.

The relevant question today is how something is perceived in its contemporary culture. If it has lost the suggestion of pagan affinity there is no sound reason to disqualify it with resurrected pagan associations. The crucial questions must be: Is it now viewed as in some way dishonorable toward God? Is its effect compatible with the goals of the gospel of Christ? and Is it helpful? These norms must be applied to decisions relating to steeples as well, regardless of their similarity or dissimilarity to towers or monuments used for entirely different purposes by some in ancient times.

2. The proximity of pagan religions constituted a continuing threat to the purity of Israelite worship. Repeatedly the Hebrews lapsed into pagan worship, yielding to influence from contemporary neighboring religions. The records, both written and archaeological, paint a doleful picture of capitulation. The constant threat of syncretism and outright apostasy contributed to the later Pharisaic mentality so well known from the New Testament.

Pharasaism is remembered for its fierce determination not to compromise in the least detail.

"Church Steeple Study" occupies several pages citing God's warnings to Israel against adopting elements from surrounding pagan cults. The document contends that these warnings apply against use of steeples today which are treated as modern adaptations of the ancient pagan worship aids. Behind this position lies the presupposition that despite a radical change in cultures, a tower remains today in and of itself pagan, hence forever under the condemnation of God's ancient warnings. The weakness of treating towers as perpetually pagan was addressed in section 1.

If a steeple today stands for pagan concepts before the community, then all would agree that it is inappropriate for Christian usage. If such connotations are absent today, the paganism argument loses its force. Few today would contend that a steeple conjures up in the modern mind a picture of paganism. In contrast, to most people now it is interpreted as a Christian symbol. Although a steeple is not an obligatory architectural feature to express Christian presence, with some types of contemporary architecture it may be the only exterior architectural signal to distinguish the church from a warehouse, a general-purpose auditorium, or even an amusement hall.

3. Mrs. White was an advocate of church buildings that were simple in structure (in contrast to the Victorian inclinations to ornament), in order to bear witness to the pilgrim character of a people whose values are controlled by the anticipation of Christ's return. For such needless display is denial of the message. But when read in full, she calls for substantial houses of worship that testify to the measured reasonableness of the faith, what she describes as the God-fearing character or the Advent movement. By this she means substantial but not ostentatious, structure that is neat, orderly, and attractive. Nowhere does she criticize employment of a steeple in pursuing these goals.

For reasons of cost and size alone, early Adventist churches followed the simplest lines of architecture, in common with those of other Christians along the American frontier. It is a

mistake to interpret the simple style of these buildings as a necessary pattern or invest it with theological orthodoxy. Styles of church buildings vary significantly among the varied cultures around the world, each seeking to express Christian principles of the Adventist faith in a way meaningful to its locale.

4. Principles of stewardship prohibit building steeples on churches. This argument expresses a legitimate concern but is subject to extreme expressions based on unclear norms. Almost any architectural feature can become suspect, including carpets, organs, padding on pews, heating, air conditioning, and others. Valid norms could well include (a) faithfulness to the Christian witness, (b) the impact for witness to the surrounding public, such as the church's neighbors, (c) compatibility with the overall plan of the church, (d) usefulness of the feature in promoting more effective worship and physical comfort, (e) aesthetic considerations, and (f) certainly the capacity of the congregation to fund the feature.

The spirit of the gospel encourages frugality and self-restraint, but not stinginess. It is generous to persons and worthy causes and does not support a severe monastic mind-set. In fact the concept that God's house should be nicer than our personal residences is in harmony with biblical precedents. If a steeple could be shown to represent an inordinate or extravagant proportion of the cost of a house of worship, the economic argument would have a telling impact and should be taken seriously. Typically, however, such is not the case, and often a simple fiberglass spire represents no more than one or two per cent of the total building cost. In such a case the argument of poor stewardship bears little weight.

5. The Battle Creek Tabernacle is a negative example. During the 1870s the Adventist community in Battle Creek increased rapidly, creating pressures for an enlarged place of worship. A plan was devised, requesting every Adventist to contribute a dime each month for the period of a year, a total of \$1.20 each. The plan was promoted vigorously by James White and led to construction of a 4,000-seat church with a prominent 110-foot steeple rising above it, as well as three smaller towers. Its architectural style was typical of the late Victorian

period. The foundation stone was laid on August 19, 1878, and its dedication took place April 20, 1879, less than nine months later. The Whites were in Texas at the time of dedication, so were not present for the occasion.

"Church Steeple Study" points out that earlier church buildings in Battle Creek had been much smaller and of simple style, suggesting that the Dime Tabernacle was an example of apostasy. Evidence shows, however, that the new building had vigorous support of the Whites. A list of contributors published in September 1878, shows that of the 300 contributors to that point, only six had given more than \$100. Among the six were Mr. and Mrs. W. C. White (\$224.50), James White (\$205.00), and Ellen G. White (105.00).

