

Healing Divisions in the Church

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1 Cor. 11:17-22

A number of years ago my family and I went on vacation and we were camping in a national park in another state. Well, Sunday rolled around and we decided that we would go to church. I know there is no law that requires you to go to church on Sunday, but I always feel weird sleeping in on Sunday and not gathering with God's people to worship.

So the day before we looked around the national park and saw a church that was nearby. We decided to get up early the next morning and go there. We had two little ones in tow and we went to this interesting looking building. We were greeted real warmly by a couple of ushers and then we sat down in their auditorium.

The auditorium had this round stage. Someone told me that it was a converted dance hall. I thought, "That's interesting – to convert a dance hall into a church building." Marlene and I were talking with each other before the service and suddenly we were hit with this sound that sounded like a passing train, because the choir struck up as the stage was revolving. It hit you with this kind of Doppler effect and I thought my head was going to come off.

I said to Marlene, "What was that?"

She said, "It is the choir."

So we enjoyed the choir and then they introduced the pastor. The pastor began to preach and things were going along smoothly until the pastor began speaking about other churches in the community. Now, his text had nothing to do with speaking about other churches in the community. And there was no particular reason why he should talk about other churches in his community. But as he began telling the faults of each of the local churches and their pastors, by name, it was like blood in the water for sharks. People were literally coming out of their seats going, "Don't hold back. Preach it."

And he was saying, "I don't have to tell you about the First Methodist Church. They are just a bunch of hypocrites. And that Revelation Benton, he doesn't preach the Bible. And what about those Presbyterians?"

People were just cheering and yelling, "Preach it. Preach it."

And he said, "The way they dress at that Presbyterian Church looks like they are going to some nightclub. The women are all painted up. Revelation Jones doesn't preach the Bible."

He literally went through the list of churches in the town and proceeded to slice up every other church and every other church in his city. It was the ugliest thing I had ever seen preached from the pulpit. The really tragic thing to me was that it didn't seem to be unusual for this pastor or this congregation. This bashing of everyone else seemed to be part of the weekly liturgy. Because after he was finished with his verbal assault on every other Christian church and

Christian pastor in the city, he would just return to the preaching of the text and finish up the service.

I thought to myself, “What kind of people is this pastor producing? What will the fruit of his ministry be in the end? What would it be like to sit here year after year and have this hatred and bitterness sown in you to the point where you actually cheer as other Christians are being verbally bashed?”

I read of a church some years ago that was divided between two factions. Both led by two powerful families in the church. Each regularly gossiped about the other. Neither side would invite the other over to their homes for parties or family gatherings. They regularly double-booked the church for conflicting uses. The conflict came to the head when the heads of the two families, who were both on the Deacons Board, got in a fistfight over the color of the carpet that the church was going to choose to carpet their sanctuary. Eventually their relationship ended in lawsuits. One group locked the other out of the church. The evicted group literally went down the street and started another church – built the building. Both groups were part of the same denomination. Their buildings are a block apart. Two generations from now, no one will be able to recall what the original dispute was about. Nevertheless, they will train their children and grandchildren to hate each other.

Chuck Colson in his book called The Body tells a story of a church split that happened in a very prestigious posh church that he graciously renamed and called The Riverton Community Church. In this particular instance, the split occurred because the pastor agreed with some church members to change the service times for the first service. The first service had been meeting at 9:30, but in order to accommodate Sunday School, the pastor agreed that they could move the first service to 10:00.

What he didn't reckon with was the wrath of people who were used to getting out of church at precisely 10:30 and immediately heading over to the Riverton Country Club for brunch. By moving the service times, the church service didn't get over until 11:00. By that time, all the good tables at their country club were taken.

Well, this was too much for any Christian to bear. Carrying our cross is one thing, but not being able to get a good table at your country club or having your eggs benedict served cold is more than any Christian should be expected to handle.

Today, in this final talk of mine in a series I have been doing on The Church and Christian Relationships, I am going to talk about Healing Divisions in the Church.” Let's pray.

Open your bibles with me to 1 Cor. 11:17-22:

“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. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or

do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not.”

Paul in verse 18 tells us what the problem was. He says, “In the first place, I hear when you come together as a church there are divisions among you and to some extent I believe it.”

