

# Can The Church Provide Food?

**Introduction.** The Galatians quickly removed themselves from the gospel of Christ because they had accepted something that was not a part of the true gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). Likewise, there are many perversions of the true gospel today, but probably the most popular is the "social gospel." Instead of using only the gospel to appeal to man's inner being to make him better spiritually, it mainly appeals to man's physical nature.

Many "churches of Christ" have constructed kitchens or "fellowship halls." These are rooms, buildings or other structures for the purpose of recreation and social functions. Our purpose will be to investigate the Bible in regard to this practice. If this practice is commanded, we should be able to find authority for it in the scriptures.

A great point of separation among differing religious groups is how we justify our beliefs. The Bible says that God has given us everything pertaining to life and godliness and we are equipped for every good work (2 Peter 1:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). One group takes a conservative approach which means, "Tending or disposed to maintain existing views." They ask for justification for all practices, reasoning that if God has told us everything, then you must be able to find book, chapter and verse for every work. Therefore, for any practice, they first ask "Why?" The other group, who constitute the majority, take a liberal approach which means, "Not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or traditional forms." They ask for proof that something is wrong, and for any practice proposed, they ask "Why not?"

Many works are justified by the good that is being done. However, good is defined as how people feel about the work and not by appealing to God's definition of good. Practices are only denied if it is shown that harm is being done. To illustrate this fundamental difference, we are going to examine the question of having meals in the meeting house or providing food through a "fellowship hall" or a "food pantry."

## I. ***A Historical Perspective***

- A. In the transition of American society from a rural-based economy to a more urban, industrialized people, churches faced many changes in their application of scriptural tradition. The Sunday evening service was one of those changes. City churches, comprised of factory workers and support staff, had to make provisions for members who could not attend the usual Sunday morning worship period. It was not an easy transition, and many brethren, even today, have not all agreed on every aspect of that change, particularly as it relates to the observance of the Lord's supper.
- B. Another traditional transition had to do with the individual provision of a family meal on the Lord's day. In the rural economy, churches would

assemble for a morning service. Many families would bring their lunches to spread out, picnic style, outside the meeting house. After dinner, there would often be a period of play preceding an occasional singing followed by an evening worship period. As many had come some distance for this Lord's day gathering with the saints, the afternoon services would conclude with plenty of day left for safe travel home and evening chores. Several factors being considered, the meeting house of the church would, of necessity, be used to accomplish all of the day's activities. From these austere beginnings evolved the modern day practice of building kitchens, banquet rooms, community meeting rooms, athletic fields and the ever popular gymnasium. Once the gate of the losing of Bible authority is opened, adventurous brethren, like sheep to the slaughter, can and usually will go anywhere and everywhere.

## II. **Common Arguments**

- A. "It is a part of our duty to provide fellowship for the members."
  - 1. Some seek to include "fellowship" as a work of the church, and, based on that assumption, the "hall" would then be scriptural.
    - a) Elders and preachers argue that if the members do not eat together they will not come to church.
    - b) If they do not provide the entertainment for the church member's children, then the devil's crowd will.
    - c) This really sells people's faith short. Do brethren really believe that our young people are so weak that they cannot be faithful without the social gospel?
  - 2. However, fellowship is not used in the scriptures in a social way. Those in fellowship often eat together, but eating together is not fellowship; it is socializing.
    - a) It is having something in common, something shared; it is a relationship between two people. The church cannot provide fellowship; it can encourage its members to be in fellowship (Philippians 1:3-6; 1 John 1:7). If fellowship is socializing, then what about all different kinds of activities?
      - (1) Super Bowl party.
      - (2) Piano recital.
      - (3) A play by Shakespeare.
      - (4) Checkers tournaments.
      - (5) Golf course.
      - (6) Horse track.
      - (7) Movie theater.

- b) If this is a work of the church, where is the passage that requires a church, by command, example or inference, to provide eating facilities?
    - (1) The work of the church is wholly centered around spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our one and only mission is the salvation of souls. To that end we preach, both to the lost (Mark 16:15) and to those who are saved for their growing in the Lord (2 Peter 3:18).
      - (a) The church provides Bible classes for all ages so that we feed on spiritual food and grow spiritually.
      - (b) When Paul told the elders to "feed" the flock in Acts 20:28, to what kind of food was he referring? Food and drink are part of the home, not part of the kingdom (Romans 14:17).
    - (2) We come together to worship God and admonish each other to press on in our common faith (Hebrews 10:24). When it becomes necessary to help a brother or sister so that he or she can carry on their life as a functioning part of the working family, the church is authorized and commanded to assist in his or her relief.
      - (a) Many times faithful Christians see after their own family members and the need is thereby met (1 Timothy 5:8, 16).
      - (b) Fellowship enters into this effort when we, collectively, accept the charge of scripture to engage in a congregational work with all of its biblical limitations (Acts 11:27-30; Acts 13:1-3; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2).
- B. "There is nothing against using the building for a common meal in the scriptures."
1. This amounts to asking the question, "Why not?" However, God said that He has revealed all that we should do. He has not stated everything we should not do. We can see in the New Testament why brethren assembled and a social meal was never included!
    - a) The church met for worship (Acts 2:42).
    - b) The church met for prayer (Acts 4:31).
    - c) The church met to arrange benevolence (Acts 6:1-6).
    - d) The church met for preaching (Acts 11:26).
    - e) The church met for an evangelism report (Acts 14:27).
    - f) The church met to discuss doctrinal problems (Acts 15:1-4).
    - g) The church met for discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).
  2. The Corinthians had misused the Lord's supper, coming together to eat instead of worship, thereby violating the will of God (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

