

NONCONFORMIST  
CHURCH  
ARCHITECTURE

RONALD P. JONES





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AN ESSAY

BY

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*With Twelve Illustrations*

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS essay is an attempt to reason out the problem of modern church design as it presents itself to that branch of Nonconformity, which, from its origin in the seventeenth century, has gradually developed into a group of Unitarian and kindred Liberal Christian congregations.

It does not pretend to be a complete architectural history of that branch, and the historical chapters are based on no profound documentary researches: in order to write them, I did not even once enter the Reading-room of the British Museum, or the Library in Gordon Square; in fact the evidence necessary for any complete history might now be hard to obtain, since most of the available documents are biographies of ministers or congregations, in which architectural events are alluded to only in a casual and disconnected way.

My conclusions are based on observation, so far as I have been able to visit the existing churches: it is probably not given to any

## INTRODUCTION

of us to have seen all of our 289 places of worship in England alone, and in quoting examples I must be understood to refer to them as representing a type or class, often of considerable number, while there may be many instances still unknown to me, which equally deserve notice.

I am indebted to the Editor and Directors of the 'Inquirer' for permission to reprint the essay, which first appeared in the columns of that paper; also to several correspondents who have since supplemented or corrected my historical chapters with information which I did not myself possess, and which I have now embodied in the text; finally, to those who have kindly lent or provided photographs for the illustrations.

R. P. J.

7, Stone Buildings,  
Lincoln's Inn, London, W.C.  
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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
I STYLE . . . . .	7
II THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY . . . . .	16
III THE GREEK REVIVAL . . . . .	27
IV THE GOTHIC REVIVAL . . . . .	34
V THE MODERN CHURCH . . . . .	43

## ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>Plate</i>	<i>to face p.</i>
1. Friars' Street Chapel, Ipswich . . . . .	19
2. Mary Street Chapel, Taunton . . . . .	20
3. Churchgate Street Chapel, Bury St. Edmunds . . . . .	22
4. Underbank Chapel, Stannington } Friars' Street Chapel, Ipswich } . . . . .	23
5. The Octagon Chapel, Norwich . . . . .	26
6. Stamford Street Chapel, London . . . . .	30
7. Todmorden Unitarian Church . . . . .	34
8. Monton Church, Eccles . . . . .	38
9. Old Meeting Church, Birmingham (interior) . . . . .	40
10. Old Meeting Church, Birmingham (exterior) . . . . .	42
11. Westgate Chapel, Lewes . . . . .	55
12. Ullet Road Church, Liverpool . . . . .	56

## I

### STYLE

WHAT should be the appropriate architectural treatment of a modern place of worship belonging to a 'Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Free Christian, Presbyterian, or other Non-Subscribing or kindred Congregation' usually indicated in somewhat vague terms as 'one of our churches,' and claiming inclusion in the pages of the 'Essex Hall Year Book'?

The problem, like all those connected with architectural expression, is much complicated by considerations of sentiment and tradition, and cannot be approached from an exclusively modern or practical point of view.

Every one will now agree that a building should sincerely interpret the object for which it was erected, and should be the natural outcome of the conditions, social and climatic, of its own period and place: however much, for instance, we may admire the Parthenon, we no longer feel it necessary,

as a former generation did, to build Greek-Doric chapels regardless of the inconvenient and inappropriate results which are bound to flow from the very nature of Greek-Doricness; but, on the other hand, we cannot ignore the past, for the reason that traditions and 'old associations' are actually part of the conditions of the present, and must have more or less weight in any state of existence into which memory enters at all.

This weight is perhaps greater in matters of religious form and expression than in any other branch of human activity, and in all periods the changes resulting from new developments and altered conditions have been more slowly carried out in ecclesiastical than in civil and domestic architecture.

Some survey of our history in this matter is, therefore, desirable if we are to estimate its claims fairly in attacking the modern problem.

First and foremost, let it be noted that the whole question of a 'style of architecture' specially appropriate to churches, or indeed to any other kind of building, is peculiar to the last hundred years; before that time it had never been raised, and if raised would have conveyed no meaning.

By the end of the eighteenth century the increase of knowledge about the work of other nations and periods, which had begun with the Italian Renaissance, reached a point when it became possible for groups of architects to adapt some particular past method of building to modern uses, independently of the general stream of architectural tradition and progress. It is true that the stream had already been violently diverted in previous centuries; but it had still pursued one undivided course, and none of its strength had as yet been drawn off into those later side channels which so often ended in stagnant backwaters. In other words, architecture up to that time was 'vernacular,' and to the majority of those engaged in it, intuitive.

It was, therefore, impossible to propound the question of the proper style for a church, or a town hall, or a cottage; allowing for differences in function, they were all designed on the same principles in any given period.

And, more than this, no one in those periods would recognize that he was employing a style at all. If you had asked the builder of Salisbury or Rheims Cathedral what style of Gothic he was using, you would have appeared incomprehensible to him, just

as you would have seemed to Julius Cæsar, if you had asked him what he was doing in '50 B.C.' The whole idea of styles belongs to critical and not to creative epochs; and even in cases like the Italian Renaissance, which was both creative and critical, a revival or adaptation of certain past forms was imposed on the present as the *only* reasonable and sound method, not simply as an alternative, depending on individual choice.

The cathedral builder, of course, realized that he did not use the same treatment as his predecessor; but this he would have put down to ignorance on the part of his predecessor, and he never doubted his own superiority in taste and skill, as we see by the ruthless way in which he destroyed existing work to make way for his enlargements and improvements.

A clockmaker would be puzzled if asked for a clock that kept ecclesiastical time, or municipal time, or domestic time; he would say that all his clocks were designed to tell 'the time' without qualification; in the same way the mediæval or renaissance builder would have asserted that he was producing 'architecture,' pure and simple, and that he knew only one kind for all purposes.

It must, however, be remembered that at different periods one particular type of building has dominated the whole field; all mediæval architecture was tinged with ecclesiastical forms because the church was the dominating work of the time, just as in the late eighteenth century all building is tinged with the cold stateliness of the great classical country seats and town mansions. But the fourteenth century warehouse was just as 'Gothic' as the cathedral, and this similarity in treatment can easily be seen in such cases as the hall and chapel of an earlier college at Oxford, both much the same in design, but the chapel on the whole imposing its ecclesiastical influence on the hall without receiving much secular impression in return; while the contrary is found in some of the heavy, palatial-looking churches of the eighteenth century, such as St. John's, Westminster.

