

Miall on Buildings and Meetings

These two items – ‘buildings’ and ‘meetings’ – are intertwined. Many believers simply cannot divorce the two. Meetings are held in dedicated buildings; dedicated buildings are devoted to meetings. So says Christendom. Miall dealt with this fetish.

Miall spoke of the appalling ‘squeamishness’ (his word – I would use veneration)¹ which many believers have about buildings or ‘sacred spaces’; or, as he put it, ‘buildings appropriated to spiritual uses’. He was concerned, not only about the wrongness of the practice – ‘superstitious’, he called it – but the consequence; namely, that an emphasis on a building actually gets in the way of reaching the lost:

There cannot be a doubt that there exists very widely, in connection with this subject [that is, the emphasis on buildings], an immense amount of superstitious feeling [which is], in its influence, obstructive of religious effort.²

Just so. The emphasis upon buildings is utterly without scriptural foundation, and it hinders real spiritual enterprise. Yes, ‘place’ was very important in the old covenant. But not in the new. This is a classic example of the need for clarity about the contrast between the two covenants. Where this contrast is not realised, forgotten, played down or ignored, all sorts of trouble ensue.³

To let Miall continue. Alas, in doing so he was far too weak: ‘It would seem from the tenor of the entire narrative contained in the Acts, that...’. I break off. As I say, this is far too weak; concerning what he was talking about, there is no

¹ Miall was using the word not in the sense of repulsion but over-scrupulousness.

² Miall p420.

³ See my *Ezekiel; Pastor*; ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’.

doubt about the scriptural position. So, let me strengthen Miall at this point:

From the tenor of the entire narrative contained in the Acts, [we know] that those founders of the... church [that is, the apostles] attached no importance whatever to sanctity of place, and that they gladly availed themselves of any accommodation for preaching the truth which the locality they visited might happen to afford. A separate building, devoted to religious purposes, and to religious purposes only, does not appear to have been regarded by them as a prerequisite to founding a church of Christ.⁴

I must break in at this point. As I have observed, Miall was being far too cautious. There is no evidence whatsoever that the apostles placed any weight on procuring a building to form an *ekklēsia*. It never entered their minds.

To let Miall continue:

There was very extensive spiritual destitution in their day, go where they would, and yet we never find them at a standstill for want of a chapel building, never meet with a hint from them touching the necessity of collections for this purpose. I do not adduce this as showing that we can dispense with such accommodation, but as proving that they [that is, the apostles] were but little troubled with our squeamishness.⁵

In the UK, the need for a building to shelter from the weather is obviously desirable. But that about sums it up. Beyond that, the work of the *ekklēsia* can be carried out without a dedicated building.

Arguing on the basis of this biblical observation, Miall went on to deduce certain practical consequences:

In all our considerable towns, how large is the number of spacious rooms, even in the most neglected districts, which might be made available for the proclamation of glad tidings

⁴ Miall p420.

⁵ Miall p420.

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on the Lord's day!⁶ What a comparatively small amount of outlay, or of annual expense, would be required to turn them to account.⁷

And then came a suggestion that would have shocked many a Victorian evangelical. Moreover, while many evangelicals today would be perfectly happy with the idea, there is still a considerable body of feeling that would be very nervous if they heard it proposed in their local assembly:

We might get rid of pews – we might get rid of pulpits... If I am asked what the churches would gain by such an arrangement, I reply, in few words: something in the way of destroying formality; still more in abolishing, at our seasons of worship,⁸ every trace of worldly distinctions.⁹

Miall was rebuking the common Victorian practice of pew rents. Those who could afford it, could pay the necessary fee – the pew rent – and hire a pew for themselves or their family, and thus effectively (maybe inadvertently) prevent the lower classes, the poor, from attending the assembly. Remember, Miall was talking about evangelistic meetings, not meetings designed for 'religious worship'. As for no room for the poor, echoes of Christ at his birth: no room in the chapel!¹⁰ We, of course, do not have that problem today. Not only is this because the abominable practice of pew rents has been abolished – which is good – but, alas, most of our

⁶ Why limit this to the Lord's day? Miall, of course, was referring to the first day of the week, Sunday. I let this talk of the Lord's day stand, but I hope to publish on the subject in due course.

⁷ Miall pp420-421.

⁸ I allow the terminology, but does the New Testament warrant the notion of attending meetings 'to worship'?

⁹ Miall pp422-423.

