

Warnock-Williams Discussion

on
Weddings and Funerals
In The Meetinghouse

Weldon E. Warnock
&
Ralph D. Williams



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INTRODUCTION

Approximately twenty-five years ago, Weldon E. Warnock and Ralph D. Williams participated in a brief exchange of articles published originally in *Searching the Scriptures*. Both men granted permission for me to print the exchange under the title *Weddings and Funerals in the Meetinghouse*. This booklet has been out-of-print for several years. Recent requests for material on this topic have prompted its re-publication in this new edition.

Christians should be willing to discuss issues of controversy in an honorable manner. These brethren have provided a splendid example of proper conduct in this regard. The publisher urges each reader to imitate the example of the first century Bereans who "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

—Thomas N. Thrasher



Weldon E. Warnock



Ralph D. Williams

Weddings and Funerals in the Meetinghouse

by

Weldon E. Warnock

A feeling has arisen in the minds of some good brethren that the meetinghouse may not be used for weddings or funerals. They are saying that the church building was erected with the Lord's money, and, therefore, it may only be used for authorized church functions. This position, as I see it, is an extreme and inconsistent one.

It is granted that the Lord's money when used in building construction should only be used to erect facilities that expedite the church's authorized work. The church has no right to build kitchens and dining halls for social purposes, wedding chapels or funeral parlors. These things do not constitute the work of the church. But for the building to be used for a wedding or funeral is something else. No divine principle is violated in any way by such usage of the building. Really, the Lord never did say what could or could not be done in a meetinghouse. He informed the church how to conduct itself, but said nothing about the meetinghouse. Hence, the issue is a matter of judgment and expediency. However, in the exercise of this liberty, nothing should be done that is in poor taste or that reflects upon the cause of Christ.

Brethren talk about the meetinghouse not being holy, then turn around and treat it like Solomon's temple. Some chide the too liberal brethren for their "dedication service" of the new church building. Right here is where the matter becomes rather ironic. The too liberal brethren "dedicate" their building to the Lord and then make a big ado about it not being sacred. Whereas some of the "conservative" brethren would have nothing to do with a "dedicatorial service" but act toward the building as though it was a sacred shrine on holy ground. I see a little taint of the Catholic attitude in this concept of the meetinghouse.

If no weddings or funerals may be conducted in the building because they are not functions of the church, then we are going to have to quit socializing before and after worship. Everything in the world (an exaggeration, wew) is discussed by the brethren in the building — from little junior's cutting of teeth to the number of coons old Blue treed the night before. These things must come to a halt if consistency is to be attained. There can be no conversation, other than on the Bible until you get off church property. After all, the church's money was not spent to provide a place to discuss coon hunting.

Too, I am certain that the church's yard and parking area bear the same relationship to this problem as the meetinghouse does. I do not think that one can logically say that the building should be anymore restricted than the outside premises. Both were bought with the same money. Hence, if the meetinghouse may not be used for anything other than church functions, then neither may the outside grounds. We are therefore forced to enclose the premises with a fence to prohibit football games, hopscotch, tag, etc. by the neighborhood children. Fencing the lot will also prevent the townspeople, in some places, parking on the property during the week while they shop or work.

Remember that the parking lot was not built for a neighborhood playground or a public

parking lot. If the meetinghouse may not be used for weddings and funerals because it was not built for these purposes, then neither may the parking lot be used for games and public parking because it was not built for these purposes. If some brethren's thinking is sound on the meetinghouse, the same kind of thinking is valid on the parking lot. If not, why not?

But someone says, "The public will get the wrong impression of the church if weddings and funerals are permitted." Here is where teaching enters the picture. We must teach the public. Really, I do not know of any that has gotten harmful impressions from a wedding or funeral in the building. There are some that are getting distorted concepts and impressions of extremism from those who refuse to allow them in the building. One woman said, when her daughter, who had recently become a Christian, was not allowed to have her wedding in the building, "She was refused because she did not grow up in that church."

Our children attend the services of the church all of their young lives, then when they get ready to marry, they are forced to go to another congregation's building where weddings are not objectionable. Oh yes, the opposition to weddings in a church building (at the home congregation, anyway) are right there to watch and give their blessings to the couple. Inconsistent, would not you say?