We shall, therefore, find that for the first century of our religious history the chapels followed the general trend of architectural form universal in their own period, and that there was no such thing as a special design for religious buildings, much less a 'Nonconformist,' as distinguished from an Anglican style.

Taking 1662 as the starting-point of the history, it is obvious that the mediæval period lies entirely outside our range. Little church building took place after the suppression of the monasteries, for the reason that all possible needs were already provided for, and by the time of the Reformation the Gothic age was at an end, and the influence of the Italian Renaissance thoroughly established. The whole theory of the correct form and arrangement of a place of worship was now completely changed; and it happened that almost at the moment when Nonconformity came into existence, an opportunity arose in the Established Church for expounding this theory on the grandest scale. The Great Fire of London in 1666 did for the Reformation church builders what the burning of the Acropolis by the Persians did for the Athenians—it gave them a ‘clean slate’ on which to write the architectural message of a new age.

Wren’s first design for St. Paul’s was the outward and visible embodiment of the Protestant Church, with its emphasis on the preacher, and the great congregation in a central space, as opposed to the long-drawn chancel of the mediæval cathedral, solidly

screening the priestly ceremonies from the profane eye of the laity. It was only Court influence which obliged him after all to accept the mediæval plan and transform it as best he could to meet the needs of his time. But in the City churches we find the free and sincere expression of these needs, and we cannot point to any mediæval forms as being introduced merely for the sake of tradition and past associations. The consequence is that on us, with our experience of architectural history in the nineteenth century, Wren’s smaller churches produce a strongly ‘Nonconformist’ effect, which we hardly realize to have been the universal quality of the church design at that time.

Sir Walter Besant wrote of them: ‘The churches were what is called ugly’—(this from the point of view of the modern Gothicist). ‘The people sat in pews, each family by itself; all churches had galleries, and the service was conducted from a three-decker.’ The statement about galleries is an exaggeration; but would not this be an equally exact description of the chapels of Ipswich, or Taunton, or Cross Street, Manchester, as originally designed? The gallery and the three-decker were characteristic



features in that age, just as the choir-screen and the stained glass windows were in earlier centuries.

Nonconformity arose in a period when the predominant influence in architecture was not ecclesiastical, and the beauty of its early chapels is quite different from that of the cathedrals. Gothic architecture, as most highly developed in northern France, was a vast system of balanced construction in stone, severely logical and mechanically perfect in theory, though seldom attaining real stability in practice; depending not at all on 'ornament' for its own sake apart from construction. All its forms were those appropriate to masonry and stone carving; even the feathery delicacy of the choir-stall canopy is not really suited to a fibrous material like oak or chestnut, but is an imitation of the stone tracery work found on a larger scale in windows and niches.

But Wren's churches and the contemporary chapels are not, in this sense, expressions of a system of construction at all; he had usually to deal with confined sites of square or oblong shape, and with extreme ingenuity he devised the form of his ceilings and the disposition of his columns in order

to obtain light and shade, space and variety, as to which the shell of the building itself gave no logical indications. His churches depend for their effect, firstly on this arrangement of the ceiling plan, and secondly on their exquisite oak fittings, reredos, pulpit, sounding-board, pew fronts, gallery, and organ-case. Here there is no forcing of wood into unsuitable decorative forms; it is the apotheosis of 'joinery,' and whether or not adorned by the wonderful carving of Grinling Gibbons and his school, it possesses the beauty which comes from all perfect and appropriate treatment of a constructive material, a beauty which of its kind is not inferior to that of vaulted roofs and stained glass windows; with a quality not emotional and romantic, but calm, dignified, and intellectual, like the beauty of that religion which it was designed to serve.



## II

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

IN considering the design of the early Nonconformist chapels, we may leave out of account those cases where existing buildings were adapted to an unforeseen purpose, since these only became chapels by an architectural accident, and had little effect on the evolution of a typical building. Though interesting in themselves, the mediæval refectory at Canterbury and the Tudor town-house at Lewes may for our purpose be disregarded, as also may a number of private houses converted for religious purposes into 'meeting-houses.' It must be remembered that for some years the ejected clergy looked forward to an eventual return into the National Church, so that these early meeting-houses would be regarded rather as temporary resting-places than as permanent homes, and the congregations would be content to make as few structural alterations as possible, and to put up with arrangements

which might have seemed unsuitable under more settled conditions. By the time that the hope of reunion was seen to be a delusion, habit had accustomed them to the existing places of worship, and the domestic influence thus established by association made itself felt when new buildings came to be required.

For about a century from 1662 onwards the Nonconformist chapel was designed in the 'style' which we have seen to be common to all architecture of the period, but it naturally shows variations from the Anglican type owing to differences in the form of service. The focus of the entire scheme was the pulpit: even in Wren's churches the pulpit attains an importance in scale and decoration never previously imagined; upon it, and upon the sounding-board the most ornate carving was lavished, and the open staircase provided a delicate contrast to its solid panelling; sometimes the whole structure quite outshines the reredos and communion table. But in the chapel it supplanted these features altogether, and the internal design was based in the first place on the problem of giving a direct view of the preacher to as large a congregation as possible.

The pulpit was, therefore, placed in the

## 18 NONCONFORMIST ARCHITECTURE

centre of one of the longer sides of the building, and the pews arranged in blocks facing it on the floor space ; galleries would greatly increase the seating accommodation, but obviously they could not be carried behind the pulpit, since the preacher would have turned his back to that section of his hearers, so they extended round three sides of the square, leaving a blank wall against which the pulpit was built up. The existence of the galleries made it necessary that the pulpit, or the top story, if it possessed more than one, should be high enough for the preacher to be seen by those who sat in the back pews upstairs, and this necessity no doubt led to the development of the 'three-decker.'

The blank wall usually contained a tall window on each side of the pulpit, and an oval or circular one above the sounding-board, these filled with plain glass in white sash-bars, or delicate leading of 'cobweb' design. The drawback to this arrangement must always have been that in the daytime the preacher was practically invisible to a large part of the congregation, owing to the strong light all round him ; particularly in chapels like that at Taunton, where these windows faced

south and received the full strength of the midday sun.

The pews were of the high-backed 'loose-box' kind, of which I do not know if any examples still survive: it is said that they sometimes contained stoves and other domestic comforts for their family parties, who were completely shut off from inspection by their neighbours; at Newbury there is an 'infants' pew'—a kind of secluded chapel nursery for the babies of the congregation.

The whole arrangement is well shown in the Ancient Chapel of Toxteth, Liverpool, and in many others of small scale where few alterations have been found necessary; sometimes the gallery only extended across one side, and if the building stood on a confined site with a narrow frontage, the pulpit might be placed on the end wall opposite the entrance. On a large scale, probably the finest survivor is Friars' Street Chapel, Ipswich, where a congregation of over 600 could be accommodated.

In buildings of this size the problem of supporting the roof became troublesome; Wren himself successfully accomplished the immense flat ceiling of the Sheldonian Theatre, with a clear span of 70 feet, but this *tour de*

PLATE 1



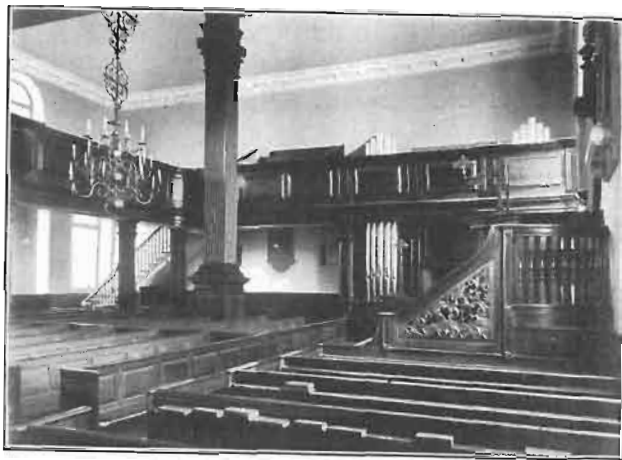
FRIARS' STREET CHAPEL, IPSWICH.  
INTERIOR.

*force* of scientific carpentry was not within ordinary powers. The roof of the large square chapel had to be designed in two parallel ridges with a valley between, which entailed supports in the centre of the interior. These obstructions, being accepted as inevitable, gave an opportunity for decorative treatment, and the two magnificent square oak columns at Taunton are perfect examples of the Corinthian 'order,' complete from base to entablature, and enriched with all the beautiful carving characteristic of the period.

The illustration also shows the delicately carved and pierced panel at the side of the pulpit staircase, an excellent decorative contrast to the usual balustrade adjoining it.

It is unlikely that organs were introduced till a later date, but in the Anglican churches they were invariably placed in a gallery at the west end.

At night the chapels were lighted by candles, and the fine brass hanging candelabra of Dutch design which still exist at Ipswich and Taunton show how greatly these must have added to the interior effect. Unfortunately very few appear to have survived through the dark ages of gas to more



MARY STREET CHAPEL, TAUNTON.

There is undoubtedly a great contrast in outward appearance between the Anglican and Nonconformist place of worship, and the domestic feeling in the latter is not merely due to the absence of a tower or spire. To a casual glance, the chapel at Horsham or Tenterden might very well be a detached private house, and it was no doubt important that in the early days of Nonconformity the chapels should not challenge attention, or be in any way obtrusive: they were deliberately designed to produce a homely and retiring effect, though we need not suppose that it was intended to disguise them in any way, since their real purpose could not have been kept from public knowledge.

Where, however, the entrance front of the building was not backed by a gallery, but contained the long windows already described, a different composition results, with a distinct character of its own. Of the type with two doorways, Rivington and Stannington show delightfully unspoilt examples, while at Crediton and Chesterfield are found the long, and at Bury St. Edmund's the narrow frontage with a single entrance. All these are obviously chapels, and could not be mistaken



CHURCHGATE STREET CHAPEL,  
BURY ST. EDMUNDS.



UNDERBANK CHAPEL  
STANNINGTON.



FRIARS' STREET CHAPEL,  
IPSWICH.

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY 23

for houses; Underbank Chapel, Stannington, in particular is a perfect piece of design and proportion, and the fact that Yorkshire stone did not lend itself to carved decoration gives it a severe simplicity quite appropriate to its modest scale; while Bury St. Edmund's Chapel is no less admirable as an example of brickwork.

The general type of chapel thus erected served as a model for nearly a century, and was only modified in details, more especially in the external treatment. Meanwhile architecture gradually lost the first fire and spirit of the Renaissance, and became more formal and frigid as the eighteenth century grew older. Palladio was now considered the only source of correct inspiration, and building activity was mainly shown by the great landowners in town and country, many of whom became enthusiastic amateurs and patrons of the arts. The middle of the century might well be called the 'Folio' period, so largely was taste influenced by the fashion for publishing great volumes of Palladian designs in which the pomposity of the buildings represented was only equalled by that of the inevitable dedication on every page—'To his Grace the Duke of Omnium, with the

humble respects of his most obedient servant the engraver.'

All this was, of course, peculiar to a limited circle of dilettanti, and it had little effect on the great mass of 'vernacular' building in provincial towns; but the chapels show a tendency to severe and barren treatment, and quite lose the charm and variety of earlier work. It is, however, mainly a matter of outward effect; at George's Meeting, Exeter, dating from 1760, the interior shows little change in design; there are the same galleries with handsome supporting columns and panelled fronts, and a splendid pulpit whose carving shows the hand of a worthy descendant of the Grinling Gibbons school. But the exterior does not recall those at Bury St. Edmund's or Bridgwater; it is simply dull, and the best that can be said for it is that nothing in the design is actively objectionable.

Before approaching the age of Revivals—architectural, not religious—one famous chapel claims our attention for its unique design; this is the Octagon at Norwich, a building in every way worthy of its distinguished place in our history. As the name implies, the plan is octagonal; the central dome is supported by eight finely

proportioned columns, behind which the galleries extend right round the interior; the pulpit is placed against the side opposite the entrance, and the section of the gallery at the back of it is occupied by the organ. Another purpose was thus found for the particular space which was useless for seating accommodation, but the adjoining section on each side is also at an angle to the back of the preacher, and the position of the organ just behind him is an exceedingly undesirable one—a point which will arise in many later cases.

In spite of these small drawbacks, and an unsuitable grouping of the windows, it would be impossible to find a better interior design for the contemporary form of service. An octagonal plan gives the greatest number of people a reasonably good view of the pulpit, and considered solely as architecture, produces the finest of all concentrated effects, owing to the variety in the angles at which the sides are seen in perspective, and the number of vistas from the central space. It is for this reason that churches like San Vitale at Ravenna, and the Salute at Venice appear so spacious and complicated to the eye though their actual dimensions are quite moderate.



In addition, the Octagon is unmistakably a place of worship; no one would imagine it to be a concert-hall or a hippodrome, and it avoids that auditorium-like effect which sometimes spoils large modern Nonconformist chapels.

