

Sharing Church Meals in the Church Building

--By Don Partain

To talk about authority for eating in the building, to begin with, we must first talk about authority for **having** a building. The Scriptures, of course, say nothing about a church even having a building.

Hebrews 10:24-25 instructs us to assemble, and *as a matter of judgment*, we provide a building to facilitate the carrying out of this command.

So, what were God's purposes for the local Church? **What local Church activities** do we find in the Spirit-guided churches? Again, take note that the Bible says nothing about a Church building for any of these activities; yet, we reason that *whatever the Lord authorizes the local Church to do, He also authorizes the local Church to facilitate.*

So, what activities do we find the local Church doing together?

- 1) Greeting one another (includes visiting with one another--about health, work, hobbies, recreational interests, personal possessions and property, etc.) (**1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12**).
- 2) Sharing in the Lord's Supper. (**Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26**).
- 3) Praying (**Acts 2:42; 12:5**)
- 4) Preaching and teaching. (**Acts 20:7; 5:42**)
- 5) Singing to one another. (**1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19**)
- 6) Sharing in one another's, and others,' financial needs. (**Acts 4:32-37; 1 Corinthians 16:1,2**) —the "contribution."
- 7) Comforting one another. (**1 Thessalonians 4:18**)
- 8) Admonishing (warning) one another. (**Romans 15:14**)
- 9) Confessing sins to one another. (**James 5:16**)



- 10) Bearing one another's burdens in certain ways. (**Galatians 6:2**)

- 11) Exhorting, edifying one another (**Hebrews 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:11**)
- 12) Serving one another with certain gifts (**1 Peter 4:10**).
- 13) Sharing meals with one another, to express and cultivate our love for one another (**Acts 2:46; Jude 12; 2 Peter 2:13; 1 Corinthians 11:33**).

However, many of our brethren have been taught to forbid this last local

Church activity from being done in a Church building. Ever since the '50's, when institutional brethren "withdrew" from us, many of us have disdained to share in meals in the Church building, even though such sharing is just as much a Church activity as these others.

The **first reason** we are told we should not eat in the building is, "sharing Church meals is not part of *the work of the church*." However, only one of the above activities is called a Church "work". (The contribution to the needy saints in Jerusalem is called a "gracious work." **2 Corinthians 8:6**)

In fact, all other times when the word, "work", is used in the New Testament, it is applied to *individual* works, not to collective works of the Church.

So, it is true that "sharing their meals with gladness and sincerity of heart" (**Acts 2:42**) and "love feasts" (potlucks) are not called a "work of the Church." *But neither is* partaking of the Lord's Supper, praying, singing, teaching/preaching, greeting one another, admonishing one another, confessing sins to one another, comforting one another, etc. ever called "the work of the Church." Yet, we still practice all these things --except "sharing their meals" inside a church building.

First, we have made up this expression, "the work of the Church"—the Scriptures are silent on it. Then, we have gone down the list of authorized Church activities (such as I have listed above) to see what looks like "work" and what does not.

And, if it looks like "work," then we decide we can do it in the building. But if it does not look like "work" to us, then we decide we cannot do it in the building.

Preaching/teaching the Word sounds like “work,” so we conclude it can be done in the building. Likewise, partaking of the Lord’s Supper, giving, praying, and singing, sound like “work.” So, we say that these, too, can be done in the building.

However, sharing a meal does not sound like “work”—it sounds too “social” to be “work.” Therefore, we exclude it from being done in the building...*even though it is just as much an authorized Church activity as any of the rest of these activities.*

Actually, if sharing a meal is disqualified since it sounds too “social,” then “greeting one another” should also be forbidden from the building since it involves what we would call “visiting”—discussing each other’s health, work, hobbies, recreational interests, relatives, animals, and other possessions, etc, along with the weather.

And, these are the very things we do talk about while visiting with one another both before and after Church services—*in the building.* Yet, we don’t decry greeting one another as “social”, to be kept outside the Church building, do we?

But, again, “the work of the Church” is a man-made criterion—it is not found in Scripture. Nor are there “sub-criteria” for what then qualifies as “the work of the Church?” So, it is not Scriptural for us to single out and exclude Church meals from the Church building when they are just as much a Church activity as the rest we find in Scripture.

