

The “Fellowship” Hall

Many churches of Christ in all parts of the country have previously constructed or are presently engaged in constructing what have become known as “fellowship halls.” The purpose of this article will be to investigate a biblical question in regard to this practice. The question is taken from a conversation recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels. Matthew’s account says, “And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?” (Matthew 21:23). Though the Lord did not answer the hypocrites’ query, He sanctioned it as a valid question. It remains a valid question for all God-fearing people today who seek His approval in our lives. By what authority does a local church build or maintain a room, building, or other structure for the purpose of recreation and social functions?

In the transition of American society from a rural based economy to that of a more urban, industrialized people, churches faced many changes in their application of scriptural tradition. The Sunday evening service was one of those changes. City churches, comprised of factory workers and support staff, had to make provisions for members who could not attend the traditional Sunday morning worship period. It was not an easy transition, and many brethren, even today, have not all agreed on every aspect of that change, especially as it relates to the observance of the Lord’s Supper.

Another traditional transition had to do with the individual provision of a family meal on the Lord’s Day. In the rural economy, churches would assemble for a morning service. Many families would bring their lunches to spread out, picnic style, outside the meeting place. After dinner, there would often be a period of play preceding an occasional singing followed by an evening worship period. As many had come some distance for this Lord’s Day gathering with the saints, the afternoon services would conclude with plenty of sunshine left in the day for safe travel home and evening chores. Several factors being considered, the meeting house of the church would, of necessity, be used to accomplish all of the day’s activities. From these austere beginnings evolved the modern day practice of building kitchens, banquet rooms, community meeting rooms, athletic fields, and the ever popular gymnasium. Once the gate of the loosing of Bible authority is opened, adventurous men, like sheep to the slaughter, can and usually will go anywhere and everywhere. Larry Ray Hafley wrote, “Those who sanctioned the ‘tangent’ of dining rooms and cafeterias (a.k.a. ‘fellowship halls’) and attempted to water down ‘anti’ objections with ‘Wee Willie the Water Cooler’ are now fighting ‘Family Life Centers.’ Suddenly, their entertainment recreational facilities have become full grown, full blown health spas ministering to ‘the felt needs of the whole man.’ They loved the kitten, but they hate the incorrigible, fat cat it has become. They loved the camps, retreats, bridal showers and church socials when they were cute, controllable little puppies, but they despise the big, belligerent dogs they have become.”

Without commenting on the farmers of generations past, can anyone really say that what is going on today is even remotely similar to that now ancient practice? Even if it is, where is the authority?

Churches have authority to assemble (1 Corinthians 5:4-5; 11:18; 16:1-2; Hebrews 10:25), and this includes the provision of a place to assemble, whether it be a home, a barn, a rented hall, a storefront, or a building constructed from the treasury of the local church. It also includes everything incidental to the assembling of ourselves together: rest rooms, drinking fountains, lights, air conditioning systems, etc. (cp. Acts 20:8, "lights" and James 2:3, "seats"). No scripture, though, can be produced to show authority for what we have going on in churches today. There are at least two scriptural references to the saints eating together. First, Acts 2:46 says, "And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart ..." They worshipped in the temple and ate their food from house to house. The church at Corinth had a problem with eating in the meeting house. They were abusing the Lord's Supper, turning it into a common meal, violating the will of God. To that problem Paul addressed himself and included this question: "What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not" (1 Corinthians 11:22). In these verses, reference to the saints eating a common meal was, in both cases, to be confined to the home (cp. v. 34). We know brethren ate together, but social meals were a function of the home, not the church. If this were only an abuse of the Lord's Supper, why didn't Paul just stop the abuse? He stopped the practice! Second, the withdrawal of fellowship included the refusal to eat with the sinning, marked brother. First Corinthians 5:11 tells us to not "keep company" with the offender and with such a person "no not to eat." The social interaction was separated from the spiritual.

Some would seek to include "fellowship" as a work of the church, and, based on that assumption, the "hall" would then be scriptural. A church bulletin from people of this persuasion read, "We are told to have fellowship of the righteous (Psalm 55:14; John 13:34; Romans 15:1). This coming Sunday evening after services we are all encouraged to have fellowship of the righteous. Bring your freezer of ice cream and join us on the back parking lot. It is a wonderful opportunity for the whole congregation to fellowship together. I hope to see each of you there." The problem with a statement like this is that fellowship is not used in the scriptures in a social way. Fellowship is a joint participation or sharing by Christians in a work. It is impractical and improper to say that we "jointly participate" in "jointly participating." The work of the church is completely centered around spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our one and only mission is the salvation of souls. To that end we preach, both to the lost (Mark 16:15) and to those who are saved for their growth in the Lord (2 Peter 3:18). We come together to worship God and admonish each other to press on in our common faith (Hebrews 10:24). When it becomes necessary to help a brother so that he can carry on his life as a functioning part of the working family, the church is authorized and commanded to assist in his/her relief. The Lord's restrictions on that, though, are so vividly pronounced, that some churches rarely find themselves in situations where congregational effort is required. Faithful Christians see after their own family members, and the need is thereby met (1 Timothy 5:8, 16). Fellowship enters into this effort when we, collectively, accept the charge of scripture to engage in a congregational work with all of its biblical limitations

(Acts 11:27-30; 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Do you see the difference between the activities of the church and the activities of the individual?

Someone might object and say, "Oh, you are one of those people who thinks it is a sin to eat in a church building. You must think the building is sacred." No, I do not think the church building is "holy" in the sense of something that is sacred to God and must not be profaned. God does not live in any kind of building, including a church building (Acts 7:48; 17:24). To eat food in a church building does not desecrate it; it is not God's temple to begin with. The church, God's people, are the dwelling place of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

However, the meeting house, as part of the resources of the local church, is set apart to God and is used as exclusively His just as is the treasury of the local church. Thus it, as the local church treasury, is to be used exclusively for those functions in which the local congregation is authorized to engage. Furthermore, I do not object to food being eaten in the church building, to brethren socializing, or to brethren eating together. When we assemble to worship, a mother may give her baby a bottle, but that is incidental to worship, an authorized church activity. Individual members of the church may and do get together for social meals, but this is not an activity for which the church, out of its treasury, should pay.

If honesty were to prevail, most people would admit that these meeting rooms and recreational facilities are acquired and maintained to serve the fleshly desires of the members of the local churches who have them. We want "our" fellowship hall to be just a bit bigger, a bit better than the one down the street. May we never forget, though, that the pressing questions still remain: "By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?" (Matthew 21:23). These truths must be repeated from generation to generation lest we slowly drift from them and fail to glorify God in the proper way.

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