This type of plan was also adopted in two chapels at Liverpool (one of these, in Paradise Street, being the former home of the Hope Street congregation), but to-day the Octagon — ‘*si parva licet componere magnis*’—stands alone like Santa Sophia among the Byzantine churches of Constantinople.



THE OCTAGON CHAPEL,  
NORWICH.

### III

#### THE GREEK REVIVAL

WE now reach the age of Revivals—the conscious adaptation to modern use of the methods natural to civilizations remote in period, and sometimes even in nationality.

The pedantic tendency of the later Renaissance paved the way for the first of these, which as an appropriate climax to the 'Folio' period, owed its origin to the appearance of a single book, 'The Antiquities of Athens,' by Stuart and Revett, published at intervals from 1762-1810. This splendid set of engraved plates of the Parthenon and other famous buildings of the greatest age in Greek art, came as a revelation of an architecture hitherto only known vaguely at second-hand through Roman versions, and at once recognized to be, within its limits, the most perfect which has ever been created. Enthusiasm was reinforced by the arrival of the Elgin marbles and the general reopening of Greece to western travellers; the Acropolis

replaced Palladio as the ultimate source of all inspiration, and an eruption of Doric and Ionic portions took place indiscriminately on churches, assembly-rooms, town halls, and even country mansions.

Considered merely as a source of inspiration, the Acropolis was, of course, infinitely superior to Palladio; but it suffered from the drawback in this connexion, that its architecture was entirely external. A Greek temple had no interior, in the sense that a cathedral has; it was not even a place of public worship, but combined the functions of a shrine for a sacred statue, a State bank, and an art museum. Approaching the Parthenon, you see no evidence of the interior division, and there is not even anything to indicate at which end the main entrance is placed; it is open-air and outdoor architecture *in excelsis*.

Consequently our revivalists were puzzled as to the proper treatment of a chapel, which is mainly an interior problem, and we have (or had) interesting examples in London of alternative solutions. At Stamford Street Chapel (1823) the traditional arrangement is reduced to its barest terms, and then carried out with Greek constructive and decorative

forms, as far as they were available. In its original form the interior did not contain a gallery, and the pulpit stood in a recess in the end wall, between two detached Doric columns. These were not essential to the building; they were put there in order to look Greek, and this is a symbol of the artificiality of the whole revival, which was driven to use the structural features of its prototype merely to be 'in the picture,' whether they were required or not. Against that defect, however, must be set the inherent beauty of all the Greek forms; the Doric column is a perfect expression in form and line of the abstract function of support, and even inappropriately used, it can never lose its dignity or appear tasteless and obtrusive; and the same may be said of the highly conventionalized Greek ornament. The design of the later gallery balustrade at Stamford Street, for instance, has no actual precedent, but it is the kind of thing which an Athenian would have produced if he had thought of using cast-iron for such a purpose.

The whole interior, though somewhat severe and chilling, has the great architectural qualities of 'breadth' and repose, too often lost to sight in later generations.

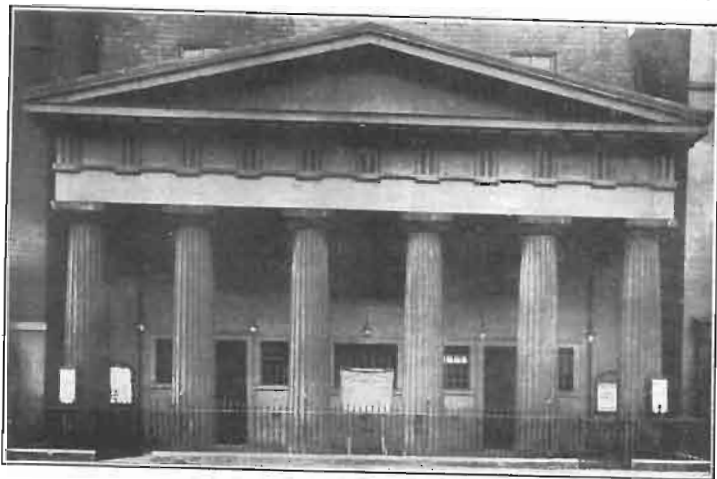
### 30 NONCONFORMIST ARCHITECTURE

Outside, the revivalists were on firmer ground ; the portico is a very good copy in scale and detail of a typical Doric example like the Temple of Concord at Girgenti, and it satisfied in every way the standards of the period.

Before the upper story containing the schoolroom was added, and while the front wall still possessed a central doorway and fewer side windows, the general resemblance to a Greek temple was even closer than it is now ; but as an adjunct to an English chapel, the Doric portico is nothing but a useless luxury ; in a grimy northern climate (particularly when facing north) it loses all its proper effect ; the massive columns merely block the light of the windows behind them, and it does not even provide shelter from bad weather owing to the excessive height as compared with the width.

At Little Portland Street Chapel the problem was more reasonably solved ; the whole interior scheme of the past century was preserved, but, so to speak, translated into Greek, as a sonnet by Milton might be rendered into Greek iambs ; and if you wanted a translation at all, it was an exceedingly good version. The thoughts themselves were

PLATE 6



STAMFORD STREET CHAPEL, LONDON.

like to be able to connect with the Adam influence ; the exterior, in particular, though quite secular in effect, is a handsome and well-proportioned classical design, combining the repose and dignity which characterizes Somerset House and other good work of this time with a delicacy of detail which the Adams were the first to revive.

From this period date some of the most dismal and hideous of our existing places of worship. Through all the artistic enlightenment of the last fifty years, they have kept their original characteristics owing to the religious conservatism of the senior section of the congregation, though they must have struck terror into generations of younger worshippers until these in their turn were either hardened by familiarity or perhaps alienated altogether from our faith by wrongly confusing its spiritual value with its material surroundings.

For sheer ugliness it would have been difficult to find a building to equal the famous Renshaw Street Chapel in Liverpool (1811), a more or less cubical box, with dingy brown gallery fronts carried on thin painted iron pillars ; a highly varnished pulpit, with a round panel like an inverted dinner-plate,

and a wiry staircase, which partly concealed the communion table behind it ; a plaster rosette in the ceiling from which by rights there should have hung a sliding ' gasalier,' and an organ recess at the back, so placed that from the majority of the lower pews it quite overwhelmed the pulpit. If this description appears to some a libel on a venerated building, it only illustrates my point as to the conservative influence of ' old associations' ; it will hardly seem overdrawn to those who, like myself, remember in their boyhood gazing up at the splendid head of Dr. Charles Beard, and losing sight of it in a confused dazzle of gilt organ-pipes.

