

CORINTHIANS 10:20-22

PICKING A FIGHT WE CANNOT WIN

“What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”¹

We live in a world that is increasingly anthropocentric. Modern man has ensconced himself on the throne of his life and generally conducts his life with no thought given to what the will of God might be. “If it feels good, do it” has become the dominant philosophy guiding the life of far too many professing Christians. Too often we are able to navigate through life without consciously thinking of God or considering what His will might be, save for a brief pause on Sunday morning, providing we are not too tired to attend services at the local church.

It is certain that the Lord’s Table is meant to be a time of worship. However, the Meal is always corporate worship, and thus the relationship of the participants is vital. At the Communion Meal, we confess relationship with those sharing the Meal as together we declare our mutual relationship to the Risen Son of God. At the Lord’s Table, we subsume our personal experience to that of the corporate Body.

It is a human tendency to reduce common acts of worship to ritual in which the performance assumes greater importance than the event itself. Thus, we become focused on carefully performing the prescribed steps, forgetting that the confessional aspect of the event; we become more intent on the action than on the act. Though the inclination to create liturgies is evident in every aspect of worship—preaching, singing, praying, baptising—nowhere is this propensity to exalt the steps more evident than at the Lord’s Table.

The great tragedy is not that we ritualise what should be a time of confession, but rather the great tragedy is that having reduced the worship to a ritual we ignore the relationship. With time, we ignore the implications arising from living out our daily lives with its attendant self-centred focus, bringing the attitudes that contaminate our lives into the congregation. Not even the knowledge that we are engaged in worship before the Lord with fellow saints is sufficient to deter this tendency.

That was precisely what was happening in Corinth when Paul wrote the congregation. Perhaps if we examine the letter he wrote when he confronted them, we will learn from their error and avoid dishonouring the Lord as we observe the Lord’s Table. Join me in exploring the stern confrontation delivered to the Corinthian Christians as the Apostle warned them they were picking a fight they could not win.

A DELIBERATE PROVOCATION — Some of the Corinthians, apparently a significant number of them, were invoking their rights as they participated in various pagan rites. The text before us is continuing the theme initiated in the eighth chapter. There, Paul begins by speaking of what appears to have become a somewhat common practise of participating in feasts dedicated to idols. Let’s examine the particulars.

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Many, perhaps even most, of the Corinthian Christians had come to faith out of a background of idolatry. Beyond the fact that Greek culture was steeped in idolatry, there remains the fact that in that pagan culture those who worked in various trades were required to be members of a guild. No one could work at a given trade without holding membership in the appropriate guild. The various guilds shared some similarities to contemporary trade unions, but they each had a patron god or goddess to which the members of the guild paid homage. From time-to-time the guild members would join together to observe a festival or even a communal meal, and the food eaten whenever the guild came together would be first offered to the god or goddess to whom the guild was dedicated. Though all the food was offered to the patron deity, only the less desirable foodstuffs would remain on the altar while the rest was consumed for the meal. Those participating in the meal were said to be guests at the table of the patron deity. The meal was not the only feature of the festivities, for there were often included immoral and idolatrous activities associated with worship of the deity.

In itself, the act of eating a meal with the idolaters was a neutral act. This is what Paul means when he writes, “As to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-6].

Some of the Corinthian believers were sufficiently strong in their faith that they were not offended by eating a meal at an idolatrous feast. However, there were fellow believers who did not share this freedom—their consciences were weak. Therefore, the Apostle continued by issuing a caution. “[Some of your fellow Christians,] through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:7-13].

Paul continued instructing the recalcitrant saints by pointing to the fact that he was prepared to forego his rights in order to avoid wounding weaker believers or to avoid turning outsiders from the Faith. Based on this, he urged the Corinthians to weigh their actions in light of how they could be perceived by others watching them [see 1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-27]. The Apostle then reminded the Corinthians of several examples drawn from the history of Israel—examples that should have been well known to these Corinthian believers [see 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13]. Throughout this examination of the economy of God versus the concept of man, Paul hammered his point home repeatedly cautioning against drawing a wrong conclusion and imploring his readers to weigh carefully their own actions in light of their spiritual forebears.

At this point, Paul drew his readers’ attention to their confession at the Lord’s Table, reminding them that they confessed a shared life when at the Table [see 1 CORINTHIANS 10:14-22]. The emphasis is upon the shared experience, and especially the shared act of worship. The Corinthians, as is true of all people who conscientiously obey the Word of the Lord, participated as a Body in the Meal. This is to be a corporate Meal at which participants confess their mutual relationship to one another because they share in a mutual relationship to the Risen Son of God.

Consider one vital issue before moving to the next point. The Corinthians that participated at idolatrous feasts were deliberate in their actions, and thus we are compelled to conclude that they were deliberate in the provocation their actions presented to the Lord. They appear to have known what they were doing, choosing to continue despite knowing that they were participating in a ritual that can only be described as demonic. It was not so much that they had dined at the table of a pagan deity as that they were either unconscious of the impact of their action on the lives of their fellow Christians or they were inconsiderate of fellow believers. In either case, those participating in the idolatrous feasts were harming the people of God.

I suppose that were we able to speak with the Corinthians that were sharing in the idol feasts, they would have asserted their right to dine wherever and with whomever they wished. It seems to me that they were not so very different from modern Canadian Christians who are more intent on enjoying their rights than they are on fulfilling their responsibilities. Living by this philosophy of the exaltation of personal rights, the Corinthian saints deliberately provoked the Lord and harmed the cause of Christ.

Well, how do we differ when we deliberately choose to pander to our personal desires rather than fulfilling the will of God? God calls us to be generous on every occasion, but when we cease generosity toward His cause in order to accumulate more of this world's goods, are we not deliberately provoking the Lord? God expects us to be compassionate toward the vulnerable, but when we ignore the plight of impoverished saints, or when we fail to inform ourselves of the persecution of fellow Christians in foreign lands so that we will not be discomforted, are we not provoking the Lord? When we stay up late on Saturday night or intentionally schedule our recreational time on Sunday and avoid worshipping the Lord, are we not provoking the Lord?

Modern Christians have created a caricature of God. The God we worship is doting—always understanding when we assert our rights against responsibilities and never disappointed in our self-centred decisions. He smiles benignly at us as we pursue our own comfort at the expense of advancing His Kingdom, and though He may cluck his disapproval He will never make us uncomfortable. However, the God we imagine we serve is a caricature.

We have forgotten that God is holy. He is pure and He calls His people to that same holiness. Peter writes Christians, “Preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Recall Peter’s words written in his first letter to Christians of the Diaspora. “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord remains forever.’

“And this word is the good news that was preached to you” [1 PETER 1:13-25].

The Divine expectation is that Christians will be holy in all their conduct. This means that God expects His people to assume responsibility for their actions, considering the impact of their decision on their fellow believers and on the way in which God is viewed by outsiders. The Divine expectation is that Christians will reflect the purity of their souls through lives that are holy and righteous. The Divine expectation is that Christians will live, not for this transient world, but for the world to come.

The Corinthians could not say that they were pure when they were deliberate in their provocative actions, