

Food Court or a Home Cooked Meal?

Today I carry a burden for the Lord's church. I believe with all that is within me, the church is under a very subtle assault that is coming from within the structure of the local New Testament Churches all over our land. It is an assault that wasn't intended to hurt; in most people's minds the assault began as an attempt to enhance the worship of the church.

The analogy that I'm using is the food court of your local mall verses the home cooked meal, prepared usually by Mom at home. The analogy will translate well in the message of our Pastor's Word because it hits all of us where we live. Get the picture: A family enters the food court of the mall. What a sight! What temptations! You've got restaurants that literally use the mall court as the vestibule of their establishment. Do you want Chinese food? How about All-American hot dogs? A steak sandwich? A chicken sandwich? Pizza? How about forgetting the entrée and just give me the ice cream parlor! You can have it, whatever you want! And the lights, the atmosphere, and environment are working hard to make their sale. A lot of things take their "hit" in the mall. I haven't been into too many food courts offering the best of vegetable nourishment on one hand or prices on the other hand. It can be costly in more ways than one. Here's what often happens; the kids go to one area to please their palate, Dad often goes to another area to please his and Mom goes to her little corner of the court. If the family does come back together it is temporarily and only a strategy meeting to plan their own individual shopping or entertainment to meet back at one central location in time to go back home and drop in bed. Were they together? It is questionable.

I am not knocking this behavior. We have done something like this with our family and it can be fun once in a while. The point I wish to make today is this same atmosphere has hit the church with an increasing familiarity. We live in a pick and choose world. We have been so trained to be independent that we have nearly become independent of those we love and need the most.

Let's talk about the definitive nature of the church. The word church comes to us from the Greek word "ekklesia" which literally means "called out assembly." Just for our own information, I looked up the word "church" in the Bible. It is used in 79 different verses in the Bible. In only 15 of the verses can one see the word used in a collective sense of the whole body of Christ. And in every one of those 15 verses, it can always fall back in reference to the local New Testament church. Think of it. In 64 of the 79 verses the usage of the word church is exclusively used in the local, visible sense. It is a point of ground, a central location. Here are some examples of the use: Romans 16:1, "*I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.*" I Corinthians 1:2, "*Unto the church of God which is at Corinth...*" I Peter 5:13, "*The church that is at Babylon....*" We see in these references, which are only three of the many like references that the church is local, called-out assembly. God's word said, Hebrews 10:25, "*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*" There is no doubt that the assembling place referred to is the local New Testament church. For clarification we see I Timothy 3:15 says, "*But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*"

Think of the home-cooked meal environment. Dad, Mom, and children assemble in the central location to break bread and fellowship. There is usually no hurry and things of personal and family matters can be met and dealt with. There is an overseeing and accountability at the supper table at home that is not always available in the food court.

As many families enter the vestibule of our churches today, it's pick and choose. The worship format is so segregated that often, in the course of an entire week, there is no service where adults, college and career, teens, and children will worship God together. Let me share with you what is happening. We don't like the music of one crowd so we choose the service where we can receive only

the music that appeals to ourselves. In many cases young people drive their car to the contemporary a.m. service and Dad and Mom go to the traditional service. In many churches Sunday night is a time when churches divide off into their cell group Bible studies, which often times is more of a place to meet for coffee and talking. The Bible study that is preferred is one in which "Bible-preaching, teaching, pulpit-pounding" is not welcome. It is an atmosphere where one's individual opinion is the most cherished piece of information. (There is a place for this interaction, and we have made provision for this in our Sunday morning Bible Study and discipleship programs). The mid-week service of the church comes along and we have our children's programs. What a blessing this has been! However, as Pastor, I have seen something take place that has grieved me to the heart. I have seen dads and moms driving off the church grounds with the kids in the car after our AWANA program, just as we are beginning to have church. In my observances and conversations, here is what I have discovered is happening. Some of our parents use the Bible memory as the extension of their education system, which is often tied to the kid's schooling curriculum. Wow, can our kids shine in this area! However, for some, the Bible program was extracurricular, for others it was inclusive in their school grade. You will have a much better prepared student if advancement in grade level work is required. Please understand this statement is not meant to underestimate the discipline, hard work, or dedication of each and every individual child and teen who made the effort to learn their verses and Bible answers. I ask you to answer this question, has the mid-week service been replaced by the extension of the schoolroom? Some might answer, but we have game time and for the teaching/preaching we have counsel time. Yes, we have it all don't we? We've got something for everybody on Wednesday night, but many of us are not together. Our food court is working well! Are you ready to say good-bye to the mid-week service, when we are together? Some of the same kids we miss on Wednesday night are also in Children's Church on Sunday morning. So, for some of the kids, the only service they have with their parents is Sunday night. I am concerned that our services together are not protected, because if preparing for personal ministry is required, I have known some of our finest brothers and sisters ditch the church service to work on their ministry of choice. It's food court, not the home cooked meal.

In the history of the church we read of thousands who gave their life to worship together as a church. In the days of ancient Rome, when the church would be found meeting together, immediately many were killed, the rest were imprisoned, to be tortured or killed later. In the days of the ancient Scottish Covenanters when Queen Mary's knights found them meeting together they would be imprisoned or killed. The martyrs could have had taken the easy way out and ministered in a very personal setting and eased their conscious with substitute ministry. But this was not to be so! Millions would have rather died than to have been deprived of meeting together with God's saints.

When the iron curtain and, in some places, the bamboo curtain began to lower, we found that Christians could not wait to come together to worship. I am thinking of a worship service conducted in Korea. A woman carried her sick husband on her back ten miles one direction to be under the preaching of the Word of God, and then she carried him back home. In Russia, after years of being deprived public worship, I have friends that went to buildings with no heat, no roof and observed whole families standing in the snow, worshipping God with their families for no less than three hours. But for many of our church members stateside, the street would not be crossed if, in our opinion, our quota of assembling ourselves together has been met.

I would like to share three thoughts with you in closing.

I. Let the home be built into the church, not taken out of it.

Let's not get away from being "The Family Church." Let's worship together. There should always be public services where dads and moms hear the same thing as the children. This is good food for conversation, impetus for devotions. When the Philippian jailer got saved, Paul and Silas brought his entire family into the worship process, beginning the very night of his conversion. Let's do the same and not get away from this type of outreach! Acts 16:31,32: *"And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,*

and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house."

II. Meeting together brings a priority to faithfulness.

Proverbs 20:6,7 *"Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find? The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him."*

Proverbs 28:20, *"A faithful man shall abound with blessings...."*

When we have the young men serve as ushers, pray, and the girls and boys play their offertories, we are training them to be faithful to the house of God in the future.

III. Education should be an addendum to worship, not a substitute.

In early America, we find town squares from Massachusetts to California where the first building built was the church house. The town was built around the church. Many times the schoolhouse doubled for the church house, but it did not replace the worship. Our education, as in everything is to bring glory to God. As you study our history, activity shut down when it came time for worship.

To use the words of the old divines, "Let the church be the church." Let it always be the place where the government of God is magnified, where we praise God and preach the Word! Psalm 87:2,3 *"The LORD loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. Selah."*

- Pastor Pope -

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