



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 11:17-34

Topic

Paul is critical of the divisions being promoted at the Lord's Supper because of what it communicates to others about the Lord's body on the earth

Title

"Abusive Body Language"

Introduction

Studies show that only about 10% of our communication is verbal. The rest, the nonverbal, is often referred to as 'body language.'

Tonya Reiman is the author of *The Power of Body Language*. Some of you know her from regular guest appearances on *The O'Reilly Factor*. Here are three of her insights:

1. "The feet point where the body wants to go." If you're talking to someone, and their feet are at an angle to you, they are not interested in what you have to say.
2. The "intimate zone space dance" occurs when two people are talking and one is uncomfortable because the other is invading their personal space. They take a step or steps back to re-establish their space.

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3. If you hold hands with your sweetheart, “whoever’s hand is on top is the person with the power in the relationship.”

Reiman claims that, “Every single thing says something about you. Every single thing about you makes a statement. What you want to make sure is that it makes a statement you are happy with.”

The apostle Paul understood body language on a much larger scale. He reminded the believers in Corinth that, at their assemblies, they were collectively the body of Jesus Christ on the earth. Whenever they met together they were saying something; they were making a statement.

Trouble is, the statement that their body language was making was not something to be happy about.

We’ll see in verse twenty-six the Lord’s Supper was supposed to be a meeting at which the body “proclaimed the Lord’s death.” Instead their celebration of the Lord’s Supper was a good example of bad body language. Paul pointed out that when they came together at communion it was “not for the better but for the worse” (v17), there were “divisions” (v18) among them, and some of them were “drunk” (v21).

All of the meetings of the church on earth say something. They make a statement. We want to be certain they make a statement that brings glory to the Lord.

I’ll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Take A Look At The Language Your Body Is Speaking, and #2 Have A Listen To The Language Your Body Ought To Be Speaking.

#1 Take A Look
At The Language Your Body Is Speaking
(v17-22)

Several times in this passage, and elsewhere in this letter, Paul uses the phrase, “come together.” It is a technical term to describe the meetings of the church.

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When we “come together” it is as the body of Jesus Christ on the earth. Every time we gather we communicate something to one another and to others. We speak a body language.

Let’s take a look at what the Corinthians were saying.

1 Corinthians 11:17 Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.

It’s pretty sad when you go to a meeting of the church and leave “worse” off than you were before you went!

I don’t know about you but I come to our meetings hoping to experience grace, love, acceptance, and forgiveness. I come seeking the mercy of God.

Paul next explained one of the reasons that folks were worse off for attending the meetings at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 11:18 For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.

Paul had received reports from believers he trusted about what was going on in Corinth. Sadly, he could “believe” that there were “divisions among” them. It didn’t surprise him.

We’ve discussed “divisions” in this letter before but this was something different. We’ll see in the next few verses that these were social and economic divisions. But first Paul makes a stunning statement in verse nineteen.

1 Corinthians 11:19 For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

“Factions” means that certain individuals chose to separate themselves from certain other believers in the church and it caused “divisions.” Obviously that is not a good thing so why did Paul say “there must also be factions among you?”

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Paul understood himself to be living in the last days with the rapture imminent. He therefore knew that God would be testing believers, trying their faith. One of those trials was to see how they fared among people who were factious and divisive.

There will always be people who act badly in the church. The real question is, How will you act and react?

You can act and react in a godly manner. When you do, others ought to be able to recognize that you are being “approved.”

I’ve used this verse often when counseling other pastors who are going through rough patches with certain folks in their churches. Who is it that is causing the divisions? Who is it that is separating and inviting others to come along? Who is it that is gossiping, slandering, backbiting - all in the name of Jesus? If it isn’t you, then it is a test in which you can be “approved” by God before others in the church.

1 Corinthians 11:20 Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.

The issue at hand was their observing of the Lord’s Supper. They were “com[ing] together,” but their observation of communion was not bringing glory to the Lord.

A little historical background is important. When the church was born in the Book of Acts they shared the Lord’s Supper daily. After a while churches adopted a practice of sharing the Lord’s Supper weekly, on a Sunday evening.