Renshaw Street Chapel could only be taken for a place of worship on the ground that it was utterly unsuited to any secular purpose ; another example of the same kind, Upper Chapel, Sheffield, owing to its elongated plan only needs the substitution of a platform for the pulpit to serve equally well as a concert-hall. The religious atmosphere in such buildings must be created by the minister and congregation *in spite of* and not with the help of their architectural surroundings.

## IV

## THE GOTHIC REVIVAL

THE Gothic revival, which gradually transformed the whole range of ecclesiastical art, can be traced, curiously enough, to almost the same date of origin as the Greek. About 1760, Horace Walpole built a villa in what he imagined to be the 'Gothic style,' and this was the first fruits of a general inclination towards ruined abbeys and the cultivation of the picturesque, as a reaction from the excessive classicism of the time. The architectural revival was part of a widespread return to the Romantic in art and literature, which found later expression in Scott's novels, and on the religious side in the Oxford movement and the tendency to revert to pre-Reformation types of service and ritual.

But while the Greek revival had sprung full-grown from the pages of Stuart and Revett, like Athene from the head of Zeus, its rival suffered a long period of immaturity



UNITARIAN CHURCH,  
TODMORDEN.

in which the real nature of Gothic architecture was never remotely understood; it was the penalty of a literary origin that attention should be concentrated on decorative details, to the neglect of the principles of the style as a constructional system.

This great fallacy can be stated in the barest terms as a belief that any sort of building is 'Gothic' if it has pointed windows and arches; its application had the most disastrous effect on religious architecture for nearly fifty years, and in some quarters it seems hardly yet to have died out. Ruskin himself contributed as much as anyone to perpetuate it by his way of approaching the subject. His architectural *ethics* are perfectly sound, and his tirades against shams—oak-graining, marbling, and all imitations of a good material in an inferior one—have long since been accepted as just; but he had no knowledge of architecture as construction, and regarded it as an affair of beautiful ornament. The title he chose for his great work, 'The Stones of Venice,' symbolizes his whole attitude: it was not the architecture of Venice which he cared about so much as the beauty of the carved capitals in the Doge's Palace, and the colouring of St. Mark's—

' that most subtle, variable, and inexpressible colour in the world, the colour of glass, of transparent alabaster, of polished marble and lustrous gold.'

This kind of gorgeous literary rhetoric blinded his contemporaries to the weakness of theories which were often formed to justify his own admiration for particular buildings, and, indeed, these admirations sometimes drove him to awkward pieces of casuistry, as when he defends the marble veneering of Giotto's Campanile on the ground that no one would imagine it to be built of marble—which is just what anyone would imagine, who brought to the criticism of an Italian tower those Ruskinian standards of construction and genuineness of material which can be properly applied only to the Romanesque and Gothic architecture of northern Europe.

During this earlier period the Nonconformist architect was in even greater difficulties than his Anglican brother; he was obliged to retain the traditional type of chapel, and could not dispense with the galleries and central pulpit, or elongate his building into any semblance of mediæval form. All he could do was to point his

windows and fill them with tracery (sometimes made of wood for economy's sake), and attach pinnacles and battlements to the exterior instead of columns and cornices. Still, this was better than nothing, in his sight; at a much later date it came to be understood that the Gothic builder pointed his arches, not because he thought they looked pretty like that, but in obedience to the profound structural necessity that, in a vaulted roof, arches of varying widths should reach approximately the same height. In 1839, however, the west front of Effra Road Chapel, Brixton, probably appeared to the building committee to be no less truly Gothic than the west front of Rheims Cathedral.

After about 1850, we find the gradual adoption of the church plan—a great advance architecturally, though the change rather outran any corresponding change in the form of service. The dilemma now was that the mediæval plan did not suit the practical requirements, while if these were properly met the building could not be genuinely Gothic. The problem of the chancel is a case in point; it may, of course, contain the communion table, but unless the choir is



seated there, it becomes a mere useless excrescence, and to this day only serves in many places as a glorified passage from the vestry to the pulpit. Side aisles, again, were originally processional pathways, and to use them for additional seating accommodation renders the preacher invisible to about half their occupants; transepts have great drawbacks for the same kind of reason, and a narrow and lofty nave is generally bad for acoustics. And yet Gothic church architecture means all these things, and not simply traceried windows and clustered pillars.

In this transition period, the exterior seems to have been more open to suitable treatment; the churches at Hackney and Islington are successful, while those at Bury, Gee Cross, and Hope Street, Liverpool, are exceptionally good, for so early a date. Internally, however, while Hope Street Church is unduly narrow, and has pews in the aisles, and a useless chancel, the London examples frankly conform to the demands of congregational worship, and are hardly Gothic in a constructional sense, though they approach this ideal more nearly than the chapel at Bank Street, Bolton, which attempts the impossible task of combining mediæval archi-



MONTON CHURCH.

ture and side galleries ; or at Dukinfield, where the whole of the ' east end ' is occupied by a huge organ and screen, with the pulpit perched up in the centre as part of the decorative casing.

The minor arts and crafts of the church also passed through a dark age before their real essence was recaptured. Stained glass, for instance, up to the time of William Morris and Henry Holiday, was one of the worst offenders, and with a palette of crude and violent colours like aniline dyes, succeeded only in blocking out the light, instead of performing the proper function of admitting it with added beauty. Glossy black and red ' encaustic ' tiles were another snare, and, unfortunately for us, possessed great lasting qualities ; while the Ruskinian crusade against grained-oak resulted in a dreadful efflorescence of varnished pitch-pine—of all methods of treatment the most detestable in colour and surface ; even oak itself was invariably varnished, and its particular beauty of grain and texture thereby destroyed.

Looking at the period as a whole, we now recognize that most of the talent and enthusiasm shown by the Gothic revivalists

was futile and misdirected, and that very few architects rose above the mechanical copying of the letter, to a comprehension of the real spirit of mediæval architecture.

Has the nineteenth century, then, nothing to show which may rank with the Octagon at Norwich, or with Friars' Street Chapel at Ipswich, as happily solving the problems of its own age? The case is not so desperate as that, but the century is far advanced before the claim can be made good.

Among our later churches, those at Todmorden (pl. 7) and Monton (pl. 8) have very beautiful spires, while at Flowery Field, Hyde, there is a dignified tower: all three show fine exterior grouping, and are successful in suggesting a system of construction, and not merely a collection of ornamental details.