It seems to me that instead of getting so stringent on weddings and funerals in the meetinghouse, there needs to be a lot of emphasis on the non-use of the building. Brethren will spend from 100 to 200 thousand dollars on a structure, then use it about four hours a week. A good portion of the weekly contribution is consumed paying on the debt for 15 to 20 years, just to have a place to meet a few hours each week. This non-use does not seem to bother some of the brethren, but mention a wedding and they quickly respond about the misuse of the building. Let's make the meetinghouse a center for special classes, training and development, and a host of other work that comes within the church's mission. We need to be better stewards of church property.



Weddings and Funerals — A Review

by

Ralph D. Williams

Brother Weldon Warnock raised some good questions in his article, "Weddings and funerals in the meetinghouse," in the Feb. 1973 issue. It seems more brethren are becoming concerned over these practices lately. *Searching the Scriptures* is to be commended for allowing the question to be searched openly.

It appears that three basic questions need to be considered as a solution is sought: (1) Are these activities a work of the local church? (2) Can church facilities be used for an individual / family need in providing for a social / domestic affair (1 Tim. 5:8)? (Though the state of marriage is ordained of God **how** it is entered is not). (3) Can the church facilities be used by a citizen to comply with his civil obligations? A marriage ceremony (of some kind not necessarily religious) is required by civil law.

The real issue is: **where is the authority?** If such practices are allowable a simple N.T. precept, example or necessary inference is all that's necessary. Positive authority is needed, not a negative "what does it violate" approach ("where does the Bible say not to play?"). Because brethren may like it, young people expect it, and churches "traditionally" practice it, doesn't make it right.

In his second and last paragraphs, Brother Warnock recognizes that the church has an "authorized work" to do, and admits the building expedites such. Surely, none can challenge that principle. Then it simply remains to determine what the "authorized work" is and use the facilities accordingly.

I would take exception to the statement, "The Lord never did say what could or could not be done in a meetinghouse." Jesus told us that when He revealed the "church's authorized work." Don't forget it's the work of the church that necessarily infers authority for a building to begin with! If the collectivity did not have a work to do requiring a meetingplace, no reason nor right would exist for such a place. Thus, the "work" and the "place" to do that work go together. Therefore, the "place" exists for only one exclusive purpose—to "expedite the church's authorized work."

To speak of brethren having a "taint of Catholic attitude" in acting as though the building were a sacred shrine on holy ground" is prejudicial and serves no purpose in clarifying the issue. All will agree the meeting place is not sacred as was Solomon's temple. But still there is a principle of "sanctification" (a setting apart) involved. Is the Lord's treasury not "set apart" to be used as He wills? Likewise are not those items purchased with those Divine funds "set apart" for the special use as the N.T. directs? Is it possible to be guilty of profaning such items by **using** them in a "common way" (Heb. 12:16)?

To compare weddings with "socializing" before and after services isn't parallel. If a special social hour were scheduled an all invited to come for that purpose we'd be comparing things of like nature. This argument is somewhat like the liberals reply, "you have a water fountain in the building," when we object to their kitchens and dining rooms. If a "socializing meeting were called, Brother Warnock would have a parallel argument; just as our liberal kitchen-banqueting brethren would have, if we were to announce a special meeting around the water cooler. But in both cases we're talking about individual doings which are **incidental** in using the building.

As brethren assemble, greetings are proper. Comments beyond that which is spiritually edifying would be a matter for the individual to regulate. Personally I try to refrain from secular socializing, and keep in mind the purpose for which we've assembled. Granted this isn't always easy. If this area needs more emphasis, we should attend to it. But the point is a special service hasn't been called for "social visiting" as for a wedding.

I don't know of any churches or elders **inviting** the public to freely use the parking lot for the neighborhood children to turn the premises into a playlot. If someone came to the elders

requesting such use, they ought to explain the lot wasn't designed for such purposes and suggest the inquirer look elsewhere. If a brother requested his family use the parking lot for games to facilitate his son's birthday party, I believe that would be more parallel to requesting use of the church building for a wedding. Wouldn't we expect the elders to deny such a request?

