

## A New Direction for Theology of Worship Space

S. Edward Yang

Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA

Allow me to begin with a story: “There was a Korean *ajusshi*<sup>1</sup> who wanted to grow in his Christian faith. He remembered a Bible passage that spoke of Jesus going up a mountainside early in the morning to pray. Since there was a hill near his home he decided to go hiking the next morning. When he woke up, he got ready, grabbed his Bible and trekked up the hill. Although physically challenging, he made it to the top and spent some time in Scripture reading and prayer. Through this activity, he felt blessed (or as Korean Christians like to say, he ‘received grace’). Early next morning, he again woke up, got ready, grabbed his Bible and began his hike up the hill. But this time, he was physically worn out after going only halfway up. The summit was unreachable. Nevertheless, he remembered another lesson from the Bible about how God is everywhere. He realized that he didn’t have to go all the way up the hill to meet with God and ‘receive grace.’ Rather he could just as well read Scripture and pray at the halfway point. For the next few mornings, he went through the same routine of waking, preparing, and hiking before his personal devotions. Yet each subsequent day, his journey up the hill got shorter with increased fatigue: from halfway up to a quarter length to an eighth. By the fifth day, he was so tired that even getting out of bed would be difficult. For a brief moment, he rationalized that he could just as well do his devotion in his bed as he had done on the hillside. But before he was able to get his Bible and pray, he fell back to sleep.”

You might be wondering what this story has to do with the topic of worship space<sup>2</sup>? My intent with this story is to offer a snapshot of what is involved with the following theological concepts for the role of worship space.

Harold Turner, in his classic work *From Temple to Meeting House*, lists four functions of a sacred place.<sup>3</sup> First, a sacred place is the center of the world.<sup>4</sup> Second, it is the meeting point between the divine and human. Third, a sacred place functions as a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Ajusshi” refers to a non-descript gentleman in Korean. While this story is told with a male figure as the main character, it can just as well be read with a female lead figure. In addition, the main character does not necessarily have to be Korean although it makes sense with the emphases on morning prayer and prayer mountains in Korean Christianity. NB: The original source of this story is unknown. Also to be noted, the author of this article has modified this story.

<sup>2</sup> By “worship space,” I am referring to the physical space that is used for corporate worship. Synonyms would include “church interior” and “sanctuary.”

<sup>3</sup> Harold W. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: the phenomenology and theology of places of worship* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 18-33.

<sup>4</sup> In Mircea Eliade’s terms, it is the *axis mundi* from which sacredness gradates outward toward the profane.

microcosm of the heavenly realm. Last, it is where the immanent-transcendent presence of God resides.

Turner goes on to argue for two major theologies of worship space. The first one is the *domus dei* (Latin for “house of God”). In this view, the physical space for worship is the sacred place with the aforementioned four functions. In most cases, this would be a church building. Yet, there is an example in Scripture of where Jacob experienced God in his dream and anointed that place as “Bethel” (Hebrew for “house of God,” Genesis 28:19).

The prime example of the *domus dei*, Turner contends, is the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple fulfilled the functions of a sacred place. The center of the world was within the Temple, specifically the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant was located. In this place, the high priest as the human representative met with the divine once a year on the Day of Atonement. The Temple was also understood as heaven on earth. At the same time, it was where God was both present and absent.<sup>5</sup>

Going back to our opening story, the *domus dei* was the hilltop that the Korean *ajusshi* initially considered as the ideal place to meet with God. Mircea Eliade describes how mountaintops are viewed as sacred places in many religions.<sup>6</sup> There is a common notion that these elevated regions are closer to heaven in more than a physical sense. However, a paradigm shift occurred in the Christian understanding of sacred space.

As an alternative to the *domus dei*, Turner names his second theology of worship space as the *domus ecclesiae* (Latin for “house of the church/assembly”). In this view, it is no longer a building or a place that fulfills the functions of a sacred place. Rather it is “Jesus-in-community” who is the center, the divine-human connection, the heavenly microcosm, and the location for God’s transcendent-immanent presence. It was no longer about meeting in a specific place (e.g., the Jerusalem Temple). Instead, a worship space was anywhere believers were gathered in Christ’s name, which carried the promise of his presence (cf. Matthew 18:20). This was evident in the early church as believers often worshipped together in the homes of patrons.<sup>7</sup>

In Turner’s perspective, the *domus ecclesiae* was the operative view on worship space until the institutionalization of the church by Emperor Constantine. Consequently the *domus dei* view regained prominence for a thousand years with the proliferation of church buildings built as sacred spaces. It was not until the Protestant Reformation that the *domus ecclesiae* was recovered.

In his magisterial work on Protestant theology, John Calvin warns that we “must guard against either taking them [church buildings] to be God’s proper dwelling places...

---

<sup>5</sup> This paradox is demonstrated in King Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the Temple (1 Kings 8:22-61). Although built as a house of God, Solomon exclaimed, “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (v. 27).

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the nature of religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, it can be argued that believers gathered in house churches out of necessity rather than choice. Nevertheless, there was a theological undergirding for the practice of worshipping in house churches, namely the *domus ecclesiae* theology of worship space.

or feigning for them some secret holiness.”<sup>8</sup> The Genevan Reformer was arguing against the notion of places for worship as exclusively sacred. William Dyrness elaborates, “In what amounts to a metaphor of his view of worship space, he [Calvin] insisted that, outside of regular worship hours, the church buildings should be locked. This was to be done so that ‘no one outside the hours may enter for superstitious reasons. If anyone be found making any particular devotion inside or nearby, he is to be admonished; if it appears to be a superstition which he will not amend, he is to be chastised.’”<sup>9</sup>

Before we criticized the loss of a sacred space idea with the Reformation, it would be beneficial to point out the freedom gained for the places of worship with the *domus ecclesiae* view. Along with gathering for corporate worship in the cathedrals that they took possession of, the early Protestants also met in homes, barns, and secluded fields. The latter choices were often dictated by the persecution they faced. Nevertheless, the *domus ecclesiae* view allowed for freedom to worship in various locations. This is more evident today as churches gather in school auditoriums, coffee shops, nightclubs, residential homes and traditional church buildings.

Going back once again to our opening story, the Korean *ajusshi* grasped a basic understanding of the *domus ecclesiae*.<sup>10</sup> He realized that he did not have to go all the way to the hilltop in order to ‘receive grace.’ Rather, he could feel blessed at various locations as he read Scripture and prayed. Although this is a benefit of the *domus ecclesiae* view, there is a problematic corollary idea that it does not matter where one worships. In other words, his personal devotion was considered independent of where he was while solely dependent on what he did – similar to how corporate worship is often viewed. Yet, the conclusion of the story ought to be a clear reminder that *where we are* affects *what we do*. It is difficult to say that the *ajusshi* ‘received grace’ when he fell back asleep in his bed – apart from the blessing of needed rest.<sup>11</sup>

Both the *domus dei* and the *domus ecclesiae* have strengths and weaknesses for how we understand the significance of worship space today.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford L. Battles, edited by John McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.20.30.

<sup>9</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 82. Citation from John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> I want to point out that the opening story has limitations in illustrating the idea of *domus ecclesiae*. Most notable problem is that lack of “Jesus-in-community” since the story relates to personal devotions while Turner’s concept pertains to corporate worship. For this section, it will be helpful to view the Korean *ajusshi* as a collective figure: an individual representing an ecclesial body.

<sup>11</sup> One may argue that he could have washed his face with cold water or drank some coffee before reading Scripture and praying to keep from falling asleep. But our environment still affects us. Speaking from personal experience, I’ve learned that reading or studying in bed can be counter-productive.

<sup>12</sup> One way of describing the strengths and weaknesses of these views is to compare their understanding of the relationship between the worship space and its surroundings. In the *domus dei*, the worship space is a sacred space in contrast to the surroundings that gradate toward what is profane. Strength for this view is the emphasis on worship space as set apart. But this can also lead to a dualistic view of the world that categorizes particular regions as belonging to God while other areas are not. In the *domus ecclesiae*, the

Recognizing this, Harold Turner proposes a mixed form of *domus dei et ecclesiae* (“House of God and church/assembly”). But it is unclear how these binary ideas are brought together for a theology of worship space. A church can worship in a building that resembles a Gothic cathedral (which communicates more of the *domus dei* idea) or a Puritan meetinghouse (which communicates more of the *domus ecclesiae* idea). They can also worship in a place that is designed in any number of styles between these two extreme examples. Yet as a theological perspective, the *domus dei* and *domus ecclesiae* seem to be incompatible. Is divine presence primarily in the physical space that serves as a ‘house of God’ or in the assembly of believers who have little regard for where they worship? What would it mean for a worship space to serve both these ideas?

Addressing this dilemma, I would assert that Belden Lane’s approach to sacred place as a more helpful way of understanding why worship space matters. In his expanded edition of *Landscapes of the Sacred*, Lane presents three models for American sacred space: ontological, cultural, and phenomenological.<sup>13</sup> The first two correspond closely to Turner’s *domus dei* and *domus ecclesiae* types, respectively.

It is the phenomenological approach that offers a needed third dimension for constructing a contemporary theology of worship space. This approach recovers the significance of place as it “*participates* in the experience that humans have of it.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, it does matter where we worship. Combined with a theological understanding of worship as our response to God’s work of believers into the likeness of Christ, we must consider the importance of worship space for our spiritual formation. In other words, *where we worship* affects *who we are becoming*.

---

entire world is viewed as sacred. Thus there is freedom to worship God in any place. Yet the lack of distinction can lead to dismissing any significance for physical places of worship.

<sup>13</sup> Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 38-61.

<sup>14</sup> Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, 41. Emphasis in the original. It should be noted that Lane argues for a multifaceted approach that combine all three models (i.e., ontological, cultural, and phenomenological).