But the best example that I can quote is the Old Meeting, at Birmingham (1885), a church which is perfectly successful in fulfilling the requirements of true Gothic design and of a modern religious service. The material throughout is a rose-red sandstone of beautiful quality; the nave has the great width suitable to a large congregation, but avoids by a still greater height any violation



OLD MEETING CHURCH, BIRMINGHAM.  
INTERIOR.

of the right proportions; and the slender vaulting shafts are carried down to the ground, a most important element in a Gothic composition, as binding together its three horizontal divisions. The transepts and chancel have enough depth to give meaning to the central space, but not so much as to separate their occupants from the rest of the congregation; the choir is seated in the chancel with the organ in the correct place at its side, and partly facing down the nave, and the aisles are solely passages and, therefore, the pillars obstruct nobody's view of the preacher.

The whole effect is one of great space and dignity, concentrated in a way which is not, perhaps, characteristic of the English cathedrals, with their long-drawn vistas, but is found in its highest form in French examples, and pre-eminently at Chartres.

The exterior is equally satisfactory, and though essentially Gothic, it is not a copy of anything; you would not mistake it for a restored mediæval building, or for a country church which had been gradually surrounded by a spreading city; it looks just what it is—a modern town church for congregational worship.

At present, the church falls short of its

## 42 NONCONFORMIST ARCHITECTURE

own standard only in two respects; the interior woodwork is poor in material and design, no doubt owing to some miscalculation as to available funds, while the pulpit, instead of being placed by the chancel arch, stands on that side of the central space which is nearest to the nave, so that the preacher has his back to the south transept and thereby renders it useless for seating accommodation.

But these are only accidental defects which time may remedy, and meanwhile the Old Meeting is a building of which we may be proud, as an admirable essay in the adaptation of traditional forms to modern purposes.



OLD MEETING CHURCH,  
BIRMINGHAM.

## THE MODERN CHURCH

WE may now approach the problem of church design as it presents itself to-day, bearing in mind the historical facts already sketched, and giving due weight to the claims of tradition and sentiment, which may sometimes justify us in retaining details of plan or decorative form, which merely on their own merits we might have discarded as unsuitable to our needs.

Briefly, the question is: What form of building will most effectively produce the religious atmosphere, and express the particular function of a church as a place of worship? Just as Wagner's preludes were designed to call up the appropriate frame of mind in his audience before the rise of the curtain, so the surroundings should influence the congregation towards worship, both before and during the service.

A church is a place set apart from the ordinary and prosaic occupations of life, for

a higher purpose, and yet not entirely cut off from them, like a monastery; entering it, one should feel

Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite  
Beyond it.

But the attitude of the modern church-goer is different from that of the mediæval Catholic on the one hand, and the Puritan on the other, so that the rich and awe-inspiring gloom of the cathedral and the severe and chilling bareness of the meeting-house are equally to be avoided. As to the latter, there is some confusion of thought in those who argue that 'if the spiritual enthusiasm is there, we can worship in a barn,' because they forget that, as I have pointed out, there was no special style of architecture for chapels, and the Puritan's chapel was bare because his house and all his other surroundings were bare, since he regarded all art and beauty as a snare of the powers of evil, from an association of ideas not unnatural in the Stuart period.

With our changed views on this subject, why should we hesitate to call in aid all the resources of architecture, music, and decorative symbolism, in order to fan the spiritual fires to a cheerful blaze? We are the last

who need fear that they will turn into mere emotional and æsthetic fireworks, and die out in a display of coloured 'Roman Candles.' Nor must we refuse any such resource merely because we have not hitherto taken advantage of it, or because it has been customary in other forms of worship than our own.

In church design the first and most essential quality is *repose* of effect; nothing should be tolerated in construction, decoration, or music, which is restless and distracting to the attention of the worshipper. But there is a cheerful as well as a gloomy repose, and his frame of mind may be subdued without also being depressed. The atmosphere we look for is not that of the Gothic cathedral, which was in a sense a spiritual judgment-seat, and aimed at producing a lively fear of hell, no less than a hope of heaven. At the same time, there must be something which dissociates the church from all secular buildings, as a place where we shall feel it inappropriate, for instance, to hold a public meeting, or a lantern lecture—since we are not now considering the church- or mission-hall, which presents a different problem, owing to the fact that it serves a variety of purposes.

The nature of the modern service gives the primary conditions which have to be met. It consists firstly, of several forms of praise and prayer, some with musical setting, in which the minister acts *with* the congregation as their leader. Secondly, of instruction and exhortation, in which he speaks *to* the congregation as their spiritual adviser. These two ministerial functions are quite distinct, and the distinction should be recognized in the arrangement of the building. I suppose it would be too revolutionary as yet to suggest that it is possible to hold a religious service in our churches, which does not include a sermon at all; but at any rate we do not now agree with our forefathers in regarding the sermon as entirely predominant, and, therefore, the central position of the pulpit in the general scheme is no longer suitable.

For convenience of description, let us assume a church of the usual oblong plan lying east and west, with the entrance in the west end. The wall at the east will then close the vista of sight to the occupants of the pews, and whether this wall runs straight across the building or is extended to form an apse or recess of some kind, its

centre should be occupied by the communion table, slightly raised above the floor level, and on either side should be placed the pulpit for the sermon, and the reading-desk for the leading of the service.

In both capacities it is necessary that the minister should be clearly audible, while as preacher he must also be clearly visible, to the whole congregation, and by his position to some extent 'set over against them,' to use a scriptural phrase; this, however, is not the case during the earlier part of the service, when he should appear to be one among the congregation itself, though taking a leading part in its actions. The pulpit may, therefore, properly stand higher than the reading-desk, and receive more emphasis and decorative treatment; in churches where the lessons are read by the laity, a lectern on the centre line, in advance of the communion table, will complete the scheme of the 'Chancel' in these respects.

It need hardly be added that any kind of substitute for the pulpit, such as a central platform or 'rostrum,' is entirely out of place in a modern church, and suggests the lecture-room or concert-hall rather than the place of worship.



Side galleries are in no case desirable, because they require such a height in the pulpit that the preacher is rendered almost invisible to those who sit in the pews immediately below him.

So far this arrangement will be applicable to any kind of church; but we now meet with the difficulty that forms of service, even in our small circle of churches, vary greatly, and the 'free' and liturgical services point to rather different types of interior design. Roughly speaking, the genuinely Gothic plan is best suited to churches of considerable size where a liturgy is used, so that the extended chancel can serve a real purpose in seating the choir, which, in such a position, should be surpliced; the object of the surplice being, not to indicate some mysterious ritual, but to obtain uniformity, and prevent distracting elements from being forced on the worshippers' attention—in a word, to preserve the essential repose of effect.