Of course how these questions are answered regarding socializing and using the parking lot doesn't really meet the issue of using the building for weddings and funerals. First, tackle this primary issue itself. **Then** if these other matters need attention for consistency and truth's sake, work at solving them. But keep in mind the right or wrong of "weddings" in the meetinghouse isn't answered by what **incidentally** takes place by non-members on the parking lot.

Liberal brethren have argued to justify their secular schools and kindergartens in the building on the grounds that it stands idle so many hours each week. Our failure to utilize the facilities more fully doesn't scripturally justify opening the door for unauthorized works. I agree we should use the building more for "special classes . . . (etc.) that comes **within the church's mission**" (Emphasis mine-RW). Brother Warnock's concluding words, as his beginning (2nd) paragraph, knocks weddings and funerals out of the building—unless Scriptural proof can be given that such are **within the church's Mission**.



Weddings and Funerals in the Meetinghouse—No. 2

by

Weldon E. Warnock

Brother Ralph Williams said in a review of my February article on "Weddings and Funerals in the Meetinghouse" that "The real issue is: WHERE IS THE AUTHORITY? If such practices are allowable a simple N.T. precept, example or necessary inference is all that's necessary." But the issue is not one of authority (finding book, chapter and verse), but rather it is a matter of judgment. We are not talking about what the church may do, but what individuals may do in the meetinghouse. Certainly, the church has no business conducting weddings or funerals in or out of the meetinghouse. We are all in agreement here. But what individuals may do in the church's building is another matter.

To ask for book, chapter and verse for a wedding or funeral in the meetinghouse is about like asking for Bible to comb your hair, tie your shoes, powder your face or manicure your nails in the meetinghouse. Where is there command, example or necessary inference for these things in the meetinghouse? Yet, we all do them (hopefully, not during the worship, however). The church would need authority to comb hair, tie shoes, powder the face and manicure nails, but not individuals.

Our brother states, "I would take exception to the statement, 'The Lord never did say what could or could not be done in a meetinghouse.' Jesus told us that when He revealed the 'church's authorized work.'" No, brother Williams, Jesus told the church what it could do when he revealed its authorized work—not what could be done in a temporal structure. This position eliminates any and everything in the building or on the premises that is not a work of the church. Is riding a bicycle on the parking lot a work of the church? Is playing ball by the neighborhood children a work of the church? Is public parking by the community while shopping or working the church's work? Since none of these things is a work of the church, they must be barred from church property, according to brother Williams' reasoning.

Forced to its logical conclusion, brother Williams view becomes an extreme and untenable one. It could be classified as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Putting this in plain language, it means, "disproof of a proposition, etc., by showing the absurdity to which it leads when carried to its logical conclusion" (Webster). Brother Williams' position demands that everything not related to church activity must be kept off the church's premises. No congregation practices this.

My comparison of weddings and funerals to socializing before and after services is parallel, brother Williams to the contrary. I did not say that they were comparable in every aspect, but they are parallel in that neither is a function of the church. Since some are contending that weddings and funerals may not be conducted in a meetinghouse because they are not works of the church, I maintained in my former article that neither may socializing, games by neighborhood children or parking of automobiles by the local residents while shopping or working, be done on the church's premises because they are not functions of the church.

Brother Williams wants to make the socializing proper and permissible before and after worship on the basis of it being incidental. Webster defines "incidental" as "a chance or undesigned feature of something; casual; hence, minor; of secondary importance." Thus, it appears that brother Williams has no objections to undesigned secular matters in the meetinghouse; just those that are planned. Maybe we need to start having unplanned weddings and classify them under "incidentals." To say a thing is incidental seems to make it right. Seriously, we have as much right to perform a wedding or funeral in the meetinghouse and classify it a matter of judgment as we do to talk about hunting there and classify it an incidental. Neither one involves the church in an unauthorized practice.

Our brother said, "I don't know of any churches or elders inviting the public to freely use the parking lot or the neighborhood children to turn the premises into a playlot." Why don't they stop the practice, then? If their failure to invite suggests that they disapprove, then they ought to terminate playing and parking on the premises. The fact that elders do not stop playing and public parking on the parking lot is evidence that they have no objections. How many churches do you think would turn down children's request to ride their bicycles on the parking lot or deny a request for some business people to use the lot while they are at work? To be this narrow and restrictive would cast the church in a contemptible position in the community.