So there is a problem in the church of divisions. But then in verse 19, Paul says, “No doubt there has to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.” It is possible, Paul was using irony here, in other words, given the nature of things in your church, there is no doubt that this kind of thing would arise among you. So each group would prove with one had God’s blessing. But I think the more likely interpretation of verse 19 is that Paul is saying essentially, not all divisions are bad. Indeed, at the end of time there is going to be a major division in every church between true and false believers. God is going to separate the wheat and the chaff. The Bible speaks about a great end-time ingathering where like fishermen who separate and sort good fish and bad, the angels of God are going to sort out believers. I must say at the front end of a talk on divisions in the church that not every division that arises is necessarily a bad thing.

A number of years ago there was a best selling book called The Closing of the American Mind. The author of the book began with these words. He wrote, “For fifty years all primary education in this country has dedicated itself to teaching that openness to various claims of truth and various lifestyles is the only plausible stand to take. It is said that the true believer is the real problem. That the message of history and culture is said to be that people in the past always thought that they were right and that viewpoint led to wars, persecution, slavery, xenophobia, racism, chauvinism. The point today is not to try to be right, it is to think that there is no right at all.”

In other words, the author is saying that the only absolute in our culture is that there is no absolute at all. That whenever someone thinks they are right, that is when people have problems. We live in a time in history when tolerance is in and absolutes are out.

But is it the case that all divisions are wrong? The moment we see people divide we must assume that there could never be a good basis, indeed, a God basis for the division? Let me put it a different way. Is there ever anything worth fighting about enough to separate over? Are all divisions of the carpet-color variety that I described at the front end or the “you changed my service time, pastor, and now I am really angry because I don’t get the best table at my country club”? Are all divisions that inconsequential?

I have seen division often occur when one person becomes a Christian convert in a family and the rest of the family is not converted. Some of you have experienced that. Suddenly, you have a whole new direction in life. You have a value system. You have new desires. We find girlfriends saying to their boyfriends, “I can’t sleep with you anymore. I can’t keep doing what I was doing because of my allegiance to Christ.” We have wives saying to their husbands and husbands saying to their wives, “I am sorry, I can’t spend money the way I have been spending it. I can’t go along with you regarding my compromise with

sin any longer because of my allegiance to Christ.” Employees sometimes can’t go along with business practices that they used to go along with without batting an eye because of their allegiance to Christ.

It is the case that Jesus often brings a sword into a relationship. He is the divider. And I have certainly talked with people who have experienced the pain of that division in their own marriages when one spouse gets converted and the other one doesn’t. The converted spouse finds they cannot share the deepest part of their lives with their unconverted spouse. They can have physical unity together. They can to some degree experience emotional unity. But they can’t experience spiritual unity because Jesus is the wall between them.

I have had people say, “I cannot share with my spouse the joy that I feel during the worship service. They don’t understand what I am talking about. I would rather say nothing than be misunderstood by my husband or wife or even worse be mocked by them. I can’t tell my spouse how thankful I feel right now because God answered my prayer. We can’t talk about a recent meaningful message together or how God spoke to me through the Bible. We don’t share spiritual victories or defeats.”

Divisions do occur as one person gets converted and another doesn’t. And not all of this is bad unless you believe that conversion is a bad thing or that Jesus isn’t worth more than any relationship on earth. Not all divisions in the church are necessarily bad. You know, the great division in the church is the one between Protestants and Catholics. And in the opinion of many, that division was necessary for a time to deal with the corruption and decadence that had worked its way into the church over the centuries.

One of the corrupt practices that had worked its way into the church by the time of Martin Luther in the 1500’s was the sale for money of indulgences. Now there was this belief at the time that very few people went straight to heaven when they died. Rather, because we are sinners, we had to spend time in a place called purgatory, which is not a biblical place at all, but arises off of some verses found in the Apocrypha, various books that were written between the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament. There was this view that you could not go immediately to heaven, instead you would spend time in purgatory.

Now, in order to reduce the amount of time that you or a dead relative spent in purgatory, you could buy your way out by the purchase of an indulgence, which was a papal dispensation, a papal blessing. In many ways the sale of indulgences was like the BINGO of the 16th Century. It was a way for the church to raise money.

