

Food, Fun, and Fellowship

By Phil Arnold

In attending the Oklahoma Christian College lectureship this past January (1989), I heard a speaker ask the audience (the majority of whom I assume were members of “institutional” churches of Christ), “How many of you worship with a congregation that has a ‘fellowship hall’?” I was tempted to raise my hand for here at 84th Street we do have a “fellowship hall.” That is, we have a building in which we join together in fellowship in singing spiritual songs, offering prayers to God, studying his word, and remembering his Son’s sacrifice. But I knew, and so did everyone else that this was not what he meant when he inquired about a “fellowship hall.” Instead, he was referring to a kitchen/ dining/ banqueting room in which members of the church and their friends and visitors might join together in eating common meals. Such a facility as an addition to the meeting house has, in recent years, become quite common. Brethren have apparently attempted to justify this addition by attaching a biblical expression (“fellowship) to what they choose to call it. The reasoning perhaps being that by calling their kitchen and banquet room a “fellowship hall” long enough, it will lead others to conclude that such truly is a work of the church and is based on Bible authority.

As the speaker looked around the room a grin came over his face and he commented, “It has gotten to the point that we can’t hear the word ‘fellowship’ without smelling the coffee.” At this point the room filled with laughter and sheepish smiles came across many faces. Rather than being amused, I was deeply saddened to think how far many of my brethren have gotten from God’s truth and how the Lord’s “soul center” (the church) is being turned into a “social center” often rivaling or surpassing the local YMCA. And like Israel of old, brethren today have forgotten even how to “blush” at the mention of their sin (Jer 8:12). They have also forgotten the plea of Bible authority in all things that has been heralded through past generations in attempting to restore, protect, and preserve the church of Christ. Instead, they follow the path of the “social gospel” and are often only a step behind the most “progressive” (?) denomination in the facilities they offer including not only “fellowship halls” but gymnasiums, wedding chapels, counseling centers, community centers, etc. The facilities are simply reflective of the activities that have come to dominate such congregations. To all who are concerned about the will of God there are questions that beg to be answered. “Where is the authority for such facilities and such activities?” “Where is the authority for the church to engage in such programs as part of their work?”

And what began among most as simply a plea for “eating on the grounds” has seen no stopping point, note the following:

Item: From the bulletin of the Richland Hills church of Christ in Dallas we note that their 1988 budget included funds for the Family Life Center (polite euphemism for gymnasium), Financial Accounting, Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation, Employment and Financial Counseling, Life After Drugs, and Real Estate Management.

Item: From the calendar published in the bulletin of the Homewood church of Christ in Birmingham, Alabama are the following notices: Softball coaches meeting, Auditions for the play “He Jus’ Keeps Rollin’ Along,” Boy Scout pack meeting, blood drive, Easter egg hunt, The Homewood Talent Show and Lip-Sync contest to be held in the gym, and a Church-wide Barbecue and Fellowship.

Item: From the bulletin of the Westbury church of Christ in Houston under the heading, “Activities of the Westbury congregation,” are the following announcements: Table Games Night, Fellowship Meal, Men’s Basketball, Snow Skiing, Kite Flying/ Picnic, and Children’s Ice Skating (The above items were taken from an article by Don C. Truex published in the Southside Reminder.).

Those things which are mentioned above and even more were formerly only associated with denominations and were almost universally condemned by churches of Christ. Now they are being observed with an increased regularity among our brethren as a large segment of the Lord’s church continues its seemingly unavoidable harmony with denominationalism as distinguishing marks from denominationalism continue to fail. Invitations to come hear the gospel are being replaced today with invitations to “come help eat the world’s largest hot dog.” One can hardly imagine what brethren are imagining to do. Once the demand for Bible authority is set aside, or at least compromised, the only limit placed upon the church is the desire of the people and the imagination of their leaders.

Through the years we have told the world that we give “book, chapter, and verse” for all that we do. And, if we can’t, we’ll quit doing it. We would do well to return to this stand from which so many have departed and ask ourselves: “Where is the authority for the church to build and/ or maintain a gymnasium or a fellowship hall?” “Where is the Scripture that authorizes the church to use its facilities for social and / or recreational purposes?” “Where is the command, example, or necessary inference for the church to enter into the work of entertainment?”