Who says that weddings and funerals are the primary issue, except brethren who have made them an issue? They are no issue with most of us, and I regret that they have been made a public issue. If I made children playing on the parking lot and socializing before and after worship an issue, they would be the main issue with me. I could say something like brother Williams said, "Of course how these questions are answered regarding weddings and funerals doesn't really meet the issue of using the church's premises for children playing and public parking. First,

tackle the primary issue itself. THEN if these other matters need attention for consistency and truth's sake, work at solving them." Really, public parking and playing on the parking lot are just as much an issue as weddings and funerals in the building, and "for consistency and truth's sake," they need solving by the objectors of weddings and funerals in the building.

Some questions are in order just here: (1) Since brother Williams contended that the church's facilities are "sanctified," would it be permissible for a person to make a phone call on the church's phone that is not related to church work? (2) Could a person get a drink of water when the church is not assembled in the building? (3) May the restrooms be used, other than during a service? These things are done in all buildings owned by churches of Christ that are so equipped. Are we to quit allowing these practices on the basis of the facilities being "sanctified"—that they are to be used only in conjunction with the church's activity?

Although I am of the conviction that the usage of the building for weddings and funerals is a matter of judgment, there are some factors to consider as to what may be permitted on the church's premises: (1) Is it morally right? Of course, this goes without saying. (2) What might the potential dangers be to involving the church in the practice later? (3) Would the people in the community get the wrong impression and thus hinder them from obeying the truth? (4) Has the main purpose of the meetinghouse been changed? It was built for the worship and work of the church. If it is used all week for individual projects and activities, has not the purpose for which it was built been altered? As the old saying goes, "The tail would be wagging the dog." (5) Is the activity in good taste? Propriety demands, on the basis of the close proximity of the meetinghouse with religious functions, that certain things are out of place on the church's property. Discretion would have to be used here.

In conclusion may I say that if a congregation saw fit to refuse a wedding or funeral in its meetinghouse, that would be its prerogative, but it has no right to try to impose its opinions or feelings on sister congregations and thereby disrupt the peace and harmony of brethren over such matters that are purely optional. We have enough legitimate issues without creating some superfluous ones.



Weddings and Funerals — Review No. 2

by

Ralph D. Williams

Brother Weldon Warnock and I agree the church is not in the business of providing for weddings and funerals. I'm sure we'd agree that such is an individual and family responsibility (1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Tim. 5:8). Yet, when the meetinghouse is used for these affairs, who has provided

the place? The individual didn't spend his money to build the facilities. The building, seating, etc. were purchased from the Lord's (church) treasury. If a church were renting a meeting place, would it be all right to use church funds to rent it an extra hour or another evening for a wedding?

Combing the hair and clipping a hangnail, like using the restroom or drinking fountain, need no specific authority. These are individual personal needs which are merely INCIDENTAL to the reason for being at the building. To have a parallel with a wedding one would need to announce that brethren were invited to gather with combs and clippers at a certain time for a special service of clipping and combing.

I'll stand upon my statement that Jesus told us how to use the meeting house when He revealed the "church's authorized work." Obviously, the Lord said nothing concerning "a temporal structure" per se. Yet places of assembling are recorded in the N.T. (Acts 20:8,10). And the work and worship required of the church necessitate a place (1 Cor. 11:18-22; Heb. 10:25). Therefore when a place is rented or purchased with the Lord's funds to do His authorized work, the question of HOW to use the place should be self-evident!

How shall we use the communion trays? Some seem uncertain about the building itself, but what about this aid to the Lord's Supper? Would a sister decide to take the bread plates home to serve sandwiches at a bridal shower since the trays weren't being used anyway? The reasoning of some would permit it. The question then is will we use an expedient (building, trays, baptistry) only for the use for which it was purchased with the Lord's funds? In the business world one who takes company property for his own personal use without authority is guilty of misappropriation. We don't wish to spiritually misappropriate the Lord's funds or property. That's the very heart of this discussion.