There was one particularly notorious seller of indulgences, a Catholic priest by the name of Tetzel. He would go into these towns throughout Germany accompanied by a solemn procession and he would plant a cross in the center of the town and here is a part of what Tetzel would say:

“Listen, now, God and St. Peter call you. Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your loved ones departed. Consider that all who are contrite and have confessed and made contributions of money will receive complete remission of all their sins. Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends beseeching you and saying, ‘Pity us. Pity us. We are in dire torment from

which you can redeem us for a pittance.’ Do you not wish to? Open your ears. Hear the father saying to his son, the mother to her daughter, ‘We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, left you our fortunes and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing to for so little set us free? Will you let us lie here in flames in purgatory? Will you delay our promised glory?’ Remember that you are able to release them, friends, for as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs. Will you not, then, for just a quarter of a florin, a little bit of money, receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul from purgatory into paradise.”

And Luther watched, as poor peasants who didn’t have enough to feed their own children would drop their last coins into Tetzels velvet lined bags. He became so incensed by the corruption and the decadence and the sully of salvation that he went to the door of the local church in Whittenberg Germany in the year 1517 and he took 95 theses, 95 statements of protest, and he nailed his protests to the door of the church. One godly man finally said, “Enough.”

Not all division is necessarily bad.

In WWII Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, and several other German pastors divided off from the main body of Lutheran pastors and formed a group called the Confessing Church, because the main body of Lutherans had come so far under the sway of the Nazis that they had actually agreed to stop preaching from the Old Testament because the Old Testament was a Jewish book. They had come so far under the sway of the Nazis that they were willing to confess that in Adolph Hitler we had the highest embodiment of God’s plan for mankind. Bonhoeffer and his little group openly said that no one was worthy to be called a Christian pastor or preach the gospel that did not publicly pray for the Jews in Nazi Germany.

Sometimes division is right. Sometimes faithfulness to Christ demands that we separate our selves. We cannot be faithful to Christ and go along with this practice. Sometimes it is not clear who is right and who is wrong. Lots of divisions are like that between people. Each group has their own perspective. Each person has his or her own viewpoint concerning the dispute. They each argue forcefully. They each argue convincingly. You certainly see that in the dispute between the apostle Paul and his dear friend Barnabas as the end of Acts 15. It is not clear who is right and who is wrong.

But sadly, most divisions in the history of the church are bad divisions. Most are not of the order of Martin Luther’s bold nailing of 95 Theses to the church door at Whittenberg protesting the rape of the peasants by corrupt sellers of indulgences. Throughout the history of the church there have been many who want to liken themselves to Luther. But they were tragically more like the folks who get in a fistfight over the color of the carpet than they are to Luther.

The division that Paul was dealing with in Corinth around the Lord’s table was a bad division. He says in the following directives, “I have no praise for you because your meetings do more harm than good in the first place. I hear that when you come together as a church that there are divisions among you and that to some extent, I believe it.”

And then he goes on and says, "When you come together it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anyone else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk."

Now it is hard to know exactly what was going on. But there seems to have been a gulf between the rich and poor members of the Corinthian church. There were well to do owners of homes who had the leisure and the resources to arrive early. Usually the church met in the homes of wealthy patrons. There were no church buildings at that time. And their wealthy friends would arrive early and eat a sumptuous meal together; fine food and wine, filling a small dining hall. Then the poor who had to work all weekend, there was no day off, day of rest during the Roman Empire. The poor had to work all day and they would arrive later. They would be seated outside in the atrium outside of the dining hall. And so the church began to resemble the various religion and fraternal organizations that were present in the ancient world. The church didn't look any different. Rich and poor were treated unequally. So instead of sharing a potluck, making sure that everyone got food, the rich ate really well and the poor went away hungry.

There are all kinds of divisions in the church that are bad divisions. Economic divisions where we judge each other based on how much someone has or how they dress, what they drive, what kind of home they live in, what their grammar is like and their level of education, economic divisions have racked the church for the last 20 Centuries. And so have racial divisions.

Let me tell you the story of modern Pentecostalism. There was a Bible College in Topeka, Kansas at the turn of the century run by a man named Charles Parham. He was a Holiness preacher and he preached that according to the book of Acts there was a second experience of the Holy Spirit called the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. And that second experience of the Holy Spirit would be accompanied by speaking in tongues.

Well, up to this time there were very people who had ever had that experience. But over the Christmas break a number of students at Charles Parham's Bible College decided to fast and seek the Lord. There was this amazing break through. At 12:01 a.m., on January 1, 1901, which in that time was considered to be the first minute of the first day of the first year of the 20th Century, Agnes, a Bible college student at this little Bible college in Topeka, Kansas, feels herself filled with the Holy Spirit and she begins to speak in tongues.

