



The Kingdom of God is not about Food

Eating in the Building

"Eating in the building" is actually a misnomer. The issue is over having large social gatherings in a church owned building where the facilities (e.g., a fellowship hall) and expendable goods (e.g., paper products, coffee, cups, cleaning material) are funded by the Lord's treasury. I know of no significant opposition to incidental eating in the building, such as the preacher eating his lunch in the study or office, or workmen eating lunch while working on the building. These would, in my view, be covered by [1 Timothy 5:18](#), "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'" There may be some opposition to eating in the building even when the church does not provide the facilities, but that would be a very specialized discussion and I would have to understand what was being proposed or objected to.

"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" ([Acts 2:46](#)).

I think it is curious that Luke specifically mentions a distinction of where the early Christians met to discuss the Lord and where they met to eat meals. Why mention the location of the meals at all? For that matter, why mention meals at all? I don't think there is a direct answer in the Scriptures, but I would like to start with a working hypothesis. Since Luke was addressing the book to Theophilus, I presume that Theophilus was or had been a pagan. For the pagan world, temples were the location of many of the acts of debauchery rather than of the spirit. Pagans purposely go to the temple to eat. Paul describe this in his discussion about meat in 1 Corinthians 8 where he notes that the connection between meat and temples is so strong that for some coming out of idolatry, it may be hard for them to

now separate them. I think Luke wanted to make sure that the pagans understood that this new religion that was coming was not one based on food and drink, but on the spirit filled life.

That then goes along with [Romans 14:17-21](#)

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall."

Although Paul is discussing eating meat versus not eating meat, the overall principle still applies. It would seem that the 'no meat' crowd of Paul's day were just as zealous of their position as the vegans are in our day. However, the kingdom of God is not about food. He does not want people to start associating discussions on food as if they are somehow tied to spirituality. Tying food to religion is a practice of the pagans. From an attention getter, it was obviously a good practice as there never seemed to be a lack of rabble near the

pagan temples whenever someone needed to start a riot.

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In Matthew 14 (the same story is in John 6) when Jesus fed the five thousand, it says that he fed them out of compassion because they had come to listen to him all day and it was still a distance to find food. I think it was commendable that the people would go out of their way to hear Jesus. Jesus offering to feed them would have just been a bonus. They could not have claimed that they came just because they expected to be fed because they were not promised food. However, once they ate, their whole disposition changed. They went from being pleasantly surprised to expecting it all the time. They shifted from coming to hear the Word due to their own interest to being self-absorbed. So in [John 6:26-27](#), "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.'" From [John 6:35-59](#) Jesus

gives a discourse on the real bread. Jesus had a crowd that was following their stomachs and were not interested in the Word that they were supposed to digest. We can tell with our 20-20 hindsight that the crowd completely missed the point and were upset with the teaching. However, Jesus did not apologize nor did he give into their desire to be fed. He stated a hard principle in [John 6:63](#), "*The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.*" This then had the obvious effect so that in verse 66, "*From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.*" Jesus understood that men tend to be drawn by their stomachs and that a strong draw like that is a distraction from getting to the real importance of the Word.

At best, therefore, it is unwise to associate food with the services. It is completely foolish to use food as an enticement to get people to come to services (a sometime reason given for having a meal after services). Jesus showed that men were easily swayed by food and once given food they were inclined to forget even recent spiritual concepts. Many people in our day think they are smarter than Jesus and want to try anyway.

I would offer these observations that I have made concerning places that have potluck dinners at the building.

- A few people will quietly slip out of the services "a few minutes early" in order to make sure everything is all set up so that things go smoothly.
- Some people will bring food that has a good aroma. Even those that are still in their seats will smell it. Food smells are a strong distraction.
- Some people will even come to services late (or skip Bible class) in order to prepare their food (either to make sure it is hot or cold).

To me that just reinforces the idea that Jesus was trying to teach. Food interferes in spiritual life. It does not enhance it.

