

The Church You Can About in the Bible

The Social and Recreational Life of the Christian

Intro: In my last few lessons in this series I've spoken about the rise of the social gospel movement and the dramatic changes that it brought about in how churches viewed their mission. Instead of seeing the church as God's agency for preaching the gospel, edifying the saints, and assisting in the preservation of God's people, many churches expanded their work to include providing for the social and recreational needs of both Christians and non-Christians. Consider this example:

The Recreation Ministry of FBC is a "Christ-centered" ministry utilizing sports and recreation programs with a special emphasis on outreach. Our main purpose is to glorify Jesus Christ and touch people's lives through recreation. We want to complete the whole person spiritually, socially, and physically. We strive to offer a full schedule of personal and group activities on a weekly basis as well as special events throughout the year. The ROC is our recreation center, located across the street from the Atrium entrance of our main building. Our Recreation Ministry helps organize several sports leagues including basketball, and softball leagues for adults, youth and children. FBC members look forward to the Church-wide Family picnic and the Pastor's Cup Golf Tournament, all sponsored by the Recreation Ministry. Quarterly family nights with varied themes and entertainment, trips to sporting events and after church socials are among just a few of the activities scheduled during the year.

At first churches of Christ opposed these innovations as additions to God's pattern for the local congregation; but many churches in the last generation changed their views and advocated that these were means by which Christians enjoyed "fellowship" with one another. It has been difficult for many people to see the inappropriateness of churches sponsoring and providing for this kind of activity, since they see the word "fellowship" often in Scripture, and they assume that this word refers to things like dinners, parties, sports, games, and other fun activities.

However we noticed last week in our lesson that NT "fellowship" did not refer to social/recreational activity, but rather to spiritual sharing in the character of God, in the blessings of the gospel, and in the provision for the needy among the saints. This "fellowship" aligns perfectly with the work we see the NT church doing through the examples of the NT.

But what place then does social and recreational activities have in the life of the Christian? Should such be encouraged? Whose responsibility is it to provide them? What about the recreational needs of young people? What does the NT say about these things?

The spiritual relationship of Christians has a social dimension that includes eating and spending time together in enjoyable secular activities (such as games, sports, and other forms of recreation).

God's people are a spiritual family; and when people love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, they may also enjoy being together socially and sharing meals together. Though never referred to as "fellowship," we can see that the first Christians spent time together and ate together in their homes.

"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," (Acts 2:46)

There are some that contend that this is a reference to the Lord's Supper and the fact that it was eaten in individual homes. However, the evidence favors a common meal.

The term "breaking bread" was an idiom for people eating together.

The action is further defined as "taking their meals together."

However it is also clear by way the contrast that this activity is marked out as taking place in the context of personal association and not in the context of gatherings for spiritual purposes in the temple. It is an activity of the home and not of the assembled church.

When the Corinthian church turned the Lord's Supper (a proper activity of the assembly) into a common meal, Paul urged them to recognize the proper place for such things:

"Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you." (1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

Paul surely had no objection to Christians eating together; but he regarded that to be an activity for their houses, not the assembly of the church.

The fact that Christians ate together in a social setting supported the disciplinary practice of withdrawing from the unfaithful brother.

In the Biblical culture, eating with someone had connotations of acceptance and approval.

This concept was grounded in the cultural practice of eating in order to ratify a covenant.

We see Jacob and Laban eating together to ratify the covenant they had made with each other.

"Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain." (Genesis 31:54, NASB)

The Israelites ate before the Lord to ratify the old covenant they made with Israel.

“and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank.” (Exodus 24:10–11, NASB)

This concept was also grounded in the cultic practice of eating a portion of the sacrifice in the presence of the Lord at the temple. The peace offering was eaten by the worshipper in the temple courts. It signified the peace he had with the Lord.

Therefore when a church member rebelled against the truth and became unfaithful to it, Christians were encouraged to withdraw the social association that they had previously had with him.

“But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.” (1 Corinthians 5:11)

“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

“And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame.” (2 Thessalonians 3:14)

Since eating with another was a sign of acceptance and approval, refusing to eat with such a one would send a strong message of disapproval for unrepentant sin.

Again these exhortations would be applied by each Christian individually as he chose to eat or not eat with someone.

It is the obligation of parents to supply the social and recreational needs of their children.

As children grow up they need times for entertainment or recreation. And it is the responsibility of parents to provide these needs just as they would provide food, clothing, and shelter for their children. And though Paul’s application was to children to take care of their aged parents, the principle is the same:

“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Timothy 5:8)

The parent who will not provide for the recreational needs of his children is disobedient to the Lord.

Furthermore Paul forbids individual believers who have such responsibilities to shift them to the church.

“If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.” (1 Timothy 5:16)

Of course again the application here in this context is the assistance of a needy parent; but the principle is clear.

Just it would a child’s responsibility to honor his parents in old age, so it would be a parent’s responsibility to provide their children’s needs in youth.

The church might as well relieve the parents of feeding and disciplining all of the young people at church expense as to take over the job of entertaining and supervising the recreation at church expense.’ (p. 229) (B.C. Goodpasture, Gospel Advocate Lesson Commentary).

The local church should provide the spiritual encouragement young people need.

Churches often substitute recreational and social activity for the needed spiritual encouragement and teaching young people need. I can remember through the years hearing children who grew up in the denominational groups describe the various activities that the church planned for them. They were primarily social and recreational events with little if any Biblical instruction.

I regard that to be an insult to young people who are quite capable of being very spiritual.

Two weeks ago I participated in an individual effort planned to provide spiritual encouragement for young people. These were teenage boys between the ages of 12-18. Each day they gathered for a morning devotional before breakfast. After breakfast they attended 5 forty-minute classes. Had lunch and then spent the next two hours working on training for public speaking and song leading. After that they assembled to hear a speaker talk about foreign evangelism. Later in the evening they assembled once more to sing and hear another lesson from the Scriptures. When asked how many of them planned to return the following year virtually all of them raised their hand.

Who says you can’t get young people interested in the gospel? Maybe we just sell them way to too short and substitute entertainment because we imagine that they could not be that interested in the gospel!

The church really should take seriously the need to teach their young people the truth.

“Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, in order that the opponent may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:6–8)

Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.” (1 Timothy 4:11–12)

Conclusion: The Scriptures provide every encouragement for Christians to enjoy each other, to spend time together in common interests, taking meals, enjoying sports, etc. The church should encourage God's people to have the love that seeks to do these things. However it does not make these activities the responsibility of the local congregation to provide. Its mission is unique and spiritual.