Some who have swallowed the social gospel “hook, line, and sinker” often no longer make any effort at all to justify their practices on the basis of Scripture. Instead, they simply speak of “keeping up with the times,” “ministering to the whole man,” and not being so “narrow minded” concerning such “good works.” Others have sought to justify such practices on the basis of a “new hermeneutic” and “Christ’s life,” apart from his doctrine, as our understanding of what the church is to do. The old stand-by has been to justify such practices on the basis of “expediency.” But in order for a matter to be expedient, it must first be shown to be lawful (1 Cor 6:12, 10:23). Again, where is the authority for the church to engage in this category of work of “fun and food fellowship”? What is being expedited by such expedients? What work of the church does “fun and food fellowship” help to accomplish? One Oklahoma City area preacher attempted to justify the practice of fellowship dinners as simply a means of advertising the church by comparing it to a newspaper ad of the location and times of assembly of a local congregation. Apparently feeling that the “end justifies the means,” he also pointed out that spending the advertising budget on food to be served would be more efficient in bringing people to the assembly than a newspaper ad. This reminded me of a discussion I once heard when an elder stated that he “would set up a hot dog stand in the foyer if it would bring more people to church.” Another preacher in the Oklahoma City area blatantly attempted to justify their “fun and food fellowship” activities by comparing them to the activity of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in gaining an audience for the hearing of the gospel. He went so far as to refer to the activity of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost as a “gimmick.” Such brilliant scriptural exegesis and wonderful argumentation borders on blasphemy!

Such sentiments reflect a lack of respect for the will of God and a lack of confidence in the drawing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their efforts to “assist the Lord” are reminiscent of Sara’s advice to Abraham concerning begetting an heir by Hagar, her handmaiden. In 1951 Goodpasture wrote, “it is not the mission of the church to furnish amusement for the world or even for its own members. Innocent amusement in proper proportion has its place in the life of all normal persons, but it is not the business of the church to furnish it... For the church to turn aside from its divine work to furnish amusement and recreation is to pervert its mission. It is to degrade its mission. Amusement and recreation should stem from the home rather than the church. The church, like Nehemiah, has a great work to do; and it should not come down on the plains of Ono to amuse and entertain. AS the church turns its attention to amusement and recreation, it will be shorn of its power as Samson was when his hair was cut. Only as the church becomes worldly, as it pillows its head on the lap of Delilah, will it want to turn from its wonted course to relatively unimportant matters” (1951 Gospel Advocate Annual Lesson Commentary). Recent articles in the Christian Chronicles have lamented the financial “crunch” facing many congregations. Among those things which have so indebted many local congregations is the building and maintaining of all types of social/recreational facilities and programs. Many elderships now feel that such is necessary to compete not only with denominations but with other “churches of Christ.” In the area, no longer do visitors simply want to know “when are your times of assembling?” and “what spiritual work is the congregation involved in?” Now they want to know if congregations offer a day care center for the toddlers, a secular school for the children, a basketball team for dad, and aerobics’ class for mom, and “fund and food fellowship” for one and all. Brother Goodpasture’s prophecy is being realized and the church is being “shorn of its power.” Is it any wonder that we are rapidly becoming what some have termed a “worldly church” and are no longer looked upon as a “people of the book” as members are being multiplied by the “loaves and the fishes” (John 6:26-27) rather than love of the truth and faith!

Again, we would plead for peace and unity, but not at the cost of prostituting the church for which our Lord shed his blood. Jesus’ precious blood was shed to purchase the church, a spiritual house with a spiritual mission (Eph 5:25-27; 1 Pet 2:5; 1 Tim 3:15). Wholesome social activities are important in the life of each Christian; but God made a distinction between the responsibility of the home and the responsibility of the church (1 Cor 11:22; Rom 14:17). Churches need to specialize in being churches and encourage parents to specialize in building good homes. The church was not established to promote aerobic classes and softball teams and “bodily exercise” which “is profitable for a little,” but rather “godliness” which “is profitable for all things; having a promise of the life which now is and of that which is to come” (1 Tim 4:8). What is needed to accomplish the work of the church is not “gimmicks” but the “gospel” of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16). Yes, the church meeting here at 84th Street has a “fellowship hall” in which we enjoy the greatest fellowship of all – the fellowship of God by abiding within his word (2 John 9). Let us return to allowing the church to be what the Lord planned and not man – a “soul center” rather than a “social center.”