

Shaping the Building

To Winston Churchill is attributed this saying: “We shape the building, and the building shapes us.” Practically speaking, we know this to be true. Even something as simple as the (mis)placement of an electrical outlet may determine where we put our TV, and the location of the TV will almost certainly affect the dynamics of the household. Or, when a farmer makes the feed alleys too narrow in his new barn, he may find himself doing more work by hand than he anticipated. Or, since we have stopped building houses with front porches and instead fenced in our backyards, we no longer interact with our neighbours as we did in past decades. Neighbourhoods rarely exist anymore, at least not in more recent housing developments. When we shape a building, the building will shape us. It is important, then, that we design buildings that will shape our lives so that we learn to live in ways that reflect our values and our needs.

Recently I read a chapter in a book which outlined a development in western thinking that has led many to believe that the gods (and God) are designed and built by human beings. There is some truth to that, certainly with respect to the gods of the nations in biblical times. The people of long ago sensed that there was a divine power/person who they could not see or hear but who yet somehow involved himself in earthly life, and they tried to imagine what that god would be like. They created a variety of images that they believed represented the god or gods. They shaped the gods, but, in turn, the gods shaped them. In the western world, about 200 years ago, a number of influential thinkers proposed that the same was true of Christians in relationship to the Lord. These thinkers said that we, like the pagans, created a god who we claimed to be the one true God. Further, they said that the Bible is nothing more than our projection of what we think this God should be like. So, like the nations of the Old Testament, the truth we hold so dear is something that we created ourselves and, according to them, we are living under an illusion if we commit ourselves to serving God.

What these “deep” thinkers proposed was that we envision a world where there is no God (or gods). Instead of being constricted by the commands of this powerful God, because there is no God, they said that we should feel free to live as we please. They said that Christians (and all who believe in divine beings) created their God because they wanted a sense of security and hope, but with it they also created a God who restricted their lives. Among these thinkers of the 19th century there were those who wanted to throw off the fetters (God’s rules) that bound them so that they could live freely. Living without stricture, they believed, was the highest human good, and the concept of God got in the way of that kind of life. Only those who live freely, they said, can be truly happy.

What they were doing was shaping a building, the world, in which there is no God, but that building began to shape them and those who came after them. By eliminating God from their lives, they were able to live freely, but they began to discover that freedom to do whatever they wanted led to unintended consequences. One of the last of that kind of “thinker” was a man named Frederick Nietzsche who declared that God was dead. He began to live as he pleased, and as a result of having multiple sexual partners, contracted a disease which led to his insanity and early death. The building shaped him in ways that he

did not suspect, much as the building where there is no God is shaping our world today, and most of what results is not as expected or desired.

But where those thinkers right in saying that we created God? I do not doubt that the gods of the nations of the Bible were created by the people. Those gods were often no more complex than the blocks of stone meant to represent them. But when we consider the God of the Bible, we find someone who is far more complex, more intricate, more profound than any human being could conceive. If it is true that we created the God depicted in the Bible, we are far more intelligent than we seem, for we would then have created a God who is beyond our understanding. As Isaiah 40:13 says, “Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counsellor?” The God of the Bible is far more complex and more profound and more infinite than any God a human being could create. That and that alone convinces me that the thinkers of the 19th century were wrong when they said that God is our creation. He cannot be, for we are not capable of such depth. We did not shape a God that we wanted, but God revealed himself to us.

We shape the building, and the building shapes us. But if we do not shape the building, the building still shapes us. And that is the way it is with God. Even though we did not create him (for we couldn't), as long as recognize him, honour him, trust him, and serve him, or, in other words, acknowledge his presence in our lives and world, he will shape us. The shape of our lives is determined by the fact that we live in God's creation and in his presence. Those who have tried to shape a world without God are learning that such a building is not good for humanity. And, as we can see from history, any time we try to shape the building (our world) without God, it refashions us in ways which are not beneficial. It is only in God's building, in God's world, that we can be shaped in a way that causes us to thrive and live. We may not have shaped God, but he does shape us.

Pastor Gary