For musical reasons the choir and organ must be placed together, and there are only two possible positions; either both must occupy a gallery at the back of the church, or the choir must be in the chancel with the organ at one side. The former custom of

placing the organ in the centre of the 'east end,' directly behind and above the pulpit, is entirely wrong, for an organ, though susceptible of fine treatment, is far too complicated an object, decoratively, to form a good close to the vista, and it distracts attention unduly from the pulpit; while the rows of variegated hats belonging to a 'mixed choir' produce an equally restless effect in a chancel. For a free service with a voluntary choir the gallery at the west end should be retained, but not used for ordinary seating purposes, and though such a gallery is just practicable in a Gothic design without violating the right scheme of construction, the fact of its existence does away with the necessity for a chancel, and, therefore, the eighteenth century type of building seems to be indicated as the more appropriate.

Pews should be arranged so that every occupant has an uninterrupted view of the pulpit, and a central passageway is essential; if the body of the church is filled with an unbroken block of pews, they will have to be divided in the middle, to avoid unmanageable length, and this allows access only at one end of each, while the whole arrangement

is inconvenient for the special services which periodically take place. Whether the building has aisles or not, a passage should always be left along the side walls, as, apart from difficulties with obstructing pillars, the walls are exposed to currents of air from the windows and radiators.

The question of light, both natural and artificial, is of great importance; the worst possible disposition of windows is that already mentioned, where the most glaring expanses of glass are grouped round the pulpit in the wall which the congregation faces, particularly if it is exposed to the midday or evening sun. The ideal church would have no windows at all in the direct line of sight from the pews, and the light required would be amply provided from the sides and back of the building. Perhaps this is a counsel of perfection; but at any rate a large window above the communion table is a mistake, for if the glass is left plain it is overpoweringly bright, and if it is stained the elaboration of the design on a large scale distracts the eye. In proof of this, I may point to the High Pavement Chapel, Nottingham, where the enormous chancel window, though in itself a fine piece of Gothic tracery, and filled with

beautiful glass by Burne-Jones and Morris, is yet so dazzling as you sit in the body of the chapel that you can hardly see the preacher, or read from a hymn-book without shading your eyes from its glare. Any window facing the pews is useless as a source of light for reading, and must be regarded as part of the scheme of decoration. On the other hand, as much window space as possible should be secured at the back, though some part of it will be blocked out, in cases where there is a choir gallery, by the organ, unless the gallery is so large that this can be divided and placed on each side of a central opening.

The same principles can be applied to artificial lighting, whether by electricity or oil lamps (gas is much less amenable and possesses a great many drawbacks as a method of illumination). The lights should be powerful enough to bear suspending at some height above the pews, otherwise those near the front of the church will be in the direct line of sight from the back pews. For the same reason, pulpit and chancel lamps should be screened so that their light falls only where it is required. Care must also be taken that pendants, unless very high up, are not so massive in design as to inter-

ferre with the windows during the daytime.

In churches of Gothic type, a great deal of light is often absorbed by ceilings or internal roofs of dark-coloured boarding—often in stained pine—which violate an important rule of colour-composition, namely, that the dark and heavy tones must occur in the lower, and the light tones in the higher, part of the scheme. The eighteenth century chapels obeyed this æsthetic law in that their plaster ceilings and domes, however richly decorated in relief, were always left white, and many of our churches might even now be rendered far less gloomy and oppressive by judicious colouring of their present brown roofs in lighter tones of cream or grey.

It may safely be asserted that stone vaulting in the true Gothic manner is never likely to be possible in our churches; but any form of ceiling, whether plastered or treated in some way with beams or wood panels, should at least be no darker than the wall surface below it.

The best base for the wall composition is undoubtedly some form of panelling, the most restful and pleasant of all surfaces to the eye, provided that the texture of the

wood is not spoiled by varnish, which at once transforms it into a network of glistening points and lines of 'high light.' No material can surpass oak, slightly subdued from its natural colouring; but very good effects can be obtained by staining pine or deal. Provided that a considerable amount of plain surface is secured as a background, the salient points in the design, such as the pulpit, organ-case, choir-stalls, and reredos, can be emphasized by decorative carving. In all interior fittings, Wren's example is a safe guide; however richly his pulpits are adorned, the tone and colour are the same throughout, the limitations of the material itself curb undue extravagance, and the essential repose of effect is never broken.

In all other decorative materials employed, whether marble or mosaic, wrought-iron or beaten brass, tiles or painted patterns, it is well to obey Polonius's advice in the matter of clothes:—

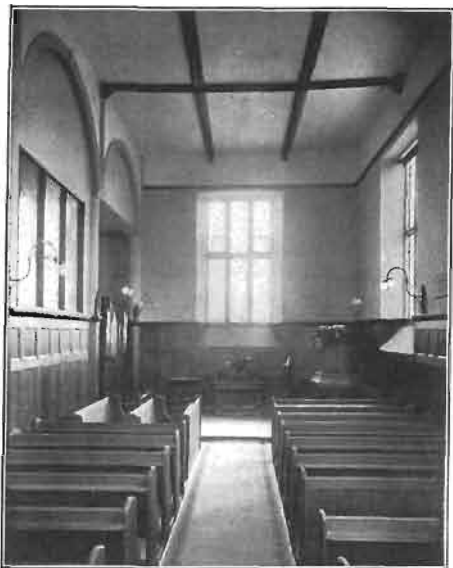
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy.

And, as with wood, all glossy or highly polished surfaces must be avoided; they reflect light in unexpected ways, and tend

to a meretricious and flashy result. To quote a standard of surface which is familiar, no material in a church should have a greater polish than that of an egg-shell. Painted dados, borders, and stencil decoration should be most cautiously used from the very facility with which they become spiky and fussy; the worshipful frame of mind cannot really be encouraged by painting 'Alleluia' in excessively 'Gothic' characters on a ribbon floating round the chancel arch, and tailing off at each end into crinkly scrolls. All texts, commandments, or other quotations should be in simple and straightforward lettering, and, above all, perfectly legible (this applies equally to any kind of memorial tablet).