But all was not well in Battle Creek. A serious spiritual problem existed, characterized by much criticism, gossip, and mistrust. This prompted Mrs. White to send strong testimonies urging reform (5T, 45-84). "Church Steeple Study" cites passages from these testimonies that condemn worldliness, a luxury-seeking spirit, and corrupt and idolatrous practices, using the term "church" as though the testimonies disapproved of the new Battle Creek church building. In fact, these testimonies make no reference to the building or its steeples, despite lively correctives to the congregation for other wrongs. While arguments from silence have limitations, her failure to cite features of the new church building as departures from the faith must receive consideration, especially as she catalogues numbers of other shortcomings.

6. Sensitivity needs to exist toward the convictions of other Christians. This argument, with clear biblical precedent, deserves thought. Perhaps the most well-known example in the New Testament is the difference over circumcision and foods offered to idols. Paul's position on these questions is enlightening. Although on a personal basis he acted in a way to avoid giving offence to believers with convictions contrary to his (Rom 14:1-13; 1 Cor 8:1-13), the apostle unhesitatingly opposed the rationale behind such convictions, going so far as instruct believers to eat whatever is sold in the market without raising questions of conscience, built on the premise that its prior consecration to an idol is as nothing because the idol itself is

nothing (1 Cor 10:25-27, Rom 12:14, 1 Cor 8:4). If, however, a brother's personal sensitivities were to be offended, then he would take steps to avoid raising offense.

To balance this practice, however, Paul also writes, "Why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples?" (1 Cor 10:29). He wants it to be clear that in voluntarily denying himself something on a personal basis he is not establishing policy for the church as a whole.

In the spirit of this counsel, then, if significant discord would be raised in a local congregation today by a steeple on the building, good judgment and Christian charity might well lead to its omission. However, this should not encourage steeple opponents to raise controversy in the congregation over an issue not based on valid biblical evidence. People with strong convictions against steeples must have opportunity to express their feelings, but they too are under obligation to place unity in the church above private convictions and seek for harmony.

## Conclusion

The "Church Steeple Study" document gives evidence of earnest effort to protect the faith from compromise, especially from ancient errors in modern guise. This effort deserves to be commended. However, several positions taken in the document are based on inadequate information, which weakens its force, no matter how sincere the author.

While recognizing the sincere concern manifest in the document, other problems lead to reservations about its conclusions. For convenience these may be listed.

1. The document is based upon incomplete and inadequate information. Superficial conclusions prove inaccurate when subjected to the scrutiny of intensive research. In general, citations of authority in the document rely on a limited number of publications of a sensational or partisan character. Recognized authorities in the fields of archaeology, ancient religions, ancient architecture, and religious development are missing from the list of citations.

Although one may legitimately differ with interpretations made by recognized authorities, it is not reasonable to dismiss the facts they have unearthed or their qualifications to come to conclusions. We must not allow anti-intellectual sentiment to cloud our access to fact. Nor can we rely on sensational books or articles promoting partisan views. A number of the books cited in the document are of such character.

2. By and large the document's argument turns on the unfortunate presupposition that something put to wrong use in the past remains objectionable today, even though it now is in an entirely different setting. This creates a problem of logic that, while attractive at a surface level to some, simply is in error when all the facts are considered. Objects are of themselves morally neutral. It is when put to a wrong use the object must be examined in light of the message it carries. In modern culture the steeple carries neither pagan connotation nor phallic significance. It is not reasonable to create in the modern mind some pagan or obscene

meaning in order to be able to attack use of the object. In both presuppositions and logic this document needs change.

3. The document's use of both biblical and Spirit of Prophecy writings is at times unjustified. Biblical condemnations of pagan practices in their own time were entirely legitimate, a part of God's inspired message.

The prophets cried against architectural or natural features as they were misused in the worship of false gods. The gods of today reflect our more sophisticated age, exhibiting themselves as secular godlessness, materialism, commercialized sports, and other activities whose demands for attention displace the claims of the Creator God. In antiquity paganism challenged the principle of God's sole sovereignty by setting up competing gods of stone, metal, or wood. Today modern life challenges that same principle, but in altered ways.

In the document both biblical texts and statements from the Spirit of Prophecy are taken and used repeatedly for the wording they contain, without the interpretative matrix of context. This is an unwarranted use of both sources.

Based on a careful analysis of the information available from the Bible, Spirit of Prophecy, and ancient religious history, there is not sound reason today to oppose steeples. Possibly steeples are offensive to the eye on aesthetic or other grounds. Church leaders should listen to all points of view prior to making decisions, and then act only after weighing all the elements. Above all, it is our Lord's will and prayer that believers be in harmony with one another, pressing together toward the highest goal set before the church: proclamation of the final message to the world in preparation for Jesus' return.