

Shortly after I came to Faith Church, in one of my conversations with Fred Shear he told me that the steeple atop this church had almost not been built. Fred was on the founding church board overseeing the construction of the building. As is often the case, costs were running over budget and hard decisions had to be made. A case was made to leave out two planned classrooms on the basement level and perhaps have those added later. Another case was made to leave off the steeple since it was not essential to the functioning of the church. Initially most of the board favored leaving off the steeple. But then someone pointed out that without the steeple the building would not be recognizable as a church and would look just like the new town hall being built right up the street. They built the steeple, and I'm glad they did. The classrooms in the basement were also built.

Architecture is a combination of aesthetics and functionality, and both are important. Architecture expresses the values and beliefs of a community and of a culture. In Enlightenment Europe the church steeple was always the highest structure in town. The church was visually the center of town and was functionally the center of society. In modernity, during the 17th century, there was the establishment of nation-states with civic governments, and government buildings began to rise above the church steeples (think of Big Ben in London). In the Modern period of the 20th century commerce took over as the organizing center of society and business buildings took over as visually dominant in city skylines.

I'm very glad our church has a steeple. I like the aesthetic and I value the symbolism of it. But the truth is it is not essential. This past summer the current church board discussed the possibility that the steeple might need to be removed in the process of putting on a new roof next spring if keeping it would involve a great deal more expense than removing it. After careful assessment, it turned out the steeple was not in as bad shape as feared and not the cause of the roof leaks that plagued us over the past couple of years, so we get to keep it. But if it would have been very expensive to save it, I would have favored removing it.

Our function as a church is no longer that of being the organizing center of civic life, as it was in Medieval Europe or in 19th century (or early 20th century) America. Our function is as salt that flavors society, and provides healing and well-being to those around us. The words salt, salvation, and salve are all from the same root. The steeple and the church bell it contained used to call people in. But salt needs to be spread around, sprinkled out of its container in order to be useful.

Yes, we need to put on a new roof over the sanctuary next spring to preserve our building. But let us keep clearly in mind as we live through another holiday season into a new year that our true function as a church is to preserve souls, to be healing bearers of God's love to those around us in our community and in our world. May it be so.

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