As to stained glass, it may be said that, like violin-playing, only the best is tolerable at all; beautiful as are the windows by Burne-Jones, William Morris, and their school, considered merely as pictures, I doubt whether they satisfy the real requirements of window design, as did the work of the mediæval artists. It is characteristic of all the glorious glass at Rheims, Chartres, and York Minster, that it does not too insistently tell a story; the figures in the design blend with the architectural and

PLATE II



WESTGATE CHAPEL, LEWES.  
AS ALTERED AND RENOVATED FROM DESIGNS BY THE AUTHOR.

decorative background to form an even pattern of rich and jewelled colouring, and except at close quarters it is impossible to disentangle the actual incidents shown; while some of the most beautiful windows at York consist merely of conventional foliage.

In any case, the design of the 'Morris' type is best suited to windows of moderate size, where only one row of figures is introduced; in a very large space, the two or even three tiers of richly coloured figures on a pale background produce a blotchy and restless effect, and too strongly contradict the vertical lines of the tracery. Churches of the eighteenth century form call for stained glass of lighter and more delicate design, for which suggestions can be found in many of the Renaissance windows.

Plates II and 12 show interiors which follow in the main the alternative schemes already laid down. The Westgate Chapel, Lewes, as recently altered and renovated, shows the simplest eighteenth century type of building (though the actual structure is of earlier date), where there is no end gallery and the choir and organ are placed near the front. It will be noticed that the window above the communion table is too large for

that position, and in a modern building of this kind might well be dispensed with altogether, or at any rate much reduced in size, while a curved ceiling might modify the rather abrupt change of angle at the top of the walls.

Ullet Road Church, Liverpool, illustrates the arrangement of chancel, communion table and choir, proposed for a large Gothic building. A very ingenious method of lighting the communion table is here used: at each side of the apse there is a window similar to the smaller one visible in the photograph, but filled with clear glass and completely screened from the congregation by the projecting piers of the further chancel arch. If it were not for these windows, the table would be very dimly seen and quite overpowered by the stained glass above it; but by their means it is brought well into sight, while the stained glass takes its proper place as a part of the scheme of decoration.

The organ stands in a transept behind the choir-stalls on the left, and would gain greater power if the front section were extended into the church above the screen across the side arch.

In the general design of the chancel, it



ULLET ROAD CHURCH,  
LIVERPOOL.

might perhaps be objected that there is too strict a symmetry in the pulpit and reading-desk : the distinction already pointed out between the minister as preacher and as leader is not clearly indicated in the two positions which he occupies, and but for the association of ideas suggested by the sounding-board on one side, and the carved eagle on the other, there is really no reason why the service should not be taken from the pulpit and the sermon preached from the reading-desk.

The electric pendants, again, are hung too low down, and being closely-set and somewhat heavy in design, they interfere considerably with the upper windows in the daytime ; they would still be powerful enough to light the church amply if the suspending chains were shortened by several feet.

But, taken as a whole, the church affords an excellent realization of the theories here put forward as to interior planning and design.

The exterior of the building should always express the function and arrangement of the interior, whether a Gothic or Classic treatment is adopted ; in the former case, some modification may be demanded by the fact that there is no stone vaulting to support,

and in consequence a great deal of the constructional apparatus of buttress and pinnacle becomes superfluous, since there is no outward thrust to be counteracted; and these features were not, and never should be, used merely as pieces of decoration. As examples of two distinct methods of applying modern Gothic on a large scale, one may point to the cathedrals at Truro and Liverpool; the first an almost perfect reproduction in form and spirit of a typical mediæval building; the second a far more interesting and original design, equally Gothic in spirit, but in no sense a copy of anything that has gone before it, and an evident proof that the possibilities of the style are not yet exhausted.

I have already indicated that the Gothic type of church will best meet the requirements of our larger congregations which may be liturgically inclined; it is based on a system of stone construction throughout, and, except for the roof, cannot properly be carried out in a meaner material; for both reasons, therefore, it demands ample funds if it is to be attempted at all, and unless these are forthcoming, some development of the Classical type is far more desirable. Dignity and repose should again be kept in view, and

a tower or spire omitted altogether unless it can be designed on a really good scale. As a rule, it would have been far better if the money spent on spires, particularly in town churches, where their effect is very limited, had been devoted to improving the interiors: for instance, by providing oak instead of pitch-pine pews, or by increasing the range and power of the organ.

In making choice of a 'style,' it is also possible to discard altogether the alternatives mentioned above, and to resort either to some Byzantine treatment of brickwork, such as is magnificently shown in the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Westminster (an interior which all architects, and very few other people, admire intensely), or to what might be called the 'Garden Suburb' style, in which no historic influence is recognized, and the facts of construction are treated in the simplest and most logical way. Both these systems, however, lack that quality of religious tradition and sentiment which counts for so much in producing the worshipful spirit, and though they might in time acquire it themselves, at present their associations are somewhat alien and secular.

A new tendency in church design, and a



hint of future developments, comes to us from the United States, where we hear that certain congregations have translated into literal form the description of the church as a 'House of God,' in contrast to the mediæval view of it as a spiritual judgment-seat. They conceive the church as the seat of a Divine hospitality of Fatherhood, and interpret it in terms of domestic architecture, raised, so to speak, to a higher power, and symbolized in the fire which is a feature of the internal design. There is a curious parallel here with the sacred associations of the hearth in Greek and Roman religious rites, and though the idea is startling, and perhaps incongruous to us at first sight, it possesses some interest as an attempt to recast the surroundings of worship in accordance with a modern point of view.



FINALLY, it may be asked, 'How much of all this destructive or constructive criticism is due merely to personal preference, or to the passing phases of constantly changing fashions, not only in architectural style, but in the very standards of appropriateness and good taste? And may not all your conclusions again be reversed by another generation?'

I will concede that no permanence can be expected in that body of æsthetic opinion held by those who assert simply that 'they know what they like'—by intuition, and not by a process of reasoning; and that there must always be fluctuations as the pendulum of taste swings from the Romantic to the Classic, and back again.

## 62 NONCONFORMIST ARCHITECTURE

But I maintain that a great part of the law of architectural right and wrong is based on principles which are eternal—namely, that a building must express and satisfy the practical requirements which it is erected to meet; that it must be constructionally sound and solid, not only in fact but in appearance; that its plan and disposition must take into account the laws of sight and sound; and that all its materials must be genuine in themselves, and so treated as not to overstep their natural limitations.

So far as good taste depends on conformity to these principles, it is independent of all changes of fashion, and as touchstones of criticism we may apply them with equal freedom and certainty to the temples of Karnak and the Acropolis or to the latest experiment in church design at the present day.