Brother Warnock calls my view absurd because he carries it out to an "extreme and untenable" conclusion, which he thinks is necessary. He says no congregation practices keeping off the church's premises everything not related to church activity. (Is *our* standard of right and wrong to be what churches practice?) Certainly we can't police the grounds or put up barbed wire to stop children from riding their bicycles or playing on it. But the fact remains the parking lot wasn't built as a playground. Neither was it designed to aid shoppers and businessmen. Such uses are INCIDENTAL. If it's a problem put up a sign: "church parking." That states the purpose of this private property. If people violate it, we can't control that nor would it be wise to make a scene over it. Because we can't completely control what outsiders do on the premises doesn't argue or justify planning and using church facilities in nearly anyway anyone may desire.

True, socializing before and after services is parallel to weddings in that neither are the function of the church. But they are **not** parallel where it would be significant in this discussion. "Socializing" or visiting is **not** a planned activity. Time is **not** set apart for it. Announcements and invitations are **not** extended for participation. A special service is **not** scheduled for that purpose. A request is **not** made of the elders that the building might be borrowed for such use. I've never heard an outsider speak of our "visiting" as they've been heard to speak about a "church of Christ wedding."

The careful attention given the word INCIDENTAL is important and appreciated. It means "a chance or undesigned feature of something; casual; hence, minor; of secondary importance." Merely, this is part of the key in resolving some of the seeming difficulties in this inquiry.

“Incidentals” are a fact of life; something we must live with. They are even found in the Bible. For example, in connection with baptism, who administered it and where were merely incidentals (1 Cor. 1:17; Acts 8:36). However, it’s a little hard to believe many brides would be satisfied with an “unplanned” (incidental) wedding. While “socializing” may be “incidental” much of that which I hear is an expression of “care one for another” (1 Cor. 12:25) and courtesy toward visitors (Gal. 6:10). The content of such visiting is indeed a matter of judgment. But this is not the same and I would object if the men wished to meet at the building one evening to talk about and show slides of a hunting trip.

Is it wrong to use the facilities purchased with the Lord’s money only for those things for which they were needed in the first place? Should the wishes of the public determine their use? I don’t find it narrow to kindly and politely tell folks that the church premises aren’t designed for general public use. Tell them (with a smile) if they want to park there to come Sunday at 9 a.m.! Right thinking people, respectful of private property, shouldn’t become offended at this truth. Of course, the first consideration ought always to be whether our practice and attitude is offensive to God.

Again, if the word “sanctified” causes misunderstanding, substitute the words “ear-marked” or “reserved” with regard to the use of the facilities. Clearly none believe the building is like some shrine in which we must remain silent or whisper in hushed tones. The meeting place is “set apart” for the special work of the Lord. The worship that is rendered therein is truly “sanctified” in the strictest Biblical sense of the word.

In response to the three questions: the telephone, like the restroom, exists not specifically for “church work” but to facilitate those who assemble or are at the building at other times (cleaning, bulletin, studying). It serves one’s needs while there spiritually or secularly. I wouldn’t object if one phoned to check with the baby sitter, called a taxi or ambulance, etc. I would oppose a member coming to the building solely to make social or business calls. If one were at the building legitimately the use of the phone would be merely incidental. If a brother didn’t have water or bathroom facilities at home, I’m sure he’d be welcome to come to the building at any hour there was need. In such trying circumstances, he’d no doubt classify as a “needy saint” anyway, thus an object of church aid. But if one has utilities at home, why would he make a special trip to the meetinghouse? The telephone, water, restrooms all serve the incidental needs of those who have reason to be at the building, during services or any other time.

Again, brother Warnock and I agree when he writes in his next to the last paragraph, the meetinghouse “was built for the worship and work of the church.” Is it improper or “absurd” to ask brethren simply to apply that truth in practice? The building wasn’t built for public use by the Garden club, Rotary, 4H-club, Boy Scouts, ad infinitum. Therefore, the list of five rules or someone else’s ten rules aren’t needed to determine what activities may be permitted on the premises and by whom. The church has a work and worship to attend to. A place was necessary to accomplish it. Therefore, let us be content to use the facilities for which they were originally acquired and authorized.

While some may consider this a superfluous issue, others are concerned enough to investigate and discuss it calmly and brotherly in the interest of doing only what is right. Let us help ourselves and our brethren never to depreciate a question to the extent we fail to fulfil 1 Thess. 5:21.

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