- a) Paul's solution was not to wait until after the worship service. His solution was not to use the building on another day. His solution was not to build a separate facility for meals. He told the Corinthians to have their meals in their homes. It is interesting to note that the only time a church social meal is mentioned in the Bible, it is condemned!
  - b) Paul is giving a general rule that condemns the specific circumstance in Corinth. This approach is used several times in the scriptures (Matthew 15:13; 1 Timothy 5:8; Hebrews 10:26; 2 John 7-9).
  - c) In Acts 2:46, the disciples worshipped in the temple and ate their food from house to house. We know brethren ate together. The withdrawal of fellowship included the refusal to eat with the sinning, marked brother (1 Corinthians 5:11). Social interaction was separated from spiritual interaction!
- C. "We do not have authority for the building, so we can do whatever we wish with it."
1. If the building is not authorized, then no congregation should have one (Colossians 3:17).
    - a) Having a building without authority would imply adding to God's word, which would be sinful.
    - b) So the reasoning is, "We are sinning already, so we can commit additional sins without further harm." Is this a proper attitude to have?
  2. However, the premise is false. We do have authority for a building.
    - a) We are commanded to meet (Hebrews 10:25).
      - (1) As we go through the New Testament, we find that the early Christians met at the Temple in Jerusalem, they met in upper rooms (rented facilities), they met by a river bank, they met in people's homes and they met in schools.
      - (2) None of these examples show that a building was purchased, but they have one point in common: they had a place to assemble. Therefore, the authority to assemble includes the provision of a place to assemble (Hebrews 10:25; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; 11:18; 16:1-2).
    - b) Brethren usually purchase a building because it is cheaper than renting a facility and provides a stable location. This method satisfies the command in a manner in which a good steward would do with the resources provided.
  3. This building was purchased and built for the purpose of worshipping God and teaching His word.
    - a) If we want to use the building for any other purpose, we must first show that God authorizes it.

- (1) Authority to assemble includes that which is incidental to our assembling: rest rooms, drinking fountains, lights, air-conditioning systems, etc.
  - (2) When we baptize someone, we understand that water is essential and a baptistry is an expedient. No scripture, though, can be produced to show authority for social meals. Social meals are not expedients.
  - b) One liberal preacher said, "We feed the people because Christ went about feeding the people."
    - (1) Yes, Jesus fed the people, but Jesus did a lot that we cannot do (e.g., feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish).
    - (2) Jesus fed the 5,000 to show that He was the bread of life, and afterwards He taught the people to seek the food which endures to eternal life (John 6:27).
  - c) Although brethren may say that they are using dinners to attract non-Christians, the ends will never justify the means (Romans 3:8). If the ends do justify the means, then why did this not work with Uzzah (1 Chronicles 13:7-10)?
- D. "The Bible uses the term 'feasts of charity' which means a fellowship meal."
- 1. The term "feasts of charity" is used in Jude 12 and 2 Peter 2:13. The problem is we do not know enough about these to say if they were fellowship meals. There are several possibilities as to its identification.
    - a) A figurative meal (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:8).
    - b) The Lord's supper.
    - c) A benevolent meal for the poor.
    - d) Sharing meals from house to house (Acts 2:46).
  - 2. Whatever it was, there was no evidence that they were done within a church assembly nor was there any evidence that church funds were used for these feasts. In fact, the word "church" is not even in the book of Jude.

**Conclusion.** Perversions of the gospel will not save men's souls, but will condemn them. On a cold winter day in 1986, Diane Elsroth entered a store in Bronxville, New York looking for something to relieve her pain. She bought a bottle of medicine, not knowing that someone had opened the bottle's tamper-resistant wrapping, tainted the capsules with cyanide and returned them to the store's shelf. Within a short time after Elsroth left the store, the cyanide-laced capsules killed her.

Like a medicine mixed with cyanide, a perverted gospel brings condemnation rather than making us whole in Christ. Stick to the authority we

have for a building and we will walk by faith. Venture into other waters and you have digression.

The church may build and maintain the facilities necessary to do everything which God has commanded it to do. Before one can justify church kitchens, banquet rooms or "fellowship halls," he must find where God has commanded the church to assemble to eat a common meal or for any other social activity. There is a difference between individual and congregational action (Matthew 18:15-17; Acts 5:1-4; 1 Timothy 5:16). If Christians want to feed people or start a pantry for poor people, leave the church alone that it might be about the business of saving souls. That is our purpose for being here.