

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Protestant Pulpit Placement 6-9-86

"To give up your individuality is to annihilate yourself. We should all remember that to be like other people is to be unlike ourselves. Nothing can be more detestable in character than servile imitation".

—Col. Robert G. Ingersoll



Vol. VIII

No. 23

First, all of the observations and opinions expressed here are strictly my own. Secondly, the theme of the article is not applicable to the more liturgical churches such as Roman Catholic, Episcopal or Lutheran. Recently I stepped into an Orleans County landmark, a church which is on the National Register of Historic Places. I was both saddened and disappointed to note the rearrangement of ecclesiastical furniture including the pulpit. For over one hundred ten years the pulpit of this particular Protestant church has been located in the sanctuary as the center focal point. Indeed, I was surprised to see that it had been relocated to one side of the dais, only to be poorly balanced with a lectern on the opposite side. I thought to myself, now here is an historic landmark which was designed by an accomplished architect of regional acclaim, being jostled by contemporary trends which alter the building's integrity. Surely the architect of the church knew what was visually pleasing and most symbolically appropriate for the denomination it houses. I asked without satisfaction a member of the church "What do modern day Christians have against the centrally placed pulpit?" As I dealt with this question myself, I began to realize that almost every Protestant church which I ever saw as a child with a centrally located pulpit no longer has it placed in the middle. Instead, many of these beautiful Victorian pieces of furniture have been moved to the side or even discarded. Indeed, almost every Baptist, Methodist, Congregational or Presbyterian

Church in Orleans County which ever had a center pulpit now has an altar in its place. The Protestant emphasis and approach to religious services has certainly changed just over the past 30 years. This gives me to wonder if many of these churches aren't simply attempting to put on airs.

How ironic all this seems to be when viewed in the total scope of what the Protestant Reformation was all about. The very object which symbolized the point of view the Protestants reacted against during the Reformation, has now become the main focal point of many Protestant Church sanctuaries. Reactionaries like Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, John Calvin and later, John Murray protested against the absolute word and doctrines of the church of their times. Graven images and idolatry were taboo and so like-wise was liturgical ritual in many Protestant churches.

Locally, our oldest church edifices date back to the 1830's. These are either Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Universalist or Episcopalian. With the exception of the Episcopalian, all the others were designed and erected with the pulpit as the central focal point of the sanctuary, not an altar. The central pulpit, although never a religious symbol, became however, a visual statement against liturgy and dogma, the very roots of what the Reformation was all about. In fact, some Catholic churches didn't even have pulpits. The pulpit, centrally located, was symbolic of the word of God through man. (A new found freedom which was all important, making the Sacraments a secondary part of religious services.) We also have to remember that back when our first settlers came here, they were not that far removed from the American Revolutionary War period. Certainly as a result of this, they were reactionary against anything which did not espouse freedom, the church included. In fact, congregations were organized in those years as Societies, not as churches. The word 'church' suggested too much dogma and structure, the very thing they had fought against. The pulpit in Protestant churches became a central focal point and symbol to interpret our Christian Heritage in a new nation founded on the basis of religious freedom. As later Victorians erected church buildings they too remembered the importance of the pulpit, what price its freedom meant and so placed it in their houses of worship a the focal point. It frequently over-shadowed not an altar but a Communion table. In my own opinion, altars as a center point of interest are out of place in most Protestant churches because they imitate and symbolize a theme, ritualistic style and liturgy which belongs to others. The one standard, symbolic, visual unifying statement of the whole Protestant epic from Evangelism to Unitarianism was the central pulpit. Unfortunately, many modern Protestants have lost sight of their heritage and what the center pulpit's roots, real purpose and symbology as an interior architectural feature is all about.

The photo included here shows the interior of the First United Presbyterian Church in Medina before 1964 when it too had a centrally located pulpit on a dais above a communion table. It certainly does seem that we have an insatiable urge to tamper with historic structures. I've said it in this column before and I say it again in relationship to historic buildings, "Keep your meddling hands off!"