Well news of this spread through the Bible College like wild fire and many other students began to speak in tongues. And Charles Parham, himself, received that gift and he began to travel around teaching about his doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues.

Well, there was a Black Holiness pastor named William Seymour, a godly man, who was blind in one of his eyes. William Seymour wanted to learn more about this baptism in the Holy Spirit and so he went to the college where Parham was teaching. But Parham was a segregationist. Parham had associations with the Ku Klux Klan. And so he wouldn't let this Black Holiness preacher sit in his class. He made him sit outside the class at the window and listen to the teaching from outside the classroom.

William Seymour was so hungry for God that he put up with that kind of racism and abuse. To make a long story short, William Seymour traveled to Los Angeles and gathered with a group of other believers on a street called Azusa Street and God visited William Seymour and this little interracial group of believers so powerfully in 1906 that tens of thousands of people from all over the world streamed to Azusa Street to be touched and filled with the Holy Spirit. William Seymour's meetings were this extraordinary gathering of people from every race, every ethnicity, who were kneeling together at the foot of the cross.

Here was the church the way Jesus meant the church to be – no regard to color, to class, to ethnic background – just spiritual brothers and sisters together worshipping God. William Seymour would get up and preach. He would say to the people, 'The mark of the Holy Spirit's coming is not just speaking with other tongues, the mark of the Holy Spirit's coming is that we love each other.' And from all over the South, white racists would come and repent and embrace their African American brothers and sisters. And they would cry together at the altar.

Well Charles Parham heard about what was going on and so he took a trip out to LA to investigate William Seymour's meetings. And when he saw Blacks and Whites kneeling together and hugging each other, crying at the altar, his racism and hatred was too much. He stood up in a meeting and said to the people, "God is sick to his stomach at this racial intermingling." He said, "God would not stand for the kind of animalism and the mongralization that was happening in this place." And with some of his white followers, he demanded that the whites leave and join him down the street. Some left with him and from that moment on there was a split in the Pentecostal movement between Black Pentecostal Churches and White Pentecostal Churches. It was racism, pure and simple.

Let me tell you a couple of stories from my own experiences of the Christian church. I told you on several occasions that I came to Christ from a Jewish background. When I was raised in New York City I never actually heard my entire growing up for 18 years an anti-Semitic remark. The first time I encountered anti-Semitism was when I gave my life to Christ and joined a Christian church. Now, perhaps it was because these Christians felt safe. They looked around and thought, "There are no Jewish people here, so we can let it all hang out." But Marlene and I were in a Sunday school class and they were discussing the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story in which a priest and Levite walked around this bleeding man, but a Samaritan helped the man. And for some reason, the teacher of this class asked how they felt Jewish people responded to those in need. And that opened the door for the entire class in this Christian church, to spew their prejudices.

One person said that he was upset with his Jewish neighbor who never raked his leaves, but let them blow on his lawn. Another talked about an unfortunate experience he had in business with a Jew. On and on it went. I was horrified. I left the room reeling. Here were people naming the name of Christ and yet had such bigotry and hatred in their hearts toward Jewish people.

On another occasion, I was standing waiting for Marlene outside the church building. This fellow walked up to me. I had seen him before and he said from out of the blue, "You know, you can always tell a Jew [he was talking to me]."

I said, "Really? How is that?"

He said, "Because of the shoes they wear."

I said, "Is that right?"

He said, "Yeah, they wear those squeaky shoes. You can always tell a Jew."

I couldn't believe what a profound ignoramus this man was who was talking to me. So I said to him very, very nicely, "Do you know that I am Jewish?"

All the color went out of his face. He began stammering.

I said, "You know, I think that Jesus just set you up to reveal to you what your heart really has been like."

Let me make this personal for each one of you. Is there any occasion; at home, in private, behind closed doors, with your spouse or roommate or friends or children, or perhaps when you are on the golf course with a few friends or driving with a coworker or having lunch; is there any occasion when you ever say something that is racist? That stereotypes a group of people according to their race or ethnicity or religion? Is there any occasion when you meet someone or watch someone or listen to someone and you form a negative judgment of that person based on his or her race? You say, "that's what all of those people are like. They always act like that. They always talk like that. They always demand this or that."

