

## EATING IN THE CHURCH BUILDING

By Dr. Hoyt W. Allen, Jr.

Nearly any subject one mentions some take issue with it. Eating and drinking in the meeting place of Christians is no different. Church splits have resulted because someone suggested having coffee, tea, or hot chocolate during a Bible Study, or a covered dish fellowship meal to introduce new Church members to the rest of the congregation.

The scripture which is the "proof text" of those who take a hard stand against eating within the areas of the meeting place of the congregation is found in **I Corinthians 11:17-22**, and especially in V. 22. Let us pray for an open mind as we examine this "proof text" and remember a great motto to stand by is, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak. Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent".

Verse 17: "Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse." Church gatherings should do one good - right? We should get "fueled up", so that we can fight off Satan's attacks as well as to attack him. But the Apostle Paul says the gatherings of the Corinthian congregation were "back-firing". The New International Version (NIV) says, "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good." Possibly some reading this article have been to church services where there has been much confusion and you wished that you had not attended.

Verse 18: "For first of all, when ye come together in the Church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it." The expression in the King James Version, "in the Church" has caused many to conclude Paul was speaking about a Church building--but history reveals that there were not any Christian Church buildings until in the 4th Century. The reason for such is that the Roman Emperors had persecuted Christians since the origin of Christianity in A.D. 33. The last Emperor to persecute Christians and the most severe was Diocletian (284-305). Christians were hunted in caves and forests; they were burned, thrown to wild beasts, put to death by every torture cruelty could devise. Thus, Christians met secretly in private homes and available buildings. The NIV has this translated more properly, "...when you come together as a church..."

Church buildings are not temples where God lives (Acts 17:24), but are places of convenience for worshippers to assemble in; places to study, worship, and fellowship, which often involves eating and drinking. Please continue reading.

Verse 19: "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." The word "hereses" is from a Greek word "hairesis" and has been translated in various ways: differences, dissensions, sects, schisms, parties, divisions, and cliques. The terms have an "air" about them of being superior. This is just the opposite of Jesus' teaching, that being humility and unity. **The NIV is a little plainer:** "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval."

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Verse 20: "When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper." Paul is stating that they should gather to partake of the Lord's Supper, but due to their behavior, it really makes the communion service void and impossible.

Verse 21: "For in eating everyone taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry and another is drunken." History tells us that the early Jewish Christians often preceded the gathering together to observe the Lord's Supper with an agape meal (love feast). This was similar to the Passover Feast (Last Supper), which preceded the first observance of the Lord's Supper.

Paul is scolding the brethren for their behavior at this love feast, which was a covered dish fellowship meal. Instead of waiting for all to put their contributions of food on the table and eating in a non-prejudiced manner, some were eating only the food brought by themselves or certain brethren and sitting only by themselves or with these certain brethren (party spirit, cliques, etc). The "poor" brethren who could not bring but very little and inexpensive food were going hungry while other brethren were over-indulging and even getting drunk. Thus, Paul tells them that with this type of attitude and in their physical conditions, there was no way that they could observe the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner.

Verse 22: "What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the Church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. These words cannot be taken to mean that no one is to eat in a church building, because as was explained under v.17, there were not any Christian Church buildings at this writing.

When Paul speaks about eating and drinking in houses, he was not contrasting that with eating and drinking in Church buildings. In fact, the congregation met in the brethren's houses. Paul was condemning the brethren not for their eating and drinking at the love feast, but for their un-Christian attitudes. Seemingly, some were not participating in the common meal with the brethren, but were dividing off into cliques and holding private meals and excluding others.

When Paul says, "Have ye not houses to eat and drink in?" he was saying "if you want to have a private fellowship meal, you should have it in your own houses and not in the midst of the rest of the congregation, as this is a congregational love feast."

Paul was attempting to help these brethren to see that by doing as they were, dividing into cliques, they were not being Christian--due to their lack of sharing, as well as embarrassing those who were poorer church members. They could not bring large amounts of food, nor the more costly food. Thus, their shameful behavior was bringing division among the body of Christ, instead of unity and a strengthening force. Let us strive to speak where the Scriptures speak and remain silent where the Scriptures are silent. Hope to see you at the next church fellowship meal!

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