Why the change? In Acts, they were all Jews who were visiting Jerusalem for the feasts. Instead of going home they stayed to hear about Jesus. It was an unusual time of community life. They had ‘church’ everyday!

As the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem, folks got saved in their regular, everyday lives. They had to work six-and-one-half days a week. Sunday night was their only respite.

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Many of the new Christians were slaves. They didn't have much to eat. So the church would have a pot luck prior to celebrating the Lord's Supper at the Sunday evening service.

Bear in mind that all of this was taking place in private homes.

Here, then, is what was occurring at the Sunday night services in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 11:21 For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

The problem seems to be a division between those who were relatively well-off and "those who have nothing." Those who were well-off were "taking... supper ahead of others." That could mean one of several things:

1. It could mean they were bringing food but refusing to share it with those less well-off.
2. It could mean they were coming early, by special invitation, and eating the best portions along with the host family, before the less well-off members arrived.
3. It could mean that the well-off were seated in the main, more comfortable dining area while those less well-off were in the outer courtyard.

The reality was probably some combination of these things. You get the idea. There were what we today call cliques that formed because of socioeconomic factors.

As a result Paul pointed out that while those less well-off remained "hungry," those well-off were "drunk." Some of them, no doubt, were literally drunk; but the point is that they indulged themselves with food and drink that was not made equally available to others.

1 Corinthians 11:22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? 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 do not praise you.

The language the believers were speaking as a body at the Lord's Supper in Corinth was division, factions, and self-indulgence. Paul said it was shameful. It communicated that they "despise[d] the church of God."

Every church, and at every meeting of the church, there is body language. We must get in the habit of looking at our body language. What is it others see us speaking?

We understand body language more than we might think. We see it if we visit other churches. We're sort of hyper-aware of what is going on, watching to see how the body we're visiting goes about their serving. We wonder if we will be greeted; we determine if they are friendly.

We should be observant at the meetings of our own fellowship!

To help the Corinthians, and us, with our body language, Paul reminded them what the Lord's Supper ought to say.

#2 Have A Listen
To The Language Your Body Ought To Be Speaking
(v23-34)

There is a lot of good information and instruction in these verses about the Lord's Supper. We are going to concentrate more on the context of these verses: The Lord's Supper communicates. It speaks as the body "come[s] together" to observe it.

1 Corinthians 11:23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread;

The risen Lord, Jesus Christ, personally appeared to the apostle Paul several times. At one or more of those appearances they had a talk about how to observe the Lord's Supper in the services of the church.

It's interesting that Paul focused attention on the fact that Jesus was "betrayed" by Judas while He was supping with His disciples. It's an

example, the original type, really, of a division and faction at the Lord's Supper. It left the other eleven disciples approved and recognized.

It is also an example of bad body language at the Lord's Supper. Judas ate with Jesus, dipped bread in the common bowl, yet went on to betray Him.

1 Corinthians 11:24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

1 Corinthians 11:25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

The emphasis of the particular phrasing Paul used was the incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

- The Lord's "body" being "broken for you" means that He was God in human flesh. It wasn't literally "broken" in that none of His bones were broken. It means it was sacrificed on your behalf.
- The "new covenant in [His] blood" emphasizes the necessity of the crucifixion in order to redeem the human race and offer the forgiveness of sins to whosoever would believe.

When we share in the Lord's Supper we are "remembering" Who Jesus was and what He accomplished on the Cross. He was God in human flesh come to die in our place as a sacrifice for our sins.

We are also saying something to ourselves and others when we share communion:

1 Corinthians 11:26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

As "often" means whenever you celebrate communion. Whenever we observe the Lord's Supper we are making a nonverbal proclamation that Jesus died but rose again and is returning to take us to Heaven.

The Lord's Supper is intensely personal as we remember what the Lord had done for each of us individually. But it is also intensely social. We do it together, as one body - the body of Jesus Christ.

Paul is going to expand on the metaphor of the church as the body of Jesus. We'll get an earful beginning with chapter twelve. But even before the explanation, you know enough about bodies to understand they function as one, in unity and harmony.

