

Tulsa's planning code could force out Christian churches

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6181>

In my columns, I have always been careful about quoting scripture to justify my own opinion, but Tulsa is in such a critical part of its development that I am going to carefully dare to suggest that we Tulsans don't forget who we are by looking at an example in scripture.

When the Jews returned from exile to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., they began rebuilding the Temple two years later, but when opposition and apathy stopped construction six years later, they got busy rebuilding their own lives and homes instead, leaving the Temple incomplete and in shambles.

God was severely disappointed with His people, but he loved them enough to send them the prophet Haggai to remind them not only who He was, but who they were as well. Here is the scripture from the book of Haggai in the Old Testament:

“So the LORD sent this message through the prophet Haggai: “Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the LORD Almighty says: Consider how things are going for you! You have planted much but harvested little. You have food to eat, but not enough to fill you up. You have wine to drink, but not enough to satisfy your thirst. You have clothing to wear, but not enough to keep you warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: Consider how things are going for you! Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord. You hope for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, says the LORD Almighty, while you are all busy building your fine houses. That is why the heavens have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its crops. I have called for a drought on your fields and hills – a drought to wither the grain and grapes and olives and all your other crops, a drought to starve both you and your cattle and to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get.” (Haggai 1:3-11, NLT).

And when looking at the unfinished building, God knew that there were some older people who had seen the beauty of the original Temple before it had been destroyed, and said through Haggai, “Is there anyone who can remember this house – the Temple? – as it was before? In comparison, how does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all!” (Haggai 2:3, NLT).

But then God encouraged them to begin work, and when they began He said through Haggai, “I am giving you a promise now while the seed is still in the barn, before you have harvested your grain and before the grapevine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have produced their crops. From this day onward I will bless you.” (Haggai 2:19, NLT).

The comprehensive planning process, which is now leading to a new zoning code, has the potential, over time, little by little, to force Tulsa's churches out of the city. This isn't rocket science; all you have to do is read some of the new codes to understand how it can happen, and look to other cities where it already has. None of these codes say, "get rid of churches", and I doubt that any of the writers of those codes have that intent, but the problems that churches will face from these codes will be gradual, systemic, and the results of unintended sequences – if we, the people in the churches of this city don't make our presence known.

In his book *Democracy in America*, deTocqueville wrote this famous saying:

"I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

Isn't that where we as Tulsans are today? Part of a great country because of our faith? Because our prosperity came from God, not from our own works? Or will we shrink back from opposition and get apathetic like the Jews of Haggai's time, and suffer the consequences? Are we going to rely on a comprehensive plan and zoning code that passively excludes churches to make us prosperous? Or are we going to write a code that protects our churches so that God will bless us? Tulsa has always been a city of churches and has been blessed because of it; let's keep it that way.

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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