

To Eat or Not to Eat in the Church Building

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The apostolic church enjoyed common meals in their places of worship, and these meals were formally designated by the term, “love feasts” (or *agapais* in the Greek language). Jude 12 and 2 Pet. 2:13 refer to these feasts. In describing them, one church historian has given to us the following account:

For when all the faithful met together and had heard the sermon and prayers, and received the communion, they did not immediately return home upon breaking up of the assembly, but the rich and wealthy brought meat and food from their own houses, and called the poor, and made a common table, a common dinner, a common banquet in the church [building]. And so from this fellowship in eating, and the reverence of the place, they were all strictly united in love one with another, and much pleasure and their benevolence both from those whom they fed and from God (*The Antiquities of the Christian Church Bingham*, Vol. 11, Book IV).

With the advance of Roman Catholicism and its borrowing of Old Testament and pagan concepts and practices, it embraced the idea of sacred sites, buildings, and temples. By A.D. 367 the sacred-site approach was fully integrated into the thinking of the Romanist hierarchy. In that year the Council of Laodicea, in its 28th canon, forbade any to eat or spread tables “in the house of God,” meaning, of course, the church building. The law of Moses perished as God’s authority in religion with Jesus’ death on Calvary (Col. 2:14), and paganism is abominable idolatry. (Elvis Huffard)

Those today who oppose the use of the church building for pot-luck dinners and fellowship meals usually think they are imitating the **apostolic** church. What they need to see is that in reality they are following the **apostate** church and its councils. Those who hold such a view commit at least two faults:

1. They confuse the church with a building of brick and mortar, boards or nails, where the church meets.
2. They make laws for others where God has not made them.

The first of these is likely a result of failure to comprehend what the church really is. The church is those persons who have been baptized for forgiveness of their sins, upon the confession of their faith in Jesus as the Christ and upon repentance of their sins (Acts 2:37-47). One might look upon it as God’s “depository” of those who are saved. Jesus purchased the **church**, not a church building, with His blood (Acts 20:28). Jesus gave Himself up for the **church**, not for a church building (Eph. 5:25). To view the

church building as a “holy place” consistently leads one to the decision of the Laodicean Council of 367.

The second fault results in a brazen attempt to usurp the dominion of the Lord by making a decree He has not made. It forbids that which He allows. Those who hold this view are governed by a human, rather than by a Divine law. Those who are determined to govern others by this position have only the authority of men for their dogma and their practice in doing so. This practice is a fine example of what Jesus condemned in principle when he said, “In vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Mat. 15:9).

But why devote so much space to a matter that is really only an indifferent point anyway? We do so because ignorance of what the church really is and binding a tradition on brethren are both very serious matters. Can we not see that “the most high dwelleth not in houses made with hands” (Acts 7:48-50)? To use the church building for a common meal is not going to desecrate it, since it is not God’s temple to begin with. The concept of “sacred” buildings is rooted in the defunct law of Moses and/or paganism rather than in the Law of Christ. He demands consecrated minds, hearts, and bodies (Luke 10:27; Rom. 12:1-3). To misuse **these**, not eating in a church building, is to defile or destroy God’s temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

But what are we to make of the language of 1 Corinthians 11:22,34? Do they not say that one should eat and drink in his house or eat “at home” if he is hungry? They indeed do. However, these cannot be fairly construed as a general condemnation of eating a meal in the same premises where worship is offered to God. We have already noted the historical description of the “love feast” of Jude 12 and 2 Peter 2:13, which was held immediately after worship in the same facility.

Further, one must consider the fact that brethren in various places used their homes for meeting places. Paul sent greeting to “Prisca and Aquila and the church that is in their house” (Rom. 16:3-5). The church in Laodicea met in the home of Nymphas (Col. 4:5). Archippus’ house was where the church in Colossae met (Phi. 2). Surely the brethren who occupied these houses also ate their meals in them.

Moreover, if we are going to ignore the true context of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, the passage would forbid one to ever eat **anywhere else except in his own house**. One other point on this passage: Paul's statement includes drinking as well as eating (v. 22). However, we have never heard those who decry **eating** in the church building ever raise one word of opposition to the **drinking fountain** in each of their own church buildings. What applies to one applies to both in this passage.

What is the major thrust of 1 Corinthians 11? It is not the right or wrong use of a building, for there is no record of any first century church even **owning** a building. Rather, the apostle condemns the Corinthians' profaning of the Lord's **Supper**, not of a **building** in this important chapter. They were combining the Lord's Supper with an ordinary meal. Additionally, those who had more were eating too much and not sharing it with those who had little and who then went away embarrassed and hungry (vv. 21-22). They could **call** this the "Lord's supper," but it was impossible for it to be so by the Lord's reckoning (v. 20). Paul then reminded them in very strong terms of the sacred, memorial purpose of the Supper and the risk to their souls in failing to thus reverently observe it (vv. 23-29).

To duplicate the error of the Corinthian church described in this passage we would have to combine a fellowship meal with the observance of the Lord's Supper (which some liberal brethren have actually been promoting in recent years, incidentally). Then those who have more food would have to refuse to share their abundance with those who have much less. Paul does not address eating or not eating a physical meal in the church building in this passage. He addresses combining a fellowship meal with the Lord's Supper, thus corrupting the spiritual feast. Read verses 20 through 34 again and you cannot miss it.

[NOTE: The date and place of publication of this article is unknown. I likely wrote it in the early 1980's. I am indebted to Elvis Huffard for assembling some of the historical notes I have used in the foregoing article. DM]

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