

# Churches and Recreation

*by Bryan Gibson*

A local church should not be burdened with responsibilities that belong to the individual and the family (1 Timothy 5:16). Unfortunately, many churches have not learned this principle, or have chosen to ignore it. Churches have burdened themselves with responsibilities that belong to the individual Christian, or in some cases, to other organizations. In this article, we want to show that churches should not be burdened with planning, supporting, providing, or paying for the recreation and entertainment of its members.

Many churches, including many churches of Christ, have built facilities designed to provide recreation and entertainment for their members. Gymnasiums, family life centers, outdoor basketball courts—these are just a few examples. In addition, churches will often sponsor an athletic team in the various “church leagues” around. For entertainment, some churches show *Andy Griffith* reruns during their services; others show major sporting events (e. g. the Super Bowl). Let’s look at some reasons why local churches should not be burdened with such activities.

**First and foremost, there is no authority from Jesus Christ for the church to engage in these things.**

Here’s what I did in my study of this issue. I looked up all the passages in the New Testament that mention a church assembling or gathering together, just to see exactly what they did when they assembled. Not a word about recreational activities. Then I looked up all the passages that relate to how churches spent their money. None was spent on recreation and entertainment. Finally, I looked up all the passages that discussed in any way the work of the church. Again, not the slightest hint of these activities.

Someone might argue though, “The reason we don’t see churches involved in these things in the New Testament is that there simply weren’t many opportunities back then. They just weren’t as recreation-minded and entertainment-minded as people are today. Our culture is just different today.” Well, there are a few things we ought to know about first century Roman society.

“Not only was the official Roman working day a short one by modern standards, but there were comparatively few working days in the year, except for slaves, who in any case were not allowed to attend public entertainments as spectators. In the reign of Claudius (41-54), 199 days in the year were designated public holidays, 90 of which shows were offered at public expense” (*Illustrated History of the Roman Empire*, via the Internet).

Referring to Grecian athletic contests of the first century, Easton’s Bible Dictionary says this: “These were very numerous. The Olympic, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian games were esteemed as of great national importance,

and the victors at any of these games of wrestling, racing, etc., were esteemed as the noblest and the happiest of mortals.”

Herod the Great certainly wanted people who were under his rule to be entertained: “Herod the Great built a theater and amphitheater in the neighborhood of the city, and instituted in the name of Caesar games which included Roman as well as Hellenic sports, celebrated every 5 years. There was also a hippodrome or racecourse for horses and chariots, bearing considerable resemblance to the Roman circus” (*ISBE*).

Don't you think the first century churches could have drawn more people if they had sponsored some of these events or contests? Don't you think they could have saved themselves from some of the persecution they endured? This leads to the next point...

**Churches in the New Testament never used anything other than the gospel to draw people to the Lord, even when people were asking for something else.**

Note, for example, Paul's attitude: “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness...” (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). Paul could have produced both—the signs and the wisdom—but he refused to do so. If Paul refused to offer signs and wisdom as incentives, what would have been his reaction to gymnasiums, ball teams, Andy Griffith re-runs, etc.?

Jesus faced the same kind of problem during His ministry on earth. His words, His teaching, were not enough for some people. But Jesus made it clear that He wanted people to follow Him because He was the bread of life, because He had the words of eternal life (read John 6, especially vv. 26-27, 66-69). This bread of life is what the church must offer to people today. It may not be what many want (John 6:66), but it is certainly what they need. The gospel is still God's power to salvation (Romans 1:16). Churches need to stop offering other incentives.

One other reason: **Local churches were simply not designed by God to provide recreation and entertainment; they were designed by God to help fulfill His greatest desire: for “all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), for all men to “come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).**

In other words, local churches were designed to be spiritual training centers, not social clubs, or recreation centers. You can see this taught in several ways in the New Testament. First, you can see it in the worship of New Testament churches. Everything they did in worship was designed for their spiritual edification (1 Corinthians 14:26). You can also see it in the way they spent their money, the bulk of it being spent to support the preaching of the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15-16). And you can see it in the work God gave them to do (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Does recreation and entertainment have its place? Of course, it does (see 1 Timothy 4:8). The New Testament describes some occasions when people were obviously entertained. But again, it is not the church's responsibility to provide these things. It is up to each family to

provide their own recreation and entertainment, and of course, it is great when we can include others in our plans. It is good for Christians to do these kinds of things together, but we do not have to burden the church with it. Some may be thinking that we won't be able to keep our young people unless we offer these kinds of programs. Can we not provide these opportunities without burdening the church, without draining its resources? Our young people need to learn that the church is not designed to provide these opportunities; it is designed to equip them spiritually.