

Dear Church
1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Emerson Kennedy
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COVID. George Floyd. Climate change. MAGA. Hillary. Biden. Roe v. Wade. The Supreme Court. Elon buying Twitter. That's free speech. No, that's hate speech. Culture wars. Cancel culture. CRT. We should support Israel. No, we should support Palestine. Let's boycott Disney. No, let's boycott Chick-fil-A. Get rid of guns. Let's go test an AR. Build the wall. Don't build a wall. Abortion is healthcare. No, it's not. Keep the statues up. Tear the statues down. They're the *Guardians*, not the *Indians*! We're in the golden age, baby!

All around us, there are differences and disagreements. But it's not only in the political realm; we have differences in the personal realm, too.

My wife's too high-strung. My husband's too lazy. My kids won't do what I tell them. My dad's too demanding. My daughter's too emotional. My mom is too nag-y (not mine, *yours*). My boyfriend's too jealous. My girlfriend spends too much money. My boss is too angry, my neighbor too nosy, my coworker too talky, my teacher too strict-y and, at church, my preacher is too preach-y!

They're too old; they're too young. We're married with kids; they're single and can't relate. They're entrepreneurial; we're not. We're wealthy; they can't keep up. We're simple; they're too flashy. We like fresh, organic, non-GMO, open-pasture, carefully coddled chickens; they eat McDonalds!

Differences and disagreements. All kinds of conflict—in politics, between personalities. Unsurprisingly, it happens in the church, too.

There are worship wars. Theology wars. Which preacher is better? Which church is cooler? What about evolution? What about Creationism? We should use the KJV. No, NIV. No, the NASB. Play contemporary music? No, hymns. No, only sing the Psalms. We should be Reformed. No, Pentecostal. No, let's be non-denominational! Creeds or no creeds? Tongues or no tongues? Rapture or no rapture? Women can preach—read your Bible! No, they can't—read *your* Bible. Let's update the building. Why are we changing everything? Put the flags up; we've got to support our country. No, we don't; we don't want to *idolize* our country. We must have coffee! The coffee stinks. We need great set design. Not like that! Evangelism should be the focus. No, discipleship. No, the Sunday worship. No, life groups.

That's *NEVER* happened here though. *TOTALLY* hypothetical. That's that *other* church.

All kinds of differences. All kinds of disagreement. What happens as a result? I hope that I'm humble enough either to have a loving conversation to bridge the gap or submit my will for the sake of a greater unity. However, often what happens is a wall goes up and I allow a barrier to exist in my mind and heart towards that other person.

In the Corinthian church, the situation wasn't dissimilar. There were all kinds of differences, conflicts, and disagreements. Among other things, they argued about which spiritual leaders to follow and about food sacrificed to idols. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is writing to the Corinthians to help them bridge a gap that opened up between members of their community, hoping to unify them once and for all.

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you,

and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. (1 Corinthians 11:17-19)

Paul says here, "I have NO praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good!"

What in the world was the issue? Look at verse 20 and following:

So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter! (1 Corinthians 11:20-22)

The Corinthians were abusing the Lord's Supper, or what we call Communion. A little odd, no? Here's the background: because there were no church buildings, wealthy people would offer their homes for the early churches to meet in. On Sunday each week anywhere around 10 to 40 or 50 people would meet to commemorate the day that Jesus rose from the dead. They would devote themselves to the apostles teaching, to prayer, and to a meal at the center of which was the bread and the cup to remember the Lord's death.

Sounds great, right? But as we read, the Corinthians were seismically botching the whole thing up because people in Corinth were having their "own private suppers."

Remember: this is a different time, a different culture. Today, most people work five days and have Saturday and Sunday off. In the ancient world, you didn't do that. Most people (the poor, the working class people, the day laborers) worked seven days a week, so on Sundays, the wealthy people (who didn't have to work) would be able to gather early in the afternoon and start the meal. Everyone else—"those who have nothing" (verse 22)—got there at the end of the day.

What did they find when they arrived? 1) There was nowhere to sit. 2) There was no food. 3) They had to sit in the overflow room. 4) The wealthy were passed out drunk, leaving them standing awkwardly.

It'd be like if you showed up to a costume party and no one else was wearing a costume. Or like going on a date only to have the person ghost you even though you already got a table. Or like standing in front of all your high school friends as you're auditioning for a role in the high school musical and the pianist starts playing the song you're supposed to sing and you know that you can sing, but for whatever reason this one time, you totally BOMB the melody and sound like a dying duck. Humiliating! (This last one is *totally hypothetical* of course.)

Instead of waiting for everybody to participate, some of the wealthy Corinthians had their own tribe, the people they were comfortable with, the people that stroked their egos, the people who made them feel high-class. They left the poor hung out to dry.

In the high quality, award-winning, show-stopping, edge-of-your-seat thriller "Mean Girls," Cady Heron (Lindsey Lohan) gets her first experience of public school. Immediately, she's told how *crucial* it is for her to find the right spot in the cafeteria. Why? Because of the *cliques*. Her friend explains how there's the freshman, the ROTC guys, the preps, the JV jocks, the Asian nerds, the cool Asians, the varsity jocks, the girls who eat their feelings, the girls who don't eat anything, desperate wannabes, burnouts, band geeks, the *best* people you'll ever meet, and the *worst* people you'll meet—the *Plastics*.

We may not be divided quite like that, but I don't think it's too far off to say that our church is potentially full of cliques—spaces where people are having their “own private suppers” in Paul's language, where we divvy ourselves up into groups (either *actually* or in our hearts) because of our politics, our personalities, or our preferences. We have our own tribes, the people we're comfortable with, the people who stroke our egos, the people who make us feel high-class, and—in the church—we leave other groups of people hung out to dry.

Friends, if we do that, we're *missing it*.

Look at what Paul says to the Corinthians. He says *you* do that and, “It is not the Lord's Supper you eat.” It's something different altogether. You change the meaning of the meal. Just like there's no haiku without the 5-7-5 syllable pattern, and no History Channel without history, and no country music without a reference to America and trucks and beer, in the same way Paul is saying to the Corinthians, “*This* is how you celebrate the Lord's Supper? Having your own little, private meal?! There *is* no Lord's Supper if there are walls built up towards another brother or sister in Christ.”

Who is the person, who are the people, that are your brothers and sisters in the Lord for whom you have walls built up? Who is that person for you? Who are those people you can't stand? Do you have a brother or sister in Christ towards whom you have a wall built?

You can imagine Paul dealing with this situation in Corinth and thinking, “What am I going to do?” Paul provides the Corinthians with a three-part solution.

1. A REMINDER

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Here's the solution—a call back, a reminder, a harkening back to the *actual* meal Jesus invited his disciples into before he was betrayed, when Christ said, “This bread, this is my body.” When Christ said, “This wine, this is my blood.” When Christ said, “This is for you.”

It's a reminder that God loves you so much. God cares for you so deeply. It's a reminder that despite my stingy heart, my greedy heart, my impatient heart, my lustful heart, my angry heart, my self-righteous heart, God still welcomes me to his table because of his Son.

It's *also* a reminder that I'm not at the table *alone*. Others have been invited to dine here, too.

I have often wondered if the Lord's Supper articulated in 1 Corinthians 11 is best illustrated by what we do in Rooted at our celebration night. A few weeks ago, we wrapped up another session of Rooted. I got to lead a group of about eighteen people, and I loved it. I loved meeting these new folks and seeing how God moved in their lives. I loved having a celebration meal together afterwards to solidify our experience.

As we moved from week to week, one of the things that I was hyper-aware of was how *different* we all were. I was like, “Woah. This group has some different kinds of people.” We had the Eli Lilly guy and the jiu jitsu guy. We had moms and not-yet-moms. We had people at various points spiritually. We had

the girl who can't smell. Different ages, different stages, different stories, from different backgrounds, from different places on the road of life.

One thing I remember being thankful for in group was that in God's sovereignty and providence, he saw it fit to put us all together *at this time, at this place, for this season*—and that happened because of Christ. That is truly wondrous. We celebrated that together. That's what that Rooted celebration gathering proclaimed: Christ's work in us individually and also Christ's bringing us together as a family.

Hence, Paul's reminder, which is then followed by a challenge.

2. A CHALLENGE

Paul continues in verse 27: "So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord." The "unworthy manner" here is not about if we really blew it this past week and so now we can't take the Lord's Supper because we're too sinful. Being a sinner is not a barrier to the Lord's table; it's a prerequisite. The "unworthy manner" has to do with what we've been talking about—coming to the table and not having an eye open to how you're excluding your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Here's where the challenge comes. In verse 28, Paul says, "Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup."

Many of you are familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Finkenwalde church community. In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer wrote about that community:

It is the command of Jesus that none should come to the altar with a heart that is unreconciled to his brother. If this command of Jesus applies to every service of worship, indeed, to every prayer we utter, then it most certainly applies to reception of the Lord's Supper. The day before the Lord's Supper is administered will find the brethren of a Christian Fellowship together and each will beg the forgiveness of the others for the wrongs committed. Nobody who avoids this approach to his brother can go rightly prepared to the table of the Lord. All anger, strife, envy, evil gossip, and unbrotherly conduct must have been settled and finished if the brethren wish to receive the grace of God together in the sacrament.

That is a challenge, and that's essentially what Paul is telling the Corinthians to do here. The stakes are too high!

If I want to partake of the Lord's Supper, I don't need to rehash all my sins as I hold the little thing of grape juice and the little wafer (although that's fine). I don't need to have not messed up this week, last night, or this morning. No, I need to make sure that I am right with my brother or sister. I need to examine myself. Am I good? Am I withholding forgiveness towards another? Do I need to reconcile? Do I have a wall up?

