

there be a church which looked like one until the age of persecution was past. At first the church needed to be only the size of a chapel, which made it easier to conceal its purpose from the passer-by. But even when the need for secrecy was over it took time before churches looked churchy.

There were two models. The first was that of the temples of the gods – not an attractive idea to most Christians, much as a modern architect would not wish to build a church that looked like a cinema or a stock exchange. This was not true for all; many of the new Christians took with them into their church ideas or rites from their old faiths, and they thought it natural that a church should look like a temple. Some congregations would be happy to meet in what had been an old temple. When (about 550) they turned the Parthenon on the Acropolis at Athens into the church of St Mary, no one saw anything wrong; they were glad that so fair a temple of dead gods was again a house of prayer.

The second model for a church was the place of meeting for trade or official business – the *basilica* or town hall. Until the congregations could come above ground and build large houses of prayer they did not often call their churches basilicas, for the word suggested large size and official status. The Greek word *basilike* meant 'belonging to the king', and thus a state building. The shape of this hall soon became the common form of a church. Eventually the word *basilica* lost its former meaning and came to mean simply a church. The basilica was rectangular in plan. The original town hall would often have an apse at the far end, where there was a throne for the chairman and benches for his council. The first churches were similar, with an apse where the bishop sat on a chair in the centre, looking to the west to face the people, and flanked by his presbyters and his deacons in a semicircle. The bishop's chair was called a throne, not because they likened him to a king, but because *thronos* was a Greek word not only for a king's chair but for the chair on which a teacher sat to instruct the class.

In front of the bishop was a table with the bread and wine for use in the Lord's supper. This table was soon called *altare*, a Latin – and pagan – word for the place where sacrifices to the gods were made. An earlier Greek word was *thusiasterion*, a place of sacrifice, or sometimes *bomos*, a platform on which the sacrifice was offered; for they knew the Greek version of the Old Testament well and used its words in their prayers, so they felt it right to use its words for the table at the centre of their worship. At first the altar was often the dining table of the house where they met, and they continued to use a wooden table as an altar for a time even when churches came out in the open and the table had no other use. The first altars made of stone were the tombs of the martyrs on which the Lord's supper was celebrated on anniversaries of their deaths. For centuries any candles on the altar were put there simply to give light in the dark; the sun was the only source of light that they revered.

✱ They did not at first have what we should call a pulpit. But since they followed the way of the Jews, in which the words of the book were read out and then explained, the hall had to be arranged so that people could hear, so they needed a raised place for the speaker. They put the bishop's chair on a dais for the same reason. The Greek word for a seat was *kathedra*, the origin of the word 'cathedral' for the bishop's church. Nearer the congregation there was a raised place from which to read, called the *ambo* – from the Greek *ambon*, a hilltop. Here the bishop, or speaker appointed by him, could read or explain the text. Soon a big church had two platforms, one from which to read the text, the other from which to explain it. The ambo was lower and simpler than the much later pulpit, but was its origin. The poet John Milton brought the word 'ambo' into the English language, to mean an early pulpit.

The apse was a place to display a work of art. It is not known when Christians first dared to depict the face of God. The commandment of the Jews, which the Christians received, said that no one should make an