



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Table Fellowship
of God's People
(*Food and Hunger*,
pp. 11-17)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Table Fellowship

The Corinthian church's divisions at the Lord's Supper were a microcosm of their fractured, dysfunctional fellowship. Yet, if properly celebrated, the Supper would foster the assembly's unity as a body of believers.

Prayer:†

Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands
that holy things have taken;
let ears that now have heard Your songs
to clamor never waken.

Lord, may the tongues which 'Holy' sang
keep free from all deceiving;
the eyes which saw Your love be bright,
Your blessed hope perceiving.

The feet that tread Your holy courts
from light, Lord, do not banish;
the bodies by Your body fed
with Your new life replenish.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Reflection

In Christian congregations, the Apostle Paul knew, we are deeply shaped by our table fellowship. Through our choices about what, where, and with whom to eat, we are forming basic commitments to other people, the creation, and God.

Paul had thoughtfully adopted some comparatively radical stances toward food and eating, including:

- ▶ *eating with Gentile believers.* Paul even rebuked Peter for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles in Antioch after "certain men from James" arrived from Jerusalem. "Paul believed Peter's conservatism was fueled by cowardice and insincerity," writes Still, "and that the pillar apostle's tactical adjustments at the dining table compromised the very 'truth of the gospel' (Galatians 2:11-14)."
- ▶ *enjoying food offered to idols.* Paul held a less guarded position on "idol foods" than did many Christians (Acts 15:29; Revelation 2:14, 20). Applying Psalm 24:1 ("the earth is the Lord's and everything in it"), he told the Corinthians to "eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the grounds of conscience" (1 Corinthians 10:25-26).
- ▶ *relaxing diet restrictions.* Because "a new day had dawned in Christ ... [Paul believed] the traditional Jewish boundary lines needed to be redrawn and well-established Jewish beliefs needed to be re-configured," Still observes. "He promoted the ideal that there was neither Jew nor Greek in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Gentiles, therefore, could be full-fledged members of the people of God without adhering to Jewish... dietary laws."

Nevertheless, Paul was sensitive toward Christians who held stricter dietary views. He urged Roman believers not to despise "weaker" disciples who are vegetarians, but to "[walk] in love"



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with them in order not to “cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died” (14:1-3, 15).

He had sharp words for the ‘strong’ Corinthians who welcomed his view of Christian freedom, yet abused others by their arrogance and greed. They carelessly continued to eat in temples for idol sacrifice. Comparing three meals—the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16-17), Jewish feasts associated with sacrifice (18), and meals served in pagan temples (19-21)—Paul warned that a common table fosters fellowship among the partakers, and between them and the one they honor in the meal. So, he warned them to “flee from the worship of idols” and the “table of demons” (10:14, 21). He was outraged when they turned their love feasts and Lord’s Supper “into a humiliating, divisive laughingstock,” says Still. “Instead of sharing their food, some church members were eating and drinking in excess, while other believers were left wanting and without.... Paul cautions that their behavior at the Lord’s Supper is literally a matter of life and death—physically and spiritually, individually and collectively (1 Corinthians 11:27-34).”

Study Questions

1. Paul objects to the arrogance of the ‘strong’ Corinthians in two regards: their careless association with pagan temple meals and their humiliating treatment of fellow Christians. How do the Apostle’s images of the bread and cup in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 address each concern?
2. Examine the occasions for table fellowship—both shared meals and the Lord’s Supper—among members of the study group and within the congregation. How do these build up a faithful community? Do they reveal hurtful divisions?
3. How can sharing the Lord’s Supper shape our discipleship, according to the opening prayer (“Strengthen for service, Lord”) and the spiritual, “Let Us Break Bread Together”?
4. Are there any “tables of demons” today, in the sense of places where it would be wrong for a Christian to eat?