The **Second reason** usually given for forbidding Church meals in the Church building is, “but Paul forbids Church meals when we have assembled together to partake of the Lord’s Supper and other worship.”

This reason is taken from **I Corinthians 11:22**--“*What? Do you not have houses in which to eat and to drink?...*” If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home.” (**11:34**).

Here, many of our brethren have concluded that Paul was rebuking the Corinthian Church for turning the Lord’s Supper into an ordinary meal (“a common meal,” as they put it).

And, they say that Paul forbade the Corinthian Church from sharing in Church meals when they had assembled for the Lord’s Supper and other worship.

However, such an interpretation of **I Corinthians 11** is not true to the context. Remember one of the basic rules of Bible study: “*Determine WHO is being addressed.*”

So, let’s notice just who the “you” is in **verse 22**. The “**you**” in “**Do you not have houses...**” is the same “**you**” in the very next sentence: “**Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing.**”

“Despise” (*kataphroneo*) means literally to “down-mind” someone. We would say, to “look down your nose at” someone...to think down on someone, acting like you are better than they are. More specifically, this “you” had been looking down their nose at--and shaming--“*those who have nothing.*”

Now, many of our brethren have tried to argue that “**those who have nothing**” simply refers to some who did not “have” the Lord’s Supper elements.

However, this is incorrect. Lexical authorities tell us that “those who have nothing” is an idiom or expression that was used to refer to **the poor**. Thus, Paul is rebuking the rich (or, at least “better-off” Christians) for looking down their noses at, and shaming, the poor brethren in the Church.

But specifically, HOW had these rich members been shaming the poor? Back up to **verse 21**--“For in your eating, each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.” That is, the rich would arrive with food that was to be shared with the others.

But, instead of waiting for the poor brethren to arrive, then sharing their food with them, the rich would “take (their) own supper first.” That is, the rich would simply indulge themselves with the food they had brought--even to the point of drunkenness... leaving their poor brethren hungry and humiliated, thus, shamed. In other words, “despised.”

Many of our brethren have tried to argue that **vs. 21** merely describes the rich gorging themselves upon the fruit of the vine and the unleavened bread of the Lord’s Supper.

The problem with this interpretation is that for several people to get drunk would require a lot of fruit of the vine--*much more than would have been used in the Lord’s Supper!*

Plus, this interpretation would imply that the purpose of the Lord’s Supper was to satisfy people’s hunger (“and one is hungry”). That is, Paul would be rebuking them for failing to take care of the poor members’ hunger, using the Lord’s Supper!

And, of course, *the Lord’s Supper has no such design.* It was never intended to satisfy anyone’s hunger, but instead was simply to be a symbolic meal, a memorial. So, Paul was not dealing with the partaking of the Lord’s Supper in this verse.

To sum it up, **the problem in this Church was not that it was turning the Lord’s Supper into a “common” (by which, our brethren mean, “ordinary”) meal**, but that the rich were degrading and shaming the poor by refusing to share their food with them.

And, Paul was correcting this problem--not by forbidding the Church from sharing this meal, but by ordering the rich to “wait” for the poor, to share with them: “*So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.*” If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you do not come together for judgment” (**vs.33-34**).

In other words, *Paul did not say, “Quit sharing in this Church meal, before eating the Lord’s Supper.”* Rather, he was saying, “Wait for one another”--that is, “**Start doing this meal right!**”

If, on the other hand, they insisted that they were just too hungry to wait (“If anyone is hungry”), then Paul said they

must eat something at home before coming to church ("let him eat at home").

That is, they had better start satisfying their hunger at home before coming, if this was the only way they could keep from gorging themselves on the food they had brought (thus, humiliating the poor). They had been acting as if they did not have "houses in which to eat and drink" (**vs. 22**)...as if they just HAD to gorge themselves, or they would starve!

So, again, Paul (**vs. 34**) warned that if such desperate hunger was to blame for their stuffing themselves and shaming the poor, then they had better start eating at home before they came to church. Otherwise, they would end up "coming together for **judgment**" (**vs. 34**).