God sees racism. He sees anti-Semitism. He sees our judgments and our prejudices and it is a stench in his nostrils.

Certainly, much division in the church is not economic or racial. Certainly some of it is just a product of our own selfishness and sin. The great English writer, C.S. Lewis, wrote a book called The Great Divorce, which was a fantasy about folks who live in Hell and take a bus trip to Heaven. Lewis doesn't portray the people from Hell as blood thirsty, horrible sinister types – no ax murderers or drug pushers. They are these ordinary folks who you and I could identify with. But they all had this one overriding characteristic about themselves, they are all supremely selfish and self consumed. In the book they are always breaking off into these lengthy monologues in which they try to explain themselves to anyone who will lend half an ear about how they have experienced so much hurt at the hands of their mother, their father, wife or husband. How they never received the recognition they deserved. How they had such rare talents and were so unique and beautiful, but because of jealousy no one paid them the proper amount of attention. How unfairly they had been treated after all they did for their children, working their fingers to the bone and slaving for them. Do you think I get one word of thanks? The tones of the voices of the people in Hell were all whines and complaints, all self-pitying. As a result of their selfishness, they keep moving farther and farther away from each other.

Hell, according to Lewis, is an individual progressively becoming more and more isolated, cutting off more relationships, moving farther and farther away from the universe. First, a mile away; then a hundred miles; then a thousand; then a million; then ten billion miles away.

This is at the root of so many divisions – selfishness. I didn't get my way. You haven't met my needs.

Martin Luther says that the essence of sin is people curved in on themselves. Let me make this personal for you. If you have been involved in a recent dispute, do you see anywhere in the dispute between you and your coworker, you and your mate, you and your roommate, you and your parents, you and your children, you and your boss, selfishness, a tug of war over whose will will win? A personal offense, not over matters of right and wrong, but offense because my way, my will didn't come out supreme. If you feel you were treated unfairly; that the unfairness is something that violated God's Word; was there sin involved or is it that this other person treated you in a way that you desired? And are you aware of your unfairness and how many people feel hurt because of your actions?

Now, friends, in many church divisions, tugs of war, power plays, selfish petty people with selfish petty disputes will cover their disputes by arguing that the issue really was doctrinal. It isn't that I wasn't elected to the deacon's board that I am upset about. The issue has to do with the authority of scriptures. Certainly, I am not going to be put out of joint because you offended my wife regarding your choice of carpet color, no one could be so petty as that, but I am concerned about your viewpoints on baptism.

Here is my fundamental conviction. Let me lay my cards on the table. My fundamental conviction is that most so-called doctrinal disputes in churches are not at the bottom doctrinal at all, they are not competing truth claims, rather most divisions in a church are personal, relational disputes that get masked over with doctrinal language. That is you go to the bottom of most divisions, it is a matter of personal hurt, personal offense, personal wounding and the personal issues are submerged under doctrine.

Now, I want to again say what I said at the front end. There are truth issues. There are some things of such supreme importance that it is appropriate to separate, to divide off, when those things are not present in a church. But frankly, the number of those essential things that require us to separate are relatively small. The essential things most have to do with salvation and who Christ is and who God is. We are talking about things like being saved by faith alone and the assertion of the full humanity and the full deity of Jesus Christ. Things like the assertion that God is a Trinity and the authority of Scripture.

But most things are not essential like that. Most of our disputes with each other are on very minor points for which Christians could legitimately disagree with each other. And holy men and women of God who are scholars could legitimately argue back and forth. I mean Christians have divided with each other about whether you get baptized backward or forward, how many times you can be dunked under the water – 3 times, 1 time, 1 time forward, 3 times backward. What words are said over in baptism? What form of government the church should take. Whether we call the leaders elders or pastors. --The nature of the Lord's return. Worship style. People always see in these things something major that would be sacrificed if we don't hold onto a pre-tribulational rapture.

It is rare that you meet someone who says, "You know, this issue is rather ambiguous in the Bible. I hold onto a position on a secondary matter, but I hold it

with a loose hand. I certainly wouldn't be willing to separate from other Christians over this."

Nowhere do we see more divisions arise doctrinally than the one thing that is meant to bring us together as Christians and that is our participation together in the Lord's Table, what we call communion.

