

# The New Life Meal

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

May 7, 2006

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Have you ever met Christian people who aren't nice? They profess faith in Jesus, are zealous and scriptural, but cold? Jesus confronted a Jewish counterpart to that. He observed people, who demonstrated little love, but were fully and zealously invested in religious practices they did not invent. Nearly every ritual or routine they practiced was rooted in some command, if not in direct obedience to a command. The washings were derived from biblical teaching. Circumcision, Sabbath observance, sacrifices and fasting obeyed commands.

Despite their religious devotion, many rejected Christ. Jesus wept on Palm Sunday as he saw the city of Jerusalem in the distance and learned from the Spirit that it would be destroyed because it missed what God was doing even while it was fully invested in religious practice.

The problem that Jesus observed is not confined to Jewish people implementing Old Testament commandments. The Apostle Paul observed this among Christians. Some of you have come from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist and Baptist backgrounds and have felt like you missed something despite the religious practices. It appears from Paul's letter that he found empty religious practices among Charismatic or Pentecostal Christians. In the church at Corinth, much attention focused on how to develop and use spiritual gifts. When Paul addressed the issue of Holy Communion, he also corrected a church absorbed with the practice of spiritual gifts.

His strongest words and greatest warnings, however, focused on the church's practice of the Lord's Supper. Paul wrote:

***In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.*** (1 Corinthians 11:17, NIV)

What a challenge! We meet to build people, not harm them. When you come to worship, I don't want you to go away in worse shape than you came. Paul wrote:

***In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you...*** (1 Corinthians 11:18, NIV)

Division is different than differences. We all are different. We all have different opinions; and when we live in Christian community, we are to test those opinions. We are to speak the truth in the posture, commitment, temperament and loyalty of love. We are to look for God's approval and develop maturity. However, in division we divide up into camps and speak negatively against the ones with whom we disagree. We define our association and friendship by opinion rather than by God's grace and mercy.

Among Jesus' disciples there were emotional differences and divisions. One thing got them together and kept them together, Jesus. Jesus had them eat a common meal and that meal profoundly changed them.

However, in Corinth the factions or divisions came to the Lord's Supper at different times. They didn't have to (nor did they care to) see one another. They ate until they were full, giving no thought to those who would come later. The Lord's Supper became a means to address their physical emptiness rather than their spiritual poverty. The Lord's Supper was all about "me" and nothing about "we." If that is the way it is for you, if the Lord's Supper is all about "me" and nothing about "we," then you are missing a tremendous gift. You don't realize that the Lord himself is feeding and healing your spiritual family and your secular community.

Paul told the believers to address their physical hunger at a different time so that they would focus, not on their stomachs, but on the presence of Jesus. Paul reminded them that this

meal was instituted by Jesus, not his followers. It was commanded by Jesus, not his disciples. Jesus identified two elements as his body and blood. Our eating proclaims his death until he returns. The Lord's Supper declares the atoning death of Jesus that removes judgment from individuals and communities until the day of salvation passes and God executes his final judgment with Jesus' return. This proclamation of Jesus' death is like Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. Jesus both spoke and demonstrated the reality of the kingdom of God. The Lord's Supper both speaks and demonstrates the reality of Jesus' atoning death. The Apostle Paul earlier wrote the Corinthians:

***My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*** (1 Corinthians 2:4-5, NIV)

If our faith rests on human wisdom, it will change with every reasoned argument. We'll be staggered by assertions and stories like *The Da Vinci Code* that is about to be released; but if we witness God at work, we aren't as impressed with human logic. Last Sunday, after our united worship service Diane, Joe and I ate with Rick Heeren, the guest speaker. He works with Christians all over the world and had just flown in from Hong Kong. He said, "The problem with the American Church is that it is populated with people who are persuaded, but not converted." We are persuaded by articulate speech and credible speakers. However, we are converted by God's presence. Conversion is a work of God's Spirit and power.

In the Lord's Supper, the meal Jesus commanded us to eat, we come into the presence of Jesus. We dine with him. We ingest the benefits of his death. Amazing work unfolds. However, if we treat this supper as a common meal or a religious routine, if we approach it more concerned about what the people around us think than what Jesus will do, we sin against Jesus' body and blood. We reject him with our unbelief. We cast ourselves with the Pharisees and

Sadducees who opposed Jesus. We turn away from believing and receiving Jesus' work, and we invariably communicate our disdain with our attitude. As a result, we not only refuse forgiveness we need and continue to suffer from the toxins of unaddressed sins; we also add to our guilt the rejection of Jesus' visitation to us. Paul wrote:

***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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.*** (1 Corinthians 11:27-32, NIV)

Paul wants the Corinthians to know that they don't lose their salvation by their unbelief and irreverent treatment of Holy Communion, but they do suffer. It's like a wall of protection topples so that Satan prevents our healing from an injury or sews ill-health. Paul told them that some of the Christians among them had died when they didn't have to. They could have been healed. These Christians suffered weaknesses, ill-health and death not by God's choice. They suffered because they did not recognize Christ nor their need in this meal.

Two weeks ago, we mentioned that Jesus' blessing of little children tells us a lot more than the value of children. It tells us that the work of God's blessing is often hidden like rain that falls on the earth and brings growth without us observing or fully understanding the process. Today, new life awaits you in a meal Jesus commanded you to eat. You may not understand the process. You may not observe all the actions God does or the mechanisms he uses. However, in this meal the word of Jesus' death will be joined by the power of his life among us. Will you eat the supper he's made for you? It is a supper with power to convert, not just persuade, with power to heal, not merely comfort. This is not comfort food. This is the power of God!