Departing Hymn: “Let Us Break Bread Together”

Let us break bread together on our knees,
let us break bread together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us drink wine together on our knees,
let us drink wine together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us praise God together on our knees,
let us praise God together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

African-American spiritual

‘From a deacon’s prayer in a fifth-century Nestorian rite of the Mar Thomas Christians on the southern coast of India; translated from Syriac by C. W. Humphreys and Percy Dearmer in *The English Hymnal* (1906). (altered)

Table Fellowship

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To explore how table fellowship within a congregation expresses and shapes members' basic commitments to one another, other people, the creation, and God.
2. To introduce the Apostle Paul's comparatively radical stances toward food and eating.
3. To examine the table fellowship in our own congregations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Food and Hunger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Todd Still writes: "Recently, at a luncheon where Baptists and Jews shared in table fellowship and theological dialog, I recalled Paul's prayer: 'May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 15:5-6). With this benediction the apostle concludes his instructions on eating and drinking. Here he captures the hope to which we are called, and the love that our table fellowship should embody" (*Food and Hunger*, p. 17). Are our choices about what, where, and with whom we eat fostering harmony among us and bringing glory to God?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study, which covers the second half of Todd Still's "Table Fellowship of God's People," explores how the Lord's Supper and common meals can shape communities of faithful disciples today. By examining a spectacular failure of table fellowship in the church of Corinth, we can learn how God intended table fellowship to build up our congregations.

The letter of 1 Corinthians contains Paul's responses to a report from several church members ("Chloe's people," 1 Corinthians 1:11; cf. 11:18) and a list of questions from the congregation (7:1a). No wonder the members turned to the Apostle, for he had established the church about five years earlier (Acts 18:1-11; cf. 3:6) through his teaching and preaching. Most members were Gentile, though a few prominent Jews had joined the congregation.

One faction in the church, which seems to agree generally with Paul's views on table fellowship (to eat with Gentiles, enjoy foods that are sold in the market after they have been offered to idols, and relax the Jewish dietary rules), is displaying spiritual arrogance. Their correction by the Apostle raises the important question:

Can we hold the proper views, yet misuse our knowledge in arrogant and greedy ways to the detriment of the functioning of the community, the souls of fellow believers, and our own souls?

Study Questions

1. "In order to form a Christian community identity within a pluralistic pagan world, Paul repeatedly calls his readers to a 'conversion of the imagination,'" Richard Hays writes. "He invites them to see the world in dramatically new ways, in light of values shaped by the Christian story" [*First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 11]. This passage is a good example. As we eat together the "common bread" and "cup of blessing" in the Lord's Supper, we are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. This rich link to all other Christians should stop us from humiliating them, especially in our table fellowship. The meal we share is from the Lord and in his honor: we eat at "the table of the Lord" and drink from "the cup of the Lord." This embrace of Christ's gracious gift and welcome of his fellowship is incompatible with showing any honor to "demons," the powers that others mistakenly worship as their gods. Were the 'strong' Corinthians intending to show honor to the pagan deities, or just carelessly unconcerned how other Christians and pagans interpreted their actions?
2. Encourage members to discuss how the Lord's Supper is celebrated. Are regular church dinners, supper clubs, small group meals, or church festivals and picnics provided for families and friends to dine together? Are these events scheduled, priced, and designed to encourage all members to participate? Do these events help members to know one another, or is the time filled with idle conversation? How are new members integrated into the meals? Are new friendships formed, or do factions and cliques eat in separation from others?
3. "Strengthen For Service, Lord" reminds us that in performing the actions of the Lord's Supper, we are forming "bodily memories" – with our hands, ears, tongues, eyes, and feet – that we should take away into our daily lives. We should be prepared to serve others, be discerning about the claims and counter-claims we hear, be truthful in our speech, and hopeful in apparently bad situations. Our bodies should be different and we should live "new lives" because our "bodies [have been] by Your body fed."

"Let Us Break Bread Together" emphasizes that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a communal prayer: as we eat the bread, drink the wine, and praise God, we are constantly aware of our humble presence together before God. Even as we celebrate and "praise God together," we remember that we are sinners in need of God's grace. This sense of shared acceptance before God should lead us to seek and grant forgiveness from one another.
4. Though Paul explicitly denies that pagan gods exist, he believes that those who worship them become "partners with demons" – that is, they participate in practices that undermine their relationships to God and neighbors. At a "table of demons," we give honor to a distorting power or principality. Encourage members to brainstorm on places (e.g., a restaurant, club, or chain of restaurants), general occasions (e.g., banquets in honor of an immoral industry or individual, or lavish feasts that are inappropriate in the context of hunger), or specific circumstances (e.g., which include inappropriate entertainment, offensive language, or exclusive snobbery) that would be inconsistent with their Christian discipleship.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.