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Are Fellowship Halls: An Expedient or A Hindrance?

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There has been a proliferation of churches of Christ throughout the world which have built fellowship halls next to their church buildings to house the brethren while they partake of a meal after services on Sunday. This is done in the name of "expediency," since it is believed that Christians must have fellowship with one another and thus the church ought to help facilitate such periods of fellowship. It is not surprising that those who have no problem giving funds from the congregation's treasury to institutions of benevolence for non-saints also generally have no problem with fellowship halls and the like. Both issues stem from a misunderstanding of the nature of expediencies and the roles of individuals and the church.

Before we get too far into our discussion of the fellowship hall and whether it is "expedient" or not, let us define our main word: expedient.

Webster's defines the word as the following:

1. Literally, hastening; urging forward. Hence, tending to promote the object proposed; fit or suitable for the purpose; proper under the circumstances. Many things may be lawful, which are not expedient.

2. Useful; profitable.

3. Quick; expeditious. [Not used.]

EXPE'DIENT, n. That which serves to promote or advance; any means which may be employed to accomplish an end.

1. Shift; means devised or employed in an exigency. Many problems arrive if we define an "expedient" as "a means by which a certain responsibility can be performed more effectively," which is often done when discussing the fellowship hall and such things, because, as Webster clearly notes, an "expedient" must be "proper under the circumstances."

The use of the "expediency" argument belies a lack of true Biblical authority and an appeal to a liberty-- otherwise it would not be an expedient, but a practice specifically commanded. Since we have an appeal to a liberty, we must see if this liberty is truly profitable or not, as Paul informs us in 1 Corinthians 10:23:

All things are lawful; but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful; but not all things edify.

So we must ask: is building another facility next to the church building an "expedient--" something profitable-- for facilitating fellowship/edification/evangelism/what have

you or is it not? It is my position that a fellowship hall is a major hindrance to the work of the individual just as the attempt to give funds to non-saints from the church treasury and call it benevolence is a major hindrance to the work of the individual. Here is why.

Issue #1: Hospitality.

Peter commands-- not an example, not a suggestion, but commands-- the Christian in the following way in 1 Peter 4:9:using hospitality one to another without murmuring. I appreciate the way the ESV translates this verse: "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."

The word here translated "hospitality" is the Greek philoxenos, literally, a "lover of guests." The term is also used as one of the requirements of an elder in 1 Timothy 3. One will be very hard-pressed to demonstrate how this command can be fulfilled with the olde fellowship hall, since Peter (and Paul) use it in reference to bringing guests into your house.

Now, does a fellowship hall encourage or hinder such hospitality? What does it say about a local congregation if they have to build a massive structure in order to have any fellowship? What image does that give-- a group of people who are hospitable according to 1 Peter 4:9 or a group of Christians individually without any initiative to invite people over to their house(s)? If the fellowship hall exists, what motivation will there be for Joe and Jane Christian to invite anyone over to their house after services or any such thing? So, we must ask ourselves: is the fellowship hall an expedient of fellowship or a hindrance for individuals to perform their God-given task of showing hospitality? Too often it is the latter,

and therefore represents a stumbling-block, not an expedient, for the Christians assembled in that location.

Issue #2: Evangelism.

For a time in my younger days (when I was around 11 and 12) I attended a Congregational church. My memories of this place are the following:

1. They gave me an RSV (still have it; ironically, I learned the truth with it).

2. The choir sang prettily.

3. The "worship service" was all planned out on the weekly flyer given out.

4. They had great breakfasts after the service was over.

Notice what is not there: (1) spiritual edification and (2) learning of the Scriptures. My stomach certainly appreciated the effort, but my soul left lacking real substance.

Let us look at portions of John 6:

John 6:10-14: Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost."

So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into

the world!"

John 6:24-27: So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."

John 6:29-32: Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven."

John 6:41-42: So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

John 6:66-71: After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,

and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.

What do we have here? The miracle of Jesus of the feeding of the 5,000, and all hail Him as the "Prophet." Jesus recognized, however, that their stomachs truly hailed Him the Prophet, and not their souls, since when He began teaching the spiritual truths of things and pointed the Jews toward the spiritual bread of life, they rejected Him. 5,000 became 12, of whom only 11 proved faithful. What was converted on that day in Galilee-- the stomachs or the souls of people?

Food is not the currency of evangelism, and neither is any other physical thing. When a congregation erects a fellowship hall they encourage the potential of having members not set on the spiritual truths of God but rather desire the satisfaction of their physical desires. A fellowship hall will certainly convict stomachs-- but do they convict souls?

I have found that one of the most significant problems with denominations is their "worldly" focus: they care less for the spiritual welfare of man than the physical welfare of man. The UMC has as its declaration that they "are convinced that the church has the responsibility to make the quality of life better for all mankind." They have forsaken the Gospel of Christ for the social gospel of the world. This is why when preachers are sent out to the remotest parts of the earth and they come into contact with peoples where denominations have already evangelized and they proclaim

that they bring the Gospel of Christ they are asked, "where are your hospitals?" "Where is the food?" Denominations-- and I fear the denominational churches of Christ--have conditioned the world to see Christianity not has the haven for souls weary of sin but the benevolent organization for the world. We do not even have to leave America for this, do we? How many churches find people knocking on their building's door looking for handouts? If churches were about the business of saving souls and not stomachs, would this happen?

So we must judge again: is a fellowship hall a means of evangelism or is it a hindrance to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ to convict souls? I again must go with the latter.

Issue #3: Purpose of Assembly

Why do we as Christians assemble?

Hebrews 10:24-27: And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

I will not dispute that coming together for a meal is very pleasurable and can be very encouraging, but the Hebrew author manifestly has a higher purpose in mind: spiritual edification and encouragement to abstain from sin. This comes only when people receive the bread of life-- not physical bread. Does the fellowship hall arm any Christian to fight sin? Does any fellowship hall help strengthen a

Christian in the knowledge of the Gospel of Christ? Or, perhaps more directly relevant to legalities, can anyone argue that a fellowship hall can fit within the parameters of Hebrews 10:24-27?

It concerns me greatly if members of the church end up beginning to favor the physical nourishment and kindredness found in the fellowship hall over the vastly more important spiritual nourishment and kindredness found in worshipping God and studying His Word. So again, a time for judgment: is the fellowship hall an expedient accessory to the assembly or a hindrance to the real purpose of assembling? I again must say the latter.

So, then, is the fellowship hall truly an expedient? It perhaps may make assembling for a meal easier, but its propriety is extremely doubtful. There are many ways in which such a building causes a hindrance to the work of the individual and the church, and actually represents a stumbling-block to each. What happens when a perceived liberty becomes a stumbling-block? Read Romans 14 and 15: you need to remove that stumbling-block!

There is no Scripture to authorize and command the fellowship hall, there is no evidence that the liberty was utilized in the first century, and there are many reasons why such a fellowship hall would be a hindrance and a stumbling-block to the Gospel of Christ for both the individual and the corporate collective. Therefore, I conclude from the Scriptures that the fellowship hall is neither expedient nor profitable. Let us all examine ourselves and make sure that we are handling accurately the word of truth lest we fall (2 Corinthians 13:5, 2 Timothy 2:15).