¹⁰ Spurgeon would have meetings where pew-holders (those who had paid to reserve their seats) would vacate them and allow their places to be taken by men and women off the street, the great unwashed, the *hoi polloi*.

congregations consist only of the middle class.¹¹ Once again, I need to point out that what we need to be thinking about in all this is not meetings which should be exclusively for believers, but, rather, meetings designed specifically to attract unbelievers so that we can present the gospel to them. Christendom has so ruined this, the one concept morphs into the other in our thinking.

As for reaching the working class – or rather, not reaching the working class, much could be learned from Roy Joslin, in his *Urban Harvest: Biblical perspectives on Christian mission in the inner cities*, Evangelical Press, 2000, who addressed this. I take this from the blurb:

The plight of inner-city communities is often news. They are characterised by unrest and antagonism, a sense of neglect and discrimination that is by no means restricted to race. Failure by authorities and leaders to see and understand the real needs of these communities is in many cases at the heart of the problem. This is a brilliant and well-researched book on reaching industrial and inner-city communities with the gospel. Roy Joslin's writing is characterised by thoroughness and penetrating analysis. It is filled with flashing insights, biblically argued and practically applied. Joslin examines the history of the class struggle and the failure of the church to keep in tune with the reasoning, needs and aspirations of working people. The long-term results of an over-emphasis on children's work, the importance of Christians staying in the city, the nature and effects of Christians' social involvement and probing questions regarding worship are just a few of the subjects discussed in this book. 'Undoubtedly *Urban Harvest* is one of the most important Christian books to be published this century'. 'His book... will take its place as a standard reference-point for its subject'... 'A thoroughly researched but immensely readable account of the impact of the gospel on the working classes of this country up to the present time'.

¹¹ I am well aware that conversion usually means a rise in class because of the change of lifestyle. But the fact is that in general we are having little impact on the working class.

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Leaving that to one side, the problem of ‘formality’ is with us still. And how! And what a stifling, killing influence it is! Like professionalism, which I have already spoken about, ‘formality’ is deadening and worse. What can be worse than ‘deadenings’? Professionalism produces an external conformity, encourages mere decency and respectability, which many mistake for genuine spirituality. Grievous! Toxic! And this is worse than a ‘dead’ meeting. It leads to eternal damnation.

Miall spoke of using various methods (compare the way Paul used synagogues in Acts) to reach those who are unsympathetic to the gospel; indeed, to reach even those who are hostile to it. He made his opinion explicit; such meetings should be used:

...not for a religious service, in the common acceptance of that phrase, but for ‘disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God’. At such meetings, under no further restriction than is obviously necessary to prevent confusion, intelligent members of the church should be encouraged to enforce the message of mercy upon those assembled, with... freedom.¹²

Now there’s a radical thought! Every (‘intelligent’!) believer actively engaged in spreading the gospel. Think of it – every believer being positively *encouraged* to roll his/her sleeves up and get stuck in!

Of course, others have seen all this and made similar observations. Kenneth S.Latourette for one:

The chief agents in the expansion of Christianity were¹³ not to have been those who made it a profession... but men and women who earned their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion.¹⁴

¹² Miall p424.

¹³ Latourette had ‘appear’. There is no doubt about it.

¹⁴ Kenneth S.Latourette: *The First Five Centuries in A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol.1, Harper & Brothers, New York,

And Adolf von Harnack:

It was characteristic of [early Christianity] that everyone who seriously confessed the faith proved of service to its propaganda... We cannot hesitate to believe that the great mission of Christianity was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries.¹⁵

To let Miall continue. He had yet even more revolutionary proposals in mind:

I would put no interdiction upon the manifestation of feeling, whether assenting or dissenting, by the audience. I would give all present full liberty to ask questions, to start objections, or to speak in opposition.¹⁶ In fact, I would have the gospel propounded, illustrated, discussed, commended on these occasions as any other great truth, or system of truth, is dealt with, when the intention is to make it known far and wide and induce men to receive it.¹⁷

If such a commitment were to be undertaken, Miall was hopeful of a delightful outcome. He felt sure such ventures would do much good, he thought:

It would attract and interest a vast number of minds which a set religious service either repels altogether or utterly fails to stir. It would elicit enquiry. It would make Christianity more obviously a matter of individual concern. It would ruffle stagnation, even if it did nothing more. It would bring Christ's disciples into closer contact with his foes. It would open up to them the defensive strongholds¹⁸ of thought, or of credulity, to which the irreligious betake themselves for the

1937, p116, quoted by Robert L.Plummer: *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission...*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2006, pp11-12.

