

To a Brother in Nottingham, England

March 1997

You asked me to address the subject of the social use of the church building and other social activities of the church, which I am happy to do. The authority to fund a building grows out of the collective demands placed upon the church: to meet for worship, edification, and teaching. If the church has not been charged with a responsibility either specifically or generically, then it has no right to be engaged in such activity.

For example, the church has not been charged with providing physical recreation for its members; therefore, it is not authorized to build gymnasiums, game rooms, football pitches, etc. The church has also not been charged with providing material necessities apart from the indigence of its members; therefore, the church is not authorized to build kitchens and operate them for social purposes only (I do believe there would be authority for using kitchen facilities for preparation of the Lord's supper, though this is rarely a necessity).

While individual Christians may serve tea, pay for recreation, feed the hungry of the world, etc., these things have not been charged to the collective church. It will not do to simply say, "Whatever the individual can do, the church can do," which has been the justification for many unauthorized things over the past few decades. Certainly the collective does some things that the individual does (teach Bible classes, for instance), but we are not free to burden the church with things that are solely individual matters. However we may understand all the particulars about 1 Timothy 5:3-16, it is clear that verse 16 makes a distinction between individual and collective responsibilities.

It may seem like a harmless courtesy to serve tea and biscuits to visiting Christians, but if it is "sponsored" (paid for) by the church, then the social and spiritual roles of the church have been confused. Given the fact that this very reasoning has been responsible for such outlandish practices as multi-million dollar family life complexes here in the U.S., offering everything from sports to arts and crafts to financial seminars, it would seem such reasoning allows far more than what God intended for the church to do.

After living in England for four years, I now realize how ingrained the practice of serving tea is in the culture. Would it not be more appropriate for a home to be provided by one of the members for such social intercourse, making a clear distinction between the spiritual activities of the church and social activities of the home? And once we say that the church is authorized to provide refreshments for visitors, where will we be able to stop the principle from being taken to its final end? Fifty years ago, when brethren in the U.S. were arguing for the church to be involved in building orphan and retirement homes, who would ever guess that the logic for doing so would be applied to recreational facilities? There will always be some who will not want to stop where others want to stop; they will push principles to the limit of their own satisfaction.

I do not believe the church building is holy or any such thing; it is a question of what the church is authorized to pay for. The collective can subsidize anything that is specifically charged to it or things which expedite those charges ...

It is more and more important that we show to the world the distinctiveness of the church for which the Lord died. There are plenty of social agencies which we can join for a membership fee; but it is only the Lord's church that can hold forth the word of salvation and redemption. We must be careful not to obscure that spiritual purpose with worldly attachments.

Brotherly,

Jim Jonas