This gives a bit more background to Paul's comments in [I Corinthians 11:17-22](#)

"In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise

the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!"

What has always stuck out for me in this passage is the rhetorical question of "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?" I've heard many point out that Paul was addressing an abuse of the Lord's Supper and not a social gathering that occurs at a time completely unrelated to the Lord's Supper. I would grant that. However, I think there were more issues at work than just the Lord's Supper. He was chewing them out about the Lord's Supper because they were not taking that part seriously enough. Again it was the issue of the stomach trying to encroach on the territory of the spirit. While we like to think of ourselves as being superior to the flaws of men of 2000 years ago, we have the same problems and the same temptations.

Some preachers suggest that Paul was claiming that they were bringing in a common meal for this time, but I don't see that Paul claims they had the wrong elements for the Supper. He only suggested that they participated in it like it was a free-for-all. They did not wait for everyone and some drank and ate too much and some did not get any. Basically they forgot that the purpose of getting together on the Lord's Day was not a matter of physical desires, but of a spiritual need.

Paul's stated solution to the problem of the stomach versus the spirit is for meals to be eaten at home. I think a rational argument could be made for Paul's statement to be hyperbole for a more generic "eat somewhere else" rather than a strict requirement to always eat at home, but it is pretty hard to get it to mean "you can still eat in the assembly, just not close to the Lord's Supper." He had the option of telling them to just eat at another time, which would then imply that it could be at the same place, just at a different time. Since he specified a place where they should be eating their meals, he eliminates the place of worship assembly as that location.

The Lord's Money

I need to take a detour for a bit in this discussion in order to talk about authorization for a building. In order to discuss the building, though, I need to establish a couple of things about the funds of the church. I doubt that I am explaining anything new here, I'm just trying to tie the associations together.

The collection of contributions that we make every first day of the week, we authorize from [1 Corinthians 16:1-2](#), "*Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no*

collections will have to be made." Here we find that the collection was to be made every first day of the week and that it could be pooled to meet a future need. This gives us both the authority to collect money and to have things like savings accounts for it. But whose money is it? Does it belong to the congregation or to God?

In [Acts 5:1-5](#):

"Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened."

In this particular case Ananias sold property that he did not have to sell and gave the money to the apostles which he could have kept any percentage of the money that he wanted to. However, he evidently wanted more praise for his deeds than his deeds deserved. As such he was told that he did not lie to men, but to God. That is an

unusual saying because the reality is that he did lie to men -- or so he thought. If he was just giving the money to the church, then he would have been lying to men. Since he was actually lying to God, then it must mean that the money became God's as soon as he laid it at the apostle's feet.

This is important when looking at how we spend the money that is collected. Some people think that it is just the money of the congregation and therefore it is allowed to be spent in any way that the congregation would like. Since it actually belongs to the Lord, then it needs to be spent on things the Lord authorizes.

The Building

I once met an elder in the church who said, "There are many things that we do for which we have no authority. The building is just one of them." I'm going to categorically deny that statement. Our goal should always be to do everything because we are convinced that we are authorized to do that. Sometimes our authority is very broad, such as "do whatever you like". That is still a type of authority. If we are given that broad of authority, then we can do anything that we want. For example we are allowed to eat meat or not eat meat (Romans 14). It does not matter. If we don't eat meat, we can honestly say that we have authority for that position. If

we do eat, we can still claim we have been given authority.

Generically we are told to assemble together. ([I Corinthians 5:4](#), [11:18](#), [20](#), [33](#)). The fact that we are told to assemble by necessity means that there must be a place. We are not told much about where the early disciples met. We have examples of them meeting in the temple ([Acts 2:46](#)), in synagogues ([Acts 13:5](#)), outside by a river ([Acts 16:13](#)), in upper rooms ([Acts 20:8](#)), and in people's houses ([Romans 16:5](#)). When Paul asked the question in [I Corinthians 11:17-22](#), "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?", he implies that the church in Corinth was meeting in a building that was not a home. That building could have been rented, donated, rent free or owned -- we don't know and have no way of knowing. There is no indication that I can find that they ever built and financed their own buildings, but seeing how they freely used the Jewish buildings for the same purpose (the synagogues), they obviously displayed no moral objections over the use of buildings that were dedicated to the study of God. Jesus also taught in the synagogues ([Matthew 4:23](#) and [9:35](#), [Luke 4:44](#)) and never once complained of unauthorized spending on frivolous buildings. However, Jesus did talk about the abuse of such places of study.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues

and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" ([Matthew 6:2](#)).

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" ([Matthew 6:5](#)).

"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi'" ([Matthew 23:5-7](#)).

For some Jews the synagogues were just one more opportunity to show off and to demonstrate their importance to the rest of the world. Church buildings and those that build them are very often fulfilling the same desire that the Pharisees used them for. Obviously we need to avoid doing the same things they did. Some people erect architectural wonders for their place of service. For whose glory? They often claim for God's glory, but who are they really trying to impress? Take the Sistine chapel

for example. Who gets mentioned more often, God or Michelangelo?

Also, twice Jesus cleaned up the temple courts because they were engaging in practices that were not acceptable. In [John 2:13-16](#),

"When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!""

And

[Matthew 21:12-13](#),

"Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'"

I could easily imagine someone trying to justify selling animals in the temple because people came

from a long way off and they would need an animal to offer prescribed sacrifices. In fact, the law allows for the exchange of money for animals whenever anyone needed to travel a long way.

"But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice" ([Deuteronomy 14:24-26](#)).

In our modern way of thinking Jesus would be accused of being overly zealous. The law allowed for the exchange of money for animals in order to fulfill the sacrifices of the law. Yet Jesus said such an exchange was not to be done in the temple courts. The law of Moses had no such restriction (i.e., the law is silent about selling in the temple). Was Jesus just being picky for no reason? Or was there a principle involved that was lost by the Jews of his day.

Let me suggest that it was never in God's plan that the temple be used

for both physical and spiritual things. It was his house and was to be honored above the carnal affairs of the world. Even in things that are commanded, like exchanging silver to buy animals for sacrifice, there is a principle at work because God's house is a house of prayer.

So, while we take authority to build a building based primarily on the example that synagogues existed and were tacitly approved, there is still a lot of questions about those buildings. Synagogues were buildings dedicated to the service of God. According to most of the Jewish web sites that I looked up, "synagogue" is a rough translation into Greek of the Hebrew for "house of assembly" or "house of prayer". So we are back to the temple at least by partial function if not by actual feature.

In the New Testament, though, the Christians in assembly are referred to as the house of God ([Hebrews 10:21](#)) rather than the physical building in which they meet. The claim is often made that the building is therefore not a holy structure, because the people are the things designated to be holy. However, that actually is not an accurate use of the word holy. Objects are holy when they are dedicated to the service of God. In Numbers 16 when Korah rebelled, we find that the censers that Korah and his followers used were considered holy ([Numbers 16:37](#)) even though those who presented them were destroyed by the Lord

for being presumptuous. By extension, the building is dedicated to the service of God (i.e., holy) because it was bought with God's money for the purpose of serving God. That does not mean that we have to bow to it or treat it with special clothing or anything else. It just means that we need to recognize that the building is not "our" building, it's God's building.

The implication of the building belonging to God is that it should therefore be used for the things that honor God.

Fellowship Halls

Fellowship Halls are a bit harder to discuss. The New Testament does not mention fellowship halls. I tried looking up a history of the fellowship hall as it is currently used and I can't find any definitive reference. It seems to have quickly appeared somewhere in the 19th century. It made its way into the churches of Christ somewhere just after WWII. Regardless, it is not a very old innovation. Since it was something that was recently (relatively) introduced, it would seem to me that the burden of proof is on those who wanted to add it.

Most people will call it a fellowship hall when in reality that is just another name for a dining facility. I can only surmise, but I have to assume that reason they are called "fellowship halls" and not dining halls is because there is a strong desire to give the impression that

"fellowship" is the main reason for it and not eating. I would further guess that such designations were very important when they were first being introduced in order to give it an aura of biblical legitimacy. "Fellowship" is a biblical word and provides the needed connection. By naming them fellowship halls there is a quiet acknowledgment that directly trying to authorize a dining hall or kitchen is not possible to do (or at least very hard) and by renaming it makes it easier to justify.

Justifications based on a name alone should be very suspect. Even in our discussions we often mention that just because a building has a biblical name on it (e.g., church of God) does not mean that it will stand up to the test of actually belonging to God. So it is with fellowship halls. Just because we call it fellowship does not make it fellowship.

The basic argument to add the fellowship hall (a.k.a. dining facility) is:

1. We have a requirement to fellowship one another as part of the process of building up the group. Eating is a perfectly acceptable way of demonstrating our fellowship with one another.
2. Since the church has to fellowship one another anyway, the church is authorized to provide a place (by implication).

The counter argument is just about as straightforward:

1. The word fellowship is never used in the New Testament in a context where food was the object of the meeting of those in fellowship.
2. Fellowship is always used to discuss a spiritual relationship. A building without facilities for eating meets that requirement.

I don't really want to repeat their arguments. They are easy enough to find on the web. However, I would like to go just one step further. A fellowship hall actually works against the building up of the body. As noted in the example of Jesus feeding the 5000, the introduction of food actually detracted from the ability of the followers to hear what Jesus was talking about. Paul mentioned in a couple of places (noted above) that the spirit filled life has nothing to do with food. Paul also told the Corinthians that homes (or at least "not in the assembly") were the appropriate place to go for partaking of food.

Church Financed Fellowship Halls

Given that eating in the building is at the very least an unwise proposition, what makes us think that God would want to be the one that finances it? I could see if eating together as a large group where somehow encouraged, but I

have never found those verses. I have heard of a couple of scenarios where someone could come up with an expedient whereby the church could be authorized to have a place for serving food. For example, the church has a large number of widows and found it cheaper to feed them at a central location than to just dole out money. However, even then there is no requirement that the dining facilities for the widows be co-located with the place of prayer and study. And, I have never heard of a modern congregation that had so many destitute widows where this was even a serious possibility.

Let's at least face the reality. We want our fellowship halls for the purpose of having a convenient place to have parties. These parties are for the purpose of filling our bellies and entertaining ourselves. These parties rarely have anything spiritual associated with them other than the "blessing for the food" and the fact that the people at them are going to be nice people. They are a long way from a necessity because every town has large places for rent -- they are just inconvenient to coordinate. We want the "church" to build and pay for the facilities because we actually see the church's money as the congregation's pooled resources rather than as God's money. We have convinced ourselves that there is no practical difference in the money collected at the time of the offering on Sunday and if everyone were to reach in their pockets and pay a \$5 cover

charge to rent a place (i.e., they are both the congregation's pooled resources). We blur the line between what we want and what God wants for us and we blur the line between what we gave to God and what we kept for ourselves.

We build our buildings using tacit approval from the synagogues, but then we want to go well beyond what the synagogues represented. The synagogues were places of prayer and study -- somewhat like a mini temple (without the sacrifices). Jesus used them for at least study and teaching. In the actual temple, Jesus threw out those who desecrated the temple by doing things (which happened to be authorized and legal things to do) other than using it as a house of prayer. God actively encourages men to pray and study. He actively discourages men from getting carnal things like food mixed up with spiritual values.

I don't see a case for the church building fellowship halls. The stronger case is to do everything within our power to disassociate eating and parties from our communal obligations before God. Are we working with God when we get him to build party facilities for us or against his desires for us?

Darrell Hamilton
La Vista church of Christ
lavistachurchofchrist.org