Paul says, "When you come together it is not the Lord's supper you eat," and then he goes on in verse 23 and says, "For I receive from the Lord what I also pass onto 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 the bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'"

I will tell, friends, in the history of the church there is probably no issue that has divided the church more than our understanding of the Lord's Supper. Here is the meal that is supposed to bring the church together, where we celebrate our common faith in Jesus Christ, where we come together around Christ's death for our sins, where we come together as sinners equal at the foot of the cross all in need, where we recognize one loaf, our oneness as one body, and yet doctrinal divisions have split the church for centuries. And truthfully, most of these cannot be established in the Bible.

For example, there is nothing in the Bible that says who the official must be at the Lord's Table. Some churches insist that the person who presides at the Lord's Table must be ordained. There is nothing in the Bible to that effect. There is nothing that says that a non-ordained Christian could not administer the Lord's Supper. That it couldn't be served by a woman as well as a man. There is nothing that says what words must be spoken over the bread and the cup before it is served. There is nothing in the Bible that says how frequent the Lord's Supper should be celebrated, whether we celebrate it every week or every day or once a month or three times a year. But churches will argue this fiercely that it must be celebrated this often and no more or no less. Here in the Vineyard we like to take it in every large-group service we meet.

There is nothing in the Bible that says what type of bread we should eat, whether we eat unleavened bread, which as a good link to the Passover, or whether we use wafers or crackers or bread. Certainly having one big loaf of bread and pulling off pieces has helpful symbolic influence as we see that we are part of a common loaf. But there are arguments in all directions regarding the kind of bread we use.

There is nothing that says that the wine that we use must be fermented or non-fermented. Grape juice can preserve the symbolism and so can wine.

There is nothing that says we can use one cup and wipe it for health purposes or use lots of little cups. People will argue this fervently back and forth.

In some cultures, bread and wine are not available. There is nothing in the Bible that says you couldn't use rice cakes and tea, if that is your staple.

There is nothing about the age of children, how old someone should be before taking communion or the fact that someone needs to go through a

catechism before taking communion. Or even the fact that they must be baptized before they take communion, so long as a person is able to explain faith in Christ and they have received Christ in their lives as their Savior. For little ones it might be best to bless them as Jesus blessed the children, and wait until they express faith in Christ. But there is nothing about the age of children. Likewise, there is nothing about certain denominations not being welcome at the table, whether they are Roman Catholic or Episcopalian or Pentecostals or Jewish. The only requirement to receive communion that I can see in the Bible is that someone be born again by God's Spirit and have Christ as their Lord and Savior.

There is nothing in the Bible that says we must call it a sacrament or an ordinance.

The truth is so many of our divisions are purely human, man-made divisions that have nothing to do with loyalty to Christ. However much we protest, this is not the division where Christ came and he said, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword." These are man-made power divisions often at the root of which is personal hurt and selfishness and pride.

Now what is the real meaning of communion?

It is certainly not a place where we divide off from each other. The apostle Paul says, "I receive from the Lord what I also pass on to you." He is not talking about receiving it by way of revelation. I think he is talking about receiving a tradition from the 11 apostles who heard Jesus speak. And each phrase here can be chewed on, mulled over and have it yield its deep significance in our lives.

Paul says, "The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed..." What night was he betrayed? It was the Passover night. As we take the Lord's Supper we must remember that the Lord's Supper was first celebrated as the Last Supper, a Passover meal. Christ himself is the Passover lamb.

And the Passover meal speaks to us about Christ's liberation. When you take the bread and the cup you need to remember that God is a Christ who sets people free. That God is the God of the Exodus. The one who led the Jewish people out from the land of bondage, from the land of Egypt, the place of their slavery.

And God is the same God today who through the blood of Jesus Christ can lead you out from whatever enslaves you. You are in bondage to some eating disorder. You have struggled with your weight for years. God can lead you out from that bondage through the power of the cross of Christ.

You struggle with anorexia. You struggle with bulimia. You struggle with a sexual addiction. You struggle with anger. You are in bondage to fear. You are racked with fears of the future concerning what will happen to you after your divorce. You are afraid regarding your finances. You are afraid of failing in school. You are afraid when you minister. You are afraid regarding your health. You are afraid of death. You are terminally ill and you are afraid to die.

Listen, the communion meal is a meal of liberation. It is a meal of freedom. Every time we take the bread and the cup, we are proclaiming that Christ is a God who can set us free from all the things that hold us in bondage.

