

## **Bells and Steeples at Church**

**Edited and Posted by Bob Young**

When a lawyer asked Jesus what was the most important commandment, Jesus responded, “Love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself.” The church has considered the “Greatest Command” a blueprint for authentic human existence. The church lives in two dimensions: the horizontal of “love your neighbor” and the vertical of “love God.” The cross, the central symbol of the Christian faith, shows those two dimensions—a vertical post pointing upward toward God and a horizontal beam pointing sideways toward neighbors. We must not emphasize one at the expense of the other. If the church becomes simply a social institution (so earthly minded it is of no heavenly good) or only a prayer group (so heavenly minded it is of no earthly good) it has forgotten its reason for being. The horizontal and the vertical dimensions of human existence are tied inextricably together: without the post, the beam falls to the earth, and without the beam, the post is just a stick. The cross is a sermon in wood.

The central symbol of our faith brings together two indispensable dimensions of authentic Christian existence. Church architecture frequently reflects that same cruciform shape, the same cross-shaped pattern, and therefore the same bi-directional dimension of faith—the vertical and the horizontal. And that is in part why we have steeples not fit for human occupancy.

This is a sermon about steeples (and bells), perhaps too trivial a topic for a Christian sermon. Steeples are very pointy structures that seem pointless. Why all the wasted space? One cannot worship, meet, educate, nor put an office in a steeple. A kid visited his grandmother’s church for the first time, his first encounter with a steeple. He was quite impressed and asked his grandmother, “Grandma, what’s the point?” He was probably asking what the tall pointy thing was called, but perhaps it was a question of weightier import. Steeples: what’s the point? Well, as it turns out, steeples are just like sermons—they have three points. Steeples have a practical point, an aesthetic point, and a theological point.

**Steeple have a practical point**, or at least that was true through much of history. Steeples go back to about 600 A.D. when a town’s church building was the largest, most enduring, most important, and most prominent structure in the community. In the middle ages, every town needed to watch out for hostile invaders. So on one end of the church, the most prominent and durable structure in town, they built a tower modeled on the lookout tower of a walled fortress, in order to anticipate danger and prepare adequate defenses against invasion. Today steeples seem like peaceful harmless things, but they originally had a military purpose. Over the years steeples got higher and higher. Every church needed a bell because churches were not only a military lookout, but also the original time-keepers. Church bells tolled the hour. People needed to know what time it was. **Bells tell people what time it is.**

**Bells remind to come to church.** Alarm clocks, wristwatches, and cell phones had not been invented yet, so people needed to know when to come to church. Where do you put a church bell? At the highest point in town—atop the lookout tower on the church, where the bell will peal out far and wide. Someone has pointed out that for long centuries of human existence, before the invention of gunpowder and steam engines, a church bell was the loudest sound a human being would ever hear in his lifetime. The only thing that might have come close was the blacksmith’s hammer and anvil. So atop their towers churches built shelters for their bells, often encased behind louvers. Over the years steeples got higher. Some churches began to place lighthouses atop the bell tower, a shelter with windows for the fire of a lantern so that the light could shine forth. Along the seacoast, **steeples became lighthouses**, navigation aids for sailors at sea, keeping them from shipwrecking on the rocks.

**Steeple represent the presence of God in a community.** Steeples are lighthouses. Think about it: where would America be were it not for the lantern in the steeple of Old North Church Boston, where Paul Revere had the sexton show two lanterns instead of one to warn the colonists that the British were approaching Lexington and Concord by sea and not by land? We will shine the light. Steeples got higher still. Every church needed a lookout tower, every lookout tower needed a bell, every bell tower needed a lantern

on top, and every lantern needed a roof to keep the rain out, and since the steeple tower was thin and pointy like a pencil, the roof needed to be pointy too. **Steeple should make God more visible and memorable.**

Historically steeples had a practical point. We don't use them for those practical purposes anymore, but churches keep building steeples because of their aesthetic and theological points.

**Steeple have an aesthetic point**, which is a fancy way of saying they are beautiful, they are visually interesting, and we appreciate their beauty. Our landscapes, cities and towns would be insufferably boring without them.

Most buildings in our American towns and cities either sprawl or soar; it is hard to do both. Buildings are built either on a horizontal or a vertical plane. With steeples, churches both sprawl and soar. This makes them visually interesting, beautiful to look at, and indicates that there is more going on than in most other buildings. Churches are visually provocative. What is this about? Perhaps they obliquely suggest something of the mystery of God. There is something complicated and beyond our grasp about God.

**Steeple have a theological point.** What's the point? The **point** is the point. Heaven is the point. **Steeple remind us of God, a tower of strength and power. Steeple cause us to lift our eyes skyward, heavenward, to lift your eyes toward God.**

"Hey!" says the prophet Isaiah, "Hey! Stop! Look! Behold! Hey, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Hey, you penniless, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine without money and milk without price. Hey, why do you spend money for that which is not bread? Hey, why do you labor for that which does not satisfy? Why do you keep trying to fill spiritual emptiness with material trinkets? Why do you keep trying to meet a gnawing hunger for heaven with the vain baubles of earth? Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon God while God is near." A steeple says that there is a vertical dimension to human existence that human beings neglect to their eternal peril.

**Steeple should cause us to see our city.** Look at our neighbors. They attend very well to the horizontal dimension of human existence: auto repair, kids care, medical care, education.... They do a great job, but don't you think the neighborhood needs something pointing at the sky?

**Steeple should help people locate God, where is he? Steeple also say something about people. In the steeple two messages are integrated.** The steeple says that there's a god-shaped blank in every one of us that nothing but God can fill. Why do you spend your money for that which does not satisfy and your labor for that which cannot fill you up?

As someone put it, 'Tis only God can be had for the asking. We have the one thing you most need, and here's the strange thing: it's free; it doesn't cost a thing. 'Tis only God can be had for the asking. As the rain comes down from heaven and waters the earth, and gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word never return to me empty. My word shall accomplish my purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. The rains come down, and the seed sprouts up. The word comes down, and the word flourishes back up, this beautiful vertical traffic between God and humanity, between heaven and earth. So let's sprawl and soar, literally and figuratively, reaching out to the neighbor and up towards God. As someone aptly put it, "A church is not just a building we worship **in**; a church is a building we worship **with**." To God be the glory, now and for the next 100 years.