As the body of Jesus on the earth we are to be one, to be in unity, to function in such a way that others will be made better and not leave worse off. So you see how the behavior of some in the body at Corinth spoke in a language contrary to everything Jesus would want to communicate. It made their celebration at His supper a hypocrisy.

1 Corinthians 11:27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

The word "unworthy" has made some Christians believe they had to "make themselves worthy" to receive communion, or if they had sinned, they were unworthy to come and remember what Jesus had done on the cross for them. This is a serious misunderstanding, because if anyone needs to remember the work of Jesus on the cross, it is the one who has sinned!

Our sin should drive us to our Savior, not away from Him. However, if a Christian is in sin, and stubbornly unrepentant, they are mocking what Jesus did on the cross to cleanse them from sin. They are "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" in the sense that they are ignoring sin - the very thing that Jesus came to die for on the Cross.

1 Corinthians 11:28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

While it is good to pause prior to communion and deal with any sin in our personal lives, the context of this verse is to be sure you are in unity and harmony with one another as the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:29 For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

The “unworthy manner” was explained earlier. It was being divisive, factious, and self-indulgent. They were not “discerning” that on the earth we are to function in unity as “the Lord’s body.”

Paul explained what he meant by eating and drinking “judgment to himself” in verse thirty.

1 Corinthians 11:30 For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.

God was disciplining some of them by allowing them to be “weak” or “sick.” In some cases God was taking them home to Heaven prematurely - which is the meaning of “sleep.”

Be careful with this. Just because you are sick it doesn’t mean you are under God’s discipline. At the same time, I know plenty of folks who cause plenty of trouble who are extremely healthy.

God was choosing to work this way in the church at Corinth. He could do so today, if and when He chooses. The main point for any church at any time is to examine our collective selves to be certain we are not doing or saying things that are contrary to the nature of our Lord.

1 Corinthians 11:31 For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.

1 Corinthians 11:32 But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

Notice that Paul called this “judgment” being “chastened by the Lord.” It is those the Lord loves that He chastens. It is because you are His child. This is *not* a verse suggesting you can forfeit eternal life.

Why, then, does he mention that the “world” will be “condemned?” It is to remind us of who we are. We were once of the world and headed for condemnation. The Lord saved us out from the world. Now, as His sons and daughters, we are chastened by Him, *never* condemned. His dealings with them as sons proved they were saved, not lost.

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1 Corinthians 11:33 Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

The word translated “wait” is full of variant meanings. One of them is to *receive*. In context it seems to say that we should receive each other as equal members of the body of Jesus Christ. In the church there is to be no consideration of ethnic or social or economic status.

Another variant of “wait” is to *wait upon*. In that case it would mean that those who have more should wait upon those who have less in order to equal-out the portions. Instead of indulging themselves those well-off should hold-off so that those less well-off might be ministered to.

This principle has practical application beyond the communion table. Though we are not a communal group, those better-off physically and financially ought to share with those less well-off in the church.

1 Corinthians 11:34 But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.

The “anyone” is obviously a person of some means who could have a good meal at home. They should temper their appetites to accommodate those less fortunate when the church “comes together” in order to communicate unity, oneness, and harmony.

What were the “rest” of the things Paul would “set in order” when he visited the church at Corinth? Apparently there were some other problems at the observation of the Lord’s Supper that needed to be addressed.

Perhaps he would not have to address them - if they would get a hold of this understanding of the body. He’ll begin to tell them more about the body in the next chapter.

Every church body speaks a language. You can see it at the meetings as Christians interact with one another and others. You can see if there is ministry occurring.

If you look carefully I think you will see our body of believers speaking in a language that is consistent with bringing glory to the Lord.

At the same time, we need to be listening to the Lord as He tells us what we ought to be speaking. We need to have a heightened awareness at our meetings. There are opportunities to minister to one another. There are opportunities to minister to others we don't know - both believers and nonbelievers.

Every meeting gives us a chance to 'speak-up' on behalf of the Lord, to proclaim the Gospel, by our actions and attitudes and not just our words.