We are not only proclaiming Christ's liberation, but also Christ's goodness. Paul says, "And when he had given thanks, he broke it." Why do we give thanks

to God in this meal we call communion? The Greek word for thanks is “eucharisteo”, from which we get the Eucharist. Why do we give thanks to God before we partake of this communion meal? Because of his goodness in our lives; because God allows us to unburden ourselves before him. God gives us access to himself through the blood of Jesus Christ. Through the blood of Christ we can come boldly to the throne of grace. God has been good to you. This meal reminds us of the goodness of God.

Paul, then, says, “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.’”

What else do we celebrate in this meal? We celebrate God’s presence. There has been much debate in the history of the church regarding the nature of God’s presence at this Table. Catholics have argued that Christ is bodily present, that a miracle takes place in which the elements are transubstantiated, that’s the word. The real body and the real blood of Jesus Christ are put in place of the substance of the bread and the wine. So that when you take the wafer, you are taking into yourself the physical body of Jesus.

Other people – Baptists, many Pentecostals, many in the Ana-Baptist tradition would say that this is just symbols. We are just holding up before people a picture. The bread represents the body of Christ. The cup represents the blood of Christ.

I think John Calvin got it most closely right when he said that he would rather adore the mystery that is at the Table rather than try to explain it. But in my mind, as I read scripture, I think we must say that what is going on in communion is more than symbols. It is more than a picture. Now I do not believe that Jesus is bodily present in this meal. And I do not hold to some view that the elements are somehow transubstantiated. But I do believe that Christ is spiritually present through the Holy Spirit in this meal and that when an individual takes the bread and the cup by faith, they are strengthened spiritually by the Holy Spirit and grace comes into our souls so that we are spiritually nourished.

You say, “Rich, is Jesus not always present with the church?”

Yes, I like the way one person describes what happens in the communion meal. He said it was like a father who has children playing in the playroom. The father is watching his children and then decides that he is doing to pick each child up and give them a hug.

What happens as you take the Lord’s Supper is you experience the hug of God. I would say, yes, he is always here. In the church he is present. But sometimes and through this meal, he leans down and picks us up and he hugs us. It is the spiritual presence of God.

The meal also speaks to us about Christ’s sacrifice. He says, “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 of my blood, do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.’”

The meal reminds us that Christ died for us, in our place, as our substitute. He died for our sins. He bore the curse of God that should have fallen on us. He took on himself our condemnation. He was executed so that we might go free.

And finally, the meal speaks to us about Christ's plans for our future. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The meal points us forward until he comes to the great Messianic banquet that we will get to enjoy with Jesus Christ, our bridegroom in the Kingdom of God.

These five things: Christ's liberation; Christ's goodness; Christ's presence; Christ's sacrifice; and Christ's plans – these five things pull the whole church together from every denomination. And so Paul finishes and says, "Therefore, whoever eats the bread and 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."

Tragically, these verses have been terribly misunderstood through the centuries. Many, many people who need the grace of God have been kept from the table by a misinterpretation of these verses. These verses are not intended to drive an individual into some morbid introspection, in which you say, "Well, I am feeling far from the Lord. I recently sinned in a terrible way. There is a stain on my conscience, therefore, I should not go to the Table." So many folks have been kept from the place that most speaks to us and assures us of God's grace. So many people have been kept from that meal which testifies to us that Christ receives sinners. So many people have been kept from the table that need to come to the Table by a misinterpretation of these verses.

What do these verses mean by eating and drinking in an unworthy manner and not discerning the body? Here is what it means.

Paul is saying that when there are divisions among us, when we don't go to the Table with a reconciling spirit, when we don't say before God, "God, I am willing to forgive all who have offended me. I am willing to have all my relationships healed. I am willing to do what it takes to get right with a brother or sister. I will leave my judgments, my grudges, my bitterness, at the altar." When we don't see the essential unity of the church, we fail to discern the body of Christ.

Here is the bottom line, friends. God wants you and God wants me, God wants us here in the Vineyard to have an open, loving, tolerant view of all other Christian believers. Around this table we at Vineyard must say anyone who names the name of the Lord in faith is welcome to participate. Oh, we might disagree about this or that. You might have a different view of healing that we do. You might have a different view of church government than we do. You might have a different view of the end times than we do.

But if you are born again, we in the Vineyard will open our arms around this community and around the word and say to you, "You are a brother of ours. You are a sister. We see the unity of the body and we receive you as a member of our very own family."

Let's pray.