

# The Lord's Supper

*"Divided We Feast"*

First Corinthians 11:17-19

I ran across the following article on the blog of a respected evangelical leader: TOP TEN WAYS CHURCHES DRIVE AWAY FIRST-TIME GUESTS.

#10 - Dirty facilities

#9 - Members telling visitors they were in their seat.

#8 - Boring sermon or service.

#7 - Insider church language.

#6 - Bad signage.

#5 - Bad church website.

#4 - No place to get information.

#3 - Unsafe and unclean children's area.

#2 - Unfriendly church members.

You'll never guess the #1 reason. *It was standing-up to have a Meet & Greet during the service.* It made the visitors polled feel "uncomfortable."

With the exception of the unclean and unsafe kids area, none of those things is really of any significance. Certainly, they are not of any spiritual significance.

If you were a visitor in the first century church that had services in Corinth, you'd have some genuine complaints.

For one thing, because of their emphasis on everyone speaking in tongues at once, visitors were concluding they were crazy:

1Co 14:23 Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

Even more serious, if you attended their weekly communion service, you'd experience the rich shaming the poor, and believers getting drunk before partaking of the elements:

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

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

Their behaviors at the Lord's Supper are going to provide context for the apostle Paul to give the clearest teaching on communion anywhere in the New Testament.

We'll take it a piece at a time on the Wednesday's we set-up communion.

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

1Co 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.

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

Back at the beginning of this chapter, in verse two, Paul said, "Now I praise you." Verse seventeen begins a new section entirely, when he says, "Now... I do *not* praise you."

If you peruse these verses, three things emerge: They were (1) assembling together, (2) to eat, but there were (3) divisions among them.

We're going to see that Paul's criticism involves their behavior at the common meal that was eaten prior to communion.

Each week, on Sunday evening, they came together to eat a common meal. We would call it a pot-luck, as each family or member who had the means, brought food for the meal.

But instead of being "together," some were separating from others by partaking of their own food while ignoring the needs of others - thereby fostering a division based on social status.

Their "coming together" is repeated about five times in this entire section, that goes to verse thirty-four. It is a technical term for the meetings of the church.

The Corinthians had no problem "coming together." They had lots of services; they were an active fellowship.

Paul's focus is on *how* they were behaving when they came together.

The rich, or at least those who had more, were separating from the poor, those who had less. They brought their food and either ate it before the poor arrived, or they ate it separately, in the presence of the poor, without sharing.

Do you see the real problem? It wasn't gluttony, or drunkenness.

The taking of communion is a declaration we are **one body** - the body of Jesus Christ. It declares the great spiritual truth that the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile has been torn down.

It symbolizes that, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Tonight we might say, "There is neither officer nor enlisted man." That is, in the fellowship of the church those designations cease to matter, because we are all one - all equal - in the Lord.

It doesn't mean we don't have roles. Men and women, for example, are given different roles, in the Bible, for the proper functioning of the church and the home.

Within our roles, we are equals. Equally loved by God.

The behavior of the well-to-do at the pot-luck was far more serious than they thought. It denied exactly what they were coming together to declare. It denied they were the church - a new organism that was one in Jesus Christ.

A visitor saw separation, at least economically and socially, where there ought to be unity.

That's what Paul means when he says they "come together, not for the better, but for the worse." It was a gathering that did more harm than good, because their behavior was the opposite of what it should have been.

1Co 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 wrote from Ephesus, where information about the church at Corinth had reached him. "In part I believe it" might indicate a reluctance to believe it; it is so paraphrased by some scholars.

I like that; let's go with that.

We should be reluctant to believe negative reports about Christians, and about churches. Sadly, there is always a lot of negative to report - because the church is made up of people, all of whom are flawed.

On a recent Sunday morning I went through a list of most of the New Testament churches and showed you the areas needing correction in each of them.

Paul had already dealt with "divisions" earlier in this letter. For example, they were dividing over which Bible teacher they followed.

He must mean something different here, and I'm suggesting it's this fact that they were failing to be God's new, unified people when they gathered for the meal leading-up to communion.

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

The word translated "factions" might be *heresies* in your Bible. It's accurate, but carries a different connotation for us. We think of some teaching error, but that is not what is meant here.

"Factions" is another way of saying "divisions." It's a little more specific, because they were dividing according to socio-economic groups, or factions.

It was officers with officers; enlisted men with enlisted men - to use our example.

Gordon Fee says of this verse, "This sentence is one of the true puzzles in the letter. How can he who earlier in the letter argued so strongly against divisions now confirm a kind of divine necessity to divisions?"

There is nothing in Paul's words that would indicate their division was a good thing. It's a "must" given that we are all flawed, in our bodies of flesh, prone to yielding to our carnal impulses rather than to God the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Peter had a problem with this, as a mature believer, long into his walk with the Lord. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul described having to rebuke Peter for separating from Gentiles at meals, and eating only among fellow Messianic Jews:

Gal 2:11 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed;

Gal 2:12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

Gal 2:13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

Gal 2:14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Factions happen; and, when they do, "those who are approved may be recognized among you."

Could Paul be talking about nonbelievers being outed by their lack of truly spiritual behavior? That is one possibility.

But believers act like this, too; and that is who Paul was addressing in this section.

Selfishness, and self-centeredness, is not always easy to identify. When certain factions occur, you're able to see, in yourself but also in others, selfishness on display.

Let's be honest: Sometimes we prefer the rich, or at least the well-off, over the poor. Churches and Christian organizations are notorious for promoting the well-off as leaders.

At least, we defer to them.

I'll go out on a limb and say that probably no church or parachurch organization in Hanford has a homeless Christian on their Board. We don't, BTW!!

Is well-to-do-ness really more spiritual?

Back to the context: Our behavior is the indicator of what we truly believe. If I separate myself socially, or racially, or economically, from other Christians, **then I do not believe the doctrine of the church, no matter what I might think or say.**

I deny that I am one with Jesus, a member of His unified body on the earth.

As we proceed, we'll see that it wasn't gluttony, or drunkenness that Paul saw as the real problem. Those things are wrong.

The real problem, the taking of communion in an unworthy manner, has to do with the beauty, and the wonder, of the church on earth as an absolutely unique organism.

People should come to our gatherings and be blown-away by our unity, as we treat each other as equals.