

“The Importance of Eating in Church”

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Scripture:

1 Corinthians 11: 1-2 and 17-33

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. 2 I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you... Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it... 20 When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. 21 For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. 22 What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! 23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. 30 For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died... 33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

Sermon: (straight from the mouth of Paul)

Thanks again for having me back!

And thanks for that rousing and warm welcome (sarcastically).

Sorry, I'm old and cantankerous and you would be too

if you had bad eyes, swollen joints and shooting pains in your side!

Anyway your pastor asked for me to talk about eating in church.

I think he wants to start serving breakfast,
or something like that, on Sunday mornings?

As you can see from the excerpt he selected from one of my letters to the church in Corinth, I'm pretty outspoken on the subject.

By the way your pastor is a great fellow
and truly a humble servant of God.

You are lucky to have him and I'd consider giving him a raise.
He mentioned something about a new budget sometime soon?
Of course I never got a salary for my ministry work
but supported myself making awnings.
Hmm... maybe I should remind him of that?

Things were quite a mess in Corinth when I wrote that letter!
And maybe that is why I had to write so many of them!
Conflict and division had arisen between some of the diverse
groups that had become Jesus followers.

Four distinct factions caused most of the problems.
With each group following a different missionary
who had spent time in Corinth sharing the gospel.

First you had the Jewish converts who followed Cephas.
I called them "God-worshippers" since they followed Yahweh
and felt that the gentiles should convert to Judaism.

Then there were those who followed Professor Apollos,
Whose teachings appealed more to the wealthy and well educated.

One group grew out of my own missionary work,
who were mostly artisans and small shop keepers.

The last group simply called themselves "Christ followers"
and they tended to come from the poorest groups in the city;
slaves and ex-slave, laborers and temple prostitutes.

As you can see it was definitely a wide variety of folks!
Perhaps too diverse and maybe we should not
have tried so hard to keep them all together?
But we also were the first generation to follow Jesus
no previous experience even of how to be a Christian.
Maybe we would have been better off just letting each distinct group
meet separately, you know sort of like you folks do today,
different denominations for different folks?

Any way, back to eating in church..
I must say I don't remember ever discussing it?
Folks were hungry after working all day
and so it just seemed like the obvious thing to do.

I was told that this was what Jesus had done.

Whenever folks gathered they simply shared whatever they had with each other.

And that is likely where the trouble began.
The wealthier members not only had more food but homes that could accommodate the whole group. But in a highly segregated and stratified society it is hard sometimes to let go of one's privilege. And the radically egalitarian way of Jesus, just did not fit with much of Greek society and culture.

Greek society was all about status and honor - climbing up the social ladder.

Hosting and attending banquets was key to this for the wealthy. The wealthy particularly aspired to live a life of leisure avoiding any physical labor at all costs.

Therefore, the common practice was to gather in the late afternoons to eat, drink, talk philosophy and be entertained. You only invited those who could increase your rank and most especially, those who could reciprocate!

Wealthier members of the struggling Jesus community were being asked to forego these important social events. Instead they were now expected to rub shoulders with slaves and to share their food and homes with those who were clear at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The vision of Jesus was simply and completely upside-down with the expectations of Greek culture.

Some of my informants also began bringing me the sad news that some of the households that hosted the gatherings were falling back into old habits, and harmful cultural practices.

And so I had to get rather specific with them in my scolding. Some hosts had decided it was not necessary to wait for others to join them! This of course meant that most of the best food and wine was gone before the poorest and hungriest had arrived.

I even heard that somewhere going home hungry,

while others were drunk before church even started.

How can you build a radically exclusive community with that kind of behavior!?

And since there was actually a famine at the time I had to let them know that I was aware of the fact that folks were literally sick and dying due to their failure to follow the practice of a shared meal.

Eating together, not only insures that the poorest will not starve but it also promotes sharing on other levels. When we share what we have with those who do not we also open our hearts to others.

Eating, sharing of resources and opening ourselves to those more vulnerable then creates true community.

Five times I use the words “come together” to implore the Corinthian community.

How can you be a community if you don't spend time together? And how can you create the radical community that Jesus calls for if your practices are actually separating folks? The only way you can truly resist cultural pressures that seek to divide are with practices that actively seek to unify.

And so I decided to go right to the heart of the matter by coining the term, “the Lord's Supper.” This is the only place where this term is used the New Testament.

I wanted to be clear that when they eat separately they were merely eating their own meals!

But when food is freely shared and folks gather without any regard to status, then that is the “Lord's Supper!” For that is exactly what our “Lord and Savior” did! He shared what he had and ate with the poor!

Actually, if you recall, that is what bothered his opponents the most - the fact that he would eat and drink with the low life of his society. It is also the “Supper of our Lord” precisely because we follow his example.

So I reminded them of that Jesus actually said, “Do this in remembrance of me!”

More than just eating, he specifically said, “do this.”

We gather, we welcome those of lowest status, we share and we eat.
And for those who still might want to justify maintaining their status

I threw in the fact that even our Lord set aside his status.
Maybe I was too hard on ‘em?
But pride is so very dangerous!
And pride can destroy one’s soul as well as the “body” of Christ!

Maybe they had conveniently forgotten the multiple meanings
in that term, “Body of Christ?”
One of course being the actual physical human body
that Jesus lived, suffered and died in.
The ultimate sacrificial gift that was offered up in love!

But the other meaning is the ongoing “Body of Christ” his people!
It is you and me... it is us!

Groups of desperate misfits stumbling and struggling to get it right!
And the only real way that we can ever get things right
is to come together to fellowship, to share
and to build communities of faithfulness.
That is how, my brothers and sisters,
that the body and blood of our Lord becomes present
in our midst when we eat his supper.
If we gather, share or eat only to honor ourselves
we actually dishonor Christ’s body and his sacrifice.

In my final words I implored them to “wait for one another.”
But your English word “wait” fails to capture the full meaning
of the Greek word that I actually used.
My final instruction rather was, “Warmly welcome
and honor every person, who comes to you.”
Which, if I say so myself, seems quite a fitting way, to sum it all up.

Main source was: “Creating a Scene in Corinth, A Simulation” Reta Halteman Finger and
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