This challenge is followed by a warning.

3. A WARNING

For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment.

Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:29-32)

Now, to be honest, when I first read these verses, I was a little taken aback. I was like, “Woah, that’s hardcore, Paul.”

But think about it. Here’s a Corinthian church in the middle of the Roman Empire, in a culture where there’s all kinds of divisions: slave and free, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile. Paul is dealing with a divisive and wall-building, clique-y church. The poor believers are being excluded.

So Paul reminds them about the radical welcome of Jesus’ table. He’s saying, “Hey, remember the Lord’s Supper? How Jesus died for *everybody*? The radical table of welcome, love, grace, redemption? The table that represents one new family wrought by the blood of Jesus? *You don’t get to screw up that table*. God takes that table seriously.”

That’s why Paul gives his warning. He says if you come to this table wrongly without discerning if you’re reconciled with other believers, you’ll drink judgment on yourself. *It’s why you’re sick. It’s why some of you have “fallen asleep.”*

One writer said, “God is *disciplining* people with *sickness* and *death* because they are killing God’s mission in the church.” He further said, “This isn’t about seeing God as harsher than what you maybe thought. This is about how God’s vision is more beautiful and more worthy of protection than we can comprehend.”

God has a vision for his church. He loves his church. It’s his *bride*. And God has a vision for this church. He loves *this church*. It’s his *bride*. He will not let it be torn asunder by people who don’t have the *humility* or the *wherewithal* to reconcile with those they need to, who have their little supper clubs, and maintain walls in their hearts towards their brothers and sisters.

We have our reminder. We have our challenge. We have the warning. What are we going to do? Do you have the courage to reconcile, to let the walls down? From whom are you withholding forgiveness? Are you brave enough to, as Paul instructed, “so far as it depends on you live at peace”?

I want to wrap things up with a story. Danielle Strickland tells about her experience seeing what are called “Transformation Villages” in Rwanda. This is post-genocide, post-one million people killed in forty days. These Transformation Villages are communities the country was using to try to rebuild, to say, “We’re not going to let this happen again.”

They chose the mantra “One People” to say that there are no tribes anymore; you’re simply Rwandan now—no Hutus or Tutsis, only Rwandans. No more divisions.

They looked for people who would live reconciliation in real life in these Transformation Villages so they could say to the rest of the country, “This is what the new Rwanda looks like.” Grace and John lived in one of these villages. Grace’s family was massacred, and she was the only survivor. She told about her experience—about trauma, fear, anger, wanting not to live anymore after it all happened, and how forgiveness has helped unlock healing in her life.

Then Grace introduced her neighbor, John. She reached over and tenderly grabbed John’s hand. She said, “This is John. John is the man who killed my family.”

Then John told his story through tears. He talked about his part in the massacre, getting caught up in this thing, and then afterwards being filled with self-loathing and shame. He shared how he ended up being one of 150 prisoners in Rwanda, and he said he spent every morning in prison wanting to kill himself as he wondered why he was still alive.

Then Rwandan Christians came to visit and minister to the prisoners. They told him and the others there, “This isn’t the end. You can be forgiven. This isn’t your last act. There’s an act bigger than this. It’s called resurrection. And Jesus is the King of that act.”

John received Jesus and then was told, “Anyone who wants to make restitution, who is willing to tell the truth of what happened, and who wants to serve Rwanda and rebuild the country, we’ll reduce your sentence by half if you’re willing to be part of this project.” John thought, “I don’t deserve it. I should probably just die, but I really do want to rebuild this country and I want to make things right.”

So he put his hand up for this project and they moved him into this Transformation Village where he and Grace were given a plot of land with a pile of bricks in the middle and were told, “Ok, build a new life.”

Grace said, “Every day, we’d meet at the brick pile.”

The first thing they did was separate their properties so they didn’t have to see each other. Grace was filled with fear and John was filled with self-loathing and shame. Every time they met at the brick pile, the fear and the shame would come up.

They tried not to make eye contact and went about trying to build their own houses on their own plots of land. But they kept meeting at the brick pile.

Grace found there were things she couldn’t do and she’d have to ask John for his help. John didn’t only help when needed; eventually, every time Grace took a break, John would come over and work on her house and do things she couldn’t.

Grace said, “We met at the brick pile and eventually we started looking each other in the eye. We met at the brick pile and a little of my fear and a little of his shame went away. We met at the brick pile and eventually, we became friends. We met at the brick pile and eventually John became my family. We’ve decided to live a reconciled life.”

It’s an amazing story and here’s the implication for us: what the brick pile is for Grace and John is what the table is for you and me.

I come to the table each week and am reminded that I’m not the only one invited to dine here. I must look my brother in the eye. I must let go of my fear and shame. I must become friends with my perceived enemies. I must live into the reality that other Christians I disagree with are my family. I must decide to live a reconciled life.

Do you have the courage to do this?