¹⁵ Adolf von Harnack: 'General Evidence for the Extent and Intensity of the Spread of Christianity: The Main Stages in the History of the Mission' in *Mission and Expansion*, quoted by Robert L.Plummer: *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission...*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2006, p11.

¹⁶ Heckle, in fact.

¹⁷ Miall pp424-425.

¹⁸ Miall had 'the retreats'. Miall was thinking of the defensive barriers which unbelievers raise against the gospel.

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purpose of evading conviction. It would bring out an immense mass of information, hardly to be attained otherwise, throwing light upon the actual position and feelings of those whom they are trying¹⁹ to win. It would present revelation and its most earnest advocates in an aspect of disinterestedness, impartiality and frank fearlessness, calculated to steal upon the confidence of many, who, mistaking its character, reject it.²⁰

Let me unpack that last sentence. Miall was saying that if his suggestion was adopted, it would go a long way to break down the view that the unconverted often have of us believers; namely, that we are bigoted and, moreover, not always willing to be fair and honest about things; in short, we display a signal lack of integrity.

In saying this, Miall showed that he had picked up his pointed stick once again. But he had rightly spotted a grievous flaw in the evangelical make-up. Evangelicals are altogether too fond of presenting a cleaner than clean image to the world. What I mean is, evangelicals can give the impression that they have an answer for everything. They don't!

When I was staying in the USA and preaching there, I was asked to see a certain man who was notoriously difficult. I gladly did so. After an hour's grilling, he told me that I was the first minister he had met who had been prepared to say that he didn't know the answer to some of his questions. He went on to say that he would come and hear me.

So much for the benefit to unbelievers if Miall's prescription were followed. It did not stop there. Miall saw benefit for the saints in such a scheme as he was putting forward:

But the plan, I think, would equally benefit the churches themselves. What scope it would afford for a wider development of the gift of utterance! What an admirable training ground²¹ for Christian teachers! What inducements to the study of divine things! Stimulus to the most tender and

¹⁹ Miall had 'essay'.

²⁰ Miall p425.

²¹ Miall had 'nursery'.

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most benevolent yearnings of the heart! Such meetings, and all that they imply, would constitute the best of all theological seminaries, on which the entire educational process would give skill in dealing with the souls of men, would be connected with each church, and would be sustained without expense.²²

Miall could see that the churches in the 1840s were failing to develop believers. Instead they were producing a spoon-fed mentality in them. Has anything changed for many with the passage of a couple of centuries? It has to be wondered if pastors would dread a thinking church, and prefer docile, passive hearers who accept what they are told.

Miall still had not done with novel suggestions:

I would only just add, that after the close of such meetings, a few minutes might be appropriately spent in a supplicating God's blessing upon them. But I would leave it to the option of each individual to depart or to remain, as he might feel inclined. Where salutary impressions have been produced, the opportunity might be seized. Where the heart is not disposed to prayer, the hypocrisy appearing to unite in it would neither be encouraged nor promoted.²³

What an important point! Christendom these past 1800 years has ensured that millions of unregenerate sinners have been sucked into spiritual meetings, meetings which should, in fact, be exclusively for believers. Under the practice of Christendom, unbelievers are encouraged to engage in spiritual activity, to use spiritual expressions, and make spiritual professions which are patently false – engaging in prayers, listening to the reading of Scripture with its understandably inclusive (since the post-Pentecost Scriptures were written mostly to believers) language of ‘we’ and ‘us’ and ‘you’, participating in the singing of hymns which express the highest devotion to Christ, and such like. What is more, many unbelievers have been doing this for a considerable number of years. This delusion – and that is what it is – is

²² Miall pp425-426.

²³ Miall p426.

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Satanic. Satan must have been laughing all the way to the pit and back these past 1800 years, gloating over the number of unregenerate sinners who have been hardened in their unregeneracy while being assured by 'the church' that they are part and parcel of the true spiritual people of God. Gospel preaching – whatever that might mean (it having been so debased in not a few cases) – as part of the service, does not overcome the damage the churches are inflicting on the unregenerate in this way.

Strong stuff in the 1840s. Strong stuff today. But, I submit, not too strong. We need to hear it.