ESSENTIAL by Al Diestelkamp

Words have meanings! Ever since the emergence of the coronavirus epidemic, we’ve been hearing the word *essential*used frequently by politicians, scientists, reporters, and neighbors. It’s a good word, but the way it is being used during this crisis leads me to borrow a memorable line from a once-popular movie: “You keep using that word; I do not think it means what you think it means” [*The Princess Bride*].

I was pretty sure I knew the meaning of the word *essential* before I looked it up in the dictionary, but I wanted to be sure. The definition includes words like *absolute*, *necessary*, *indispensible*, and *required*. Since my dictionary is over sixty years old, I *googled* the word just to make sure I hadn’t missed a change in its meaning over the years. The New Oxford American Dictionary defined the word as an adjective meaning “absolutely necessary; extremely important,” or as a noun referring to “a thing that is absolutely necessary.”

Some of the recent governmental mandates declaring certain businesses or individuals as “essential” (and by implication declaring all others “non-essential”) would be laughable if they weren’t so sad. The question that remains unanswered is, “deemed to be essential and non-essential *to* *whom,* and *by whom?”*

We all recognize that some essentials can and should be suspended under unusual circumstances, but they must not be suspended indefinitely. Food is essential to life, but even our Lord fasted forty days and nights before enduring intense temptation from the devil (Matt. 4:1-2). The apostle Paul’s instructions to husbands and wives clearly imply that sexual intimacy is essential in a healthy marriage, but the apostle Paul indicated that it was permissible to consensually forego it “for a time” only to “come together again” to avoid temptation (1 Cor. 7:4-5).

It should not surprise us that many of the “powers that be,” and even much of the world, place assembled worship in the “unessential” category. All of our lives, we’ve heard people say, “I can worship God by myself—I don’t have to go to church.” While private worship is good and should be encouraged, it is never a substitute for assembled worship.

There is a good reason given by the Word of God for assembling with other Christians. We often quote Hebrews 10:25 to prove this point without reading the verse right before it which reveals a God-given reason for assembling together—to “consider one another in order to stir up love and good works.” While an online meeting may be a temporary measure under unusual circumstances, it is a poor substitute at best and does not fulfill the essential practice of coming together as a church in one place (1 Cor. 11:18,20).

Readers may mistakenly think that I am being critical of decisions to suspend in-person worship assemblies during the height of the coronavirus shutdown. Such is not the case. What I am concerned about is a willingness to be satisfied with accepting the claim that in-person assemblies are not essential and to be comfortable with so-called “virtual assemblies” (an oxymoron). The essentiality of in-person assembling demands that we find a way to make any suspension of such very temporary.
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*Perhaps government officials who fail to recognize the essentiality of worship assemblies have taken their cue from the host of false teachers who, while agreeing that water baptism is important, deny that it’s essential to salvation. However, Jesus made it clear to Nicodemus that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). Jesus confirmed this in the parting commission He gave His apostles (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16)*;*and His apostles clearly understood the essentiality of baptism as seen in their response to the question “What shall we do?” which was posed on the day of Pentecost (Ac. 2:37,38).*

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