

Church Buildings: Authorized and Unauthorized Practices

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Ironically, *ecclesiastical* language has created many false concepts about the *ekklesia*. “Ekklesia” is the Greek word for “church.” “Ek” means “out,” and “klesia” (klesis) means “a call.” Together they mean the “called out ones.” The universal church is composed of the saved of all the earth. They have been called out of sin and into fellowship with God (Col. 1:13, 14; Acts 2:47). A local church is composed of the saved of a particular area. These saints agree together to function jointly in work and worship (Acts 9:26; 11:26; Eph. 4:12-16). It is this collective function that raises the question about a local church’s use of a worship and work *facility*. The universal church has no collective function.

Many people cannot hear the word “church” without thinking of a church *building*. This should not surprise us given the social and secular direction that many modern churches have taken in past years. There is also the problem of people attaching the same spiritual significance to their church buildings that was attached to Moses’ Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple. They consider their church *edifice* to constitute *holy ground*, even referring to worship halls as *sanctuaries*. But Paul said that God “*does not dwell in Temples made with hands. Nor is he worshipped with men’s hands...*” (Acts 17:24, 25). Church houses may be constructed and used for holy *purposes*, but the premises themselves are not *holy*.

Using the Bible definition, a “church” is not a building; it is *people*. The word “church” is a collective noun. These *people* may assemble anywhere, for Jesus loosed the place of worship (Jn. 4:22-24). Paul originally met with Lydia and other women at a *riverside* (Acts 16:13, 14). After their conversion they met at Lydia’s *house* (Acts 16:40). Church buildings are not a matter of *necessity*. It is possible for a local church to assemble and even *grow* without *owning* a church building. The early chapters of the book of Acts show that the rapidly growing Jerusalem church met at Herod’s Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:42), specifically at a place called Solomon’s Portico or Porch (Acts 3:11; 5:12). This was a roofed colonnade that ran along the eastern side of the Temple. It could house thousands of people. We know from John 10:23 that Solomon’s Colonnade was considered a part of the Temple, for John recorded, “*And Jesus was walking in the Temple, in the colonnade of Solomon.*”

Use of Buildings by First Century Christians

This brings us to an important consideration. Though churches can exist and operate without church buildings, and the nature of the local church is not determined or defined by the physical structures that it may use, first century Christians did use buildings to house their assemblies. Jerusalem saints assembled at Solomon's Portico (Acts 3:11; 5:12). Paul and the Ephesian disciples met at the school building of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). Troas disciples met on the third floor of some house (Acts 20:8, 9). Others met in the houses of the members (Rom. 16:3-5, 23). As noted above, Jesus loosed the place of worship (Jn. 4:22-24). These examples reflect the existence of generic authority for a church's use of a meeting facility. Some people cite Acts 1:13 in an effort to prove that Christians must always assemble in "an upper room." The argument errs in that it makes exclusive appeal to this one example of assembling and attempts to bind this one example to the exclusion of others. It turns *generic authority* into *specific authority*. As noted from the above passages, early disciples also met in *ground floor* facilities, thus proving that we must not bind one particular place to the exclusion of others.

Some say that early saints assembled in Jewish synagogue buildings. However, one needs to be careful with this argument. For, while Paul and others used synagogues for teaching purposes (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4; 19:8), as Jesus forewarned (John 16:2), these synagogues were headquarters for all types of anti-Christ, anti-Christian propaganda and activities (Acts 9:2; 6:9). Some were used as torture facilities (Acts 26:11). The usual practice was for Jewish leaders to expel men and women from their synagogues when they converted to Christ (Acts 19:8-10; see also John 9:22, 34 and 12:42, 43).

How Church Buildings Are Authorized

As I said, there are *approved apostolic examples* of the use of worship facilities by Christians. But more specifically, the use of worship facilities is authorized by the various commands and examples of church *gatherings*. Whether a protective structure is *borrowed, owned or rented*, it is authorized by the very passages that authorize the assembly itself. Thus, **the purpose of a church building is identical to the purpose of the church assembly**. Churches are not authorized to use buildings to do things that they are not authorized to do in their assemblies. Consider these examples:

- Since churches are authorized to assemble for the purpose of conducting worship (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:18, 20, 33; 14:23, 26), then they are authorized to use buildings for this purpose.

- As Paul had commanded the churches of Galatia, so he commanded the Corinthian *church* (members) to make regular contributions “upon the first day of every week” (1 Cor. 16:1-2, NASB). This weekly collection was to be made in order to avoid the need for the Corinthians to have to make a *special collection* upon Paul’s arrival (1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 9:5). It should be noted that this particular aid to Jerusalem was a function of “churches,” each church making up its own funds and selecting its own messengers (2 Cor. 8:1, 23, 24; Rom. 15:25, 26). The command for local churches to gather funds into a common treasury authorizes a *place* for this to be done. Acts 4:35 speaks of proceeds being laid “at the apostles’ feet.” These passages authorize the use of a building in which saints may assemble for making first day of the week contributions.
- Since churches are authorized to assemble for the purpose of edification and evangelism (Acts 11:26; 13:1-3; 20:7; Eph. 4:12-16; Heb. 10:25), then they are authorized to use a building for this purpose.
- The Antioch church “gathered together” to hear Paul and Barnabas report their work among the gentiles (Acts 14:27). The authority to “gather” constitutes authority for a building in which to gather.

Meeting houses, whether borrowed, owned or rented, are, therefore, *lawful expedients*. They are not *necessary*, but they are *helpful*. They facilitate in the accomplishment of divinely authorized tasks, thus meeting the conditions of expediency as stated in 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23.