Now, let's look closer at this "**judgment**" (**vs. 34**). Where had Paul dealt more at length with this "judgment"? Well, **here is where the observance of the Lord's Supper fits in**. Back up to **vs. 22**.

After Paul reproved the rich, he went on to remind them about how the Lord had so solemnly instituted the Lord's Supper--a commemoration of both the body and blood of Jesus. He warned that to partake unworthily would result in their becoming "guilty" of this "body and blood of Jesus" (**vs. 27**)...so bringing "judgment" upon themselves (**vs. 29**).

Eating "worthily" required their having "examined" themselves (**vs. 28**) that was, their attitude specifically in regard to the rest of the members: they needed to "discern"--or "**judge**"--"**the body rightly**" (**vs. 29**).

What "body" was Paul talking about here? The literal Body of Christ, or His Spiritual Body, the Church? **Verse 31** answers this for us. In a parallel statement, Paul says, "if we would judge ourselves rightly, then we should not be judged." In other words, in **verse 31** Paul substitutes "ourselves" for "body" (**vs. 29**).

So, again, "body" refers to the Spiritual Body of Christ, the Church. Remember that back in **vs. 22**, Paul had rebuked the rich for looking down their nose at the Church or Body of Christ--specifically, at the poor in the Church.

So, here, Paul says they must begin "judging rightly" their poor brethren...otherwise, whenever they would eat the Lord's Supper, they would be eating and drinking *judgment* to themselves.

Thus, we understand what Paul was referring to in **vs.34** when he warned, "If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for *judgment*." This "judgment" would come upon them if they ate the Lord's Supper, after humiliating the poor during the preceding Church meal. Therefore, if their hunger is what keeps them from "waiting" for the poor and sharing food with them, then these rich had better start eating something at home before they come!

The point is clear: we cannot mistreat our brethren--the Body of Christ--then, turn around and partake acceptably of the Lord's Supper!

In fact, just earlier Paul had stated (**10:17**), "For we being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread." That is, proper partaking of the Lord's Supper expresses our ONENESS as the Body of Christ. Thus, an attitude of despising--looking down upon--our brethren violates this "oneness" with them, and prevents us from partaking of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner.

So, again, **what was Paul's solution to this problem in Corinth?** "Wait for another" (**vs. 33**). You rich members must start waiting for, and sharing your food with, the poor. Otherwise, whenever you eat the Lord's Supper--having mistreated your brethren--you will only be eating and drinking judgment to yourselves!

In other words, **Paul is not saying, "Church! Quit sharing meals as you have assembled!"** Rather, he is saying, "Start doing this meal right! You rich who have been indulging yourselves, to the shame and humiliation of the poor, must quit that--and *start sharing the food you have brought, with the poor!*"

AND, if you insist that you are just too hungry ("if any man is hungry") to wait and share, then you had better start eating something at home before you come!"

Thus, what we actually have here is Paul approving **the sharing of meals by local churches when they have assembled together for worship**.

Notice again in **verse 18**--"*when you come together in church.*" Their Church meals preceding the Lord's Supper were done "in Church". And, if the Lord has authorized the Church to do a certain activity "in Church," then, of course, He has authorized it to be done in the Church building (the very reasoning we use to justify eating the Lord's Supper, preaching/ teaching, praying, admonishing one another, etc. etc. in the building).

In fact, this meal in which well-off brethren were to bring food to share with the poor brethren--thus, showing their love and acceptance of them as brethren--and doing so just before partaking of the Lord's Supper...is exactly what we find described by many authorities as "**love feasts**", the term used in **Jude 12** and **2 Peter 2:13**.

In this latter verse, a play on words was made: Peter called their "*agapais*" (love feasts) "*apatais*" (deceivings) because the misbehavior of some in the Church caused them to deceive themselves, if they thought these were true love feasts. Both Jude and Peter talked about these love feasts as **the general practice of churches:** "*your love feasts.*" And, significantly, neither Jude nor Peter condemned such Church meals. Rather, they only condemned the ones who were misbehaving in these "potlucks" (just as Paul did in **I Corinthians 11**).