Some Unscriptural Practices Relating To The Construction of Church Buildings

Christians desire for their brethren throughout the world to be able to assemble in a comfortable and protective environment. Those who already possess adequate worship facilities are particularly interested in seeing other brethren have similar facilities. Emotions often overrule Scriptures, and Christians end up engaging in unscriptural practices. Let us consider some of the ways by which Scripture is ignored with respect to the construction of church buildings.

1. Some churches financially assist other churches in the construction of church buildings. Institutional churches have done this for years. There is no scriptural authority for such action. Since church buildings are only authorized by the Scriptures that authorize the various collective functions of the local church, then a church that sends

construction money to another church is actually sending money for that church's *assembly functions*. The giving church is actually financing the worship, evangelistic or edification activities of the receiving church! This would amount to one church paying another church to observe the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7), be edified (Eph. 4:16), send out preachers (Acts 13:1-4), and so on. Obviously, churches that have no objection to the sponsoring church arrangement will also have no objection to constructing church buildings for other churches. But it is important for *noninstitutional* churches to occasionally consider these principles. Even if it could be argued that there is no violation of church autonomy in this arrangement, there is still no Bible authority for the practice.

2. Some classify the construction of church buildings as an act of benevolence. The word "benevolence" suggests a *need*. But as demonstrated by the above Scriptures, church buildings are *expedients*, not *necessities*. They are useful and convenient, but unlike "food and clothing" (1 Tim. 6:8), they are not a matter of *survival*. Some people are using their "benevolent" chartered organizations to raise and spend funds in the construction of church buildings. But this is a slippery slope. If constructing church buildings is an act of "benevolence," then local churches would also be authorized to do this work. I realize that different people use terms in different ways. However, most brethren understand "benevolence" in the context of the church-to-church activities of passages like Acts 11:28-30; Romans 15:25-27 and 1 Cor. 16:1-3. This benevolence supplied the "needs" of the "poor" saints. The money was not sent for the construction of church buildings or other such *expedients*. This brings us right back to point number one. Where is the authority for this practice?

Some will say that their **charitable organizations** serve merely as logistical facilitators for individuals who wish to spend tax-exempt funds for church house construction. If so, then the charitable organization must keep their *church building* funds separate from their *benevolence* funds. These funds should not be mingled, for their purposes are not the same. This actually raises two more related points.

3. By raising money for the construction of church buildings, charitable organizations are raising money for the propagation of the gospel. As described above, the use of church buildings is authorized to do only the things that the local church is authorized to do collectively. This includes the teaching of the gospel to saints and sinners (Eph. 4:12). As with church-to-church funding, by funding the construction of church buildings, one funds the activities that are performed by the church that uses the building.

4. By taking funds from charitable organizations for the purpose of building worship facilities, local churches are participating in an unscriptural method of fund raising. Local churches are to obtain their funding by the free-will contributions of their members upon the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:1, 2; Acts 4:32-37; 2 Cor. 9:7). There is no Bible authority for local churches to use funds generated by charitable organizations for the construction of their church buildings.

5. The preachers of some churches are deliberately over supported for the purpose of constructing church buildings. Many churches know that there is no authority to directly fund other churches for the construction of their buildings, so they give the money to the preachers of those churches to accomplish the same result. Though the money is sent as a part of the preacher's "support," it actually goes into a *work fund* that is earmarked for church house construction. The "work fund" practice violates New Testament passages that classify preacher support as a "wage" (Lk. 10:7; 2 Cor. 11:8). Preacher funding of church house construction is just one of the many types of the work fund concept.

6. Some churches allow other churches to support their preacher so that they can use their own funds for construction purposes.

Preachers are authorized to preach to one church while receiving support from others (2 Cor. 11:8). However, some discretion must be used in these matters. Paul said that a preacher is supported for the purpose of his *livelihood* (1 Cor. 9:14). No passage addresses the practice of supporting a preacher for the purpose of enabling another church to pay for its own expedients.

There are a couple of rules that brethren should apply in these circumstances: There is the matter of *transparency*. Brethren should "*provide things honest in the sight of all men*" (Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21). Supported preachers ought to tell their supporting churches what they are doing. This will allow the supporting churches to make their own decisions about continuing support under such circumstances and for such reasons. There is also the matter of *consistency*. Would it be right for outside churches to pay a preacher in order to provide the church where he preaches with the financial ability to buy radio and television spots, Bible class materials and copiers? I have seen this done in various places. If not careful, this practice can easily turn into a back door sponsoring-church type of arrangement.

Conclusion

While church-owned buildings can be quite helpful to a local church in the performance of its collective functions, church buildings are *aids* and not *requirements*. God nowhere *commands* us to use church buildings. Like other expedients, such as songbooks and baptisteries, church buildings are authorized by the passages that authorize the thing for which the expedient is used. Local churches that have the ability to borrow, buy, build or rent meeting facilities are certainly authorized to do so. However, brethren must be careful about the methods and procedures by which this is done. The New Testament pattern must not be violated. The modern craze for non-church socio-religious organizations may have some people thinking that there is a way to circumvent the divine pattern. However, “*God is not mocked*” (Gal. 6:7). Any seeming loopholes are nonexistent. They may appear to exist, but only in the minds of those who are blindly determined to do as they please in religion, and this is quite dangerous (Prov. 14:12; 16:25; Isa. 65:2; Jer. 10:23).

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