Bible Greek Lexicons, Bible Dictionaries, and other authorities describing New Testament Church meals, in close connection with worship, especially in **I Corinthians 11:**

- 1) **Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, by W. E. Vine—"These love feasts arose from the common

(that is, shared; DP) meals of the early churches. Compare **I Corinthians 11:21**.”

- 2) **Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament**—“Feasts expressing and fostering mutual love which used to be held by Christians before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and at which the poorer Christians mingled with the wealthier and partook in common with the rest of the food provided at the expense of the wealthy, **Jude 12**...see **I Corinthians 11:17ff**.”
- 3) **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Walter Bauer**—“Common (shared) meal eaten by early Christians in connection with their church services, for the purpose of fostering and expressing brother love.”
- 4) **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, edited by G. Kittel**—“(Agape) becomes a technical term for the fraternal love-feast which develops out of the beginnings of *table fellowship*...”
- 5) **Patristic Greek Lexicon, by G.W.H. Lampe**—“A charity, denoting a common (shared) meal of fellowship to which the poor were invited or from which distribution was made to those supported by the church, connected with the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper)...”

Many commentaries on I Corinthians 11:17ff expressly identify the problem here as an abuse of the love feast—as the poor were humiliated. **Not a problem of “turning the Lord’s Supper into an ordinary meal,”** as many of our brethren have been led to believe.

The following is representative of their comments: **Expositor’s Greek Testament**, by W. Robertson Nicoll—“Instead of ‘waiting for one another’ (**I Corinthians 11:33**), the Corinthians, as they entered the assembly-room bringing their provisions, sat down at once to consume each his own supply, like private diners at a restaurant...the rich even hurried to do this, so as to avoid sharing with slaves and low people at a common dish”. (**verse 22**)

To sum it up, the problem here in **I Corinthians 11** was that the rich members were abusing the love feast as they indulged themselves rather than share their food with the poor members. Such abuse involved humiliating and degrading the poor brethren—making it impossible for these guilty rich members to turn around then, and partake worthily of the Lord’s Supper.

The solution: Paul instructed these rich to “wait” for the poor (**vs.33**), to share their food with them...in other words, “do it right!” So, Paul did not—as many of our brethren contend—tell them to just ‘quit having this Church meal’.

Thus, Paul gave clear approval for churches to share a meal on the occasion of assembling for worship—even in direct connection with the Lord’s Supper.

Still another example of the early Church sharing meals is found in **Acts 2:46**—“And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house,

they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart...”

However, many brethren use this verse to try to prove that we cannot have meals in the building since the Church here did not share their meals in the Temple—instead, “from house to house.” But this is a faulty argument since...

- 1) Temple use was not under the control of the Church and the Apostles, but instead under the control of the Jews and their regulations. In other words, if the Church was being forbidden from sharing meals in the Temple, it was not because of apostolic doctrine, but because of Jewish regulation.
- 2) The Temple was not a Church building! It’s interesting that brethren will boldly proclaim that the Church building is not a Temple--instead the Church is Christ’s temple.

But then, they will turn around and say that since the Church did not eat in the Temple, then we cannot eat in the Church building--thus, equating the Church building with the Temple!

Yes, the Jerusalem Church did have fellowship (Greek, *metalambano*, one of the fellowship words, in addition to *koinonia*) in these meals “from house to house.” But they also *worshiped* “from house to house” (**Acts 5:42**).

In other words, in the first two or three centuries, **houses were their only “Church buildings.”** They facilitated all their Church activities—whether partaking of the Lord’s Supper, sharing “love feasts” (what we call “potlucks,” today), singing, preaching/teaching, giving, praying, comforting each other, admonishing each other, confessing sins to one another, etc....they facilitated all of their Church activities in their houses back at this time.

Today, having determined we have authority to provide a Church building, we say that the Church can facilitate, with this building, whatever activities we find the local churches doing in the New Testament. And, one of these Church activities is sharing Church meals (love feasts...potlucks).

Thus, these, too, can be done in the building--“when you come together in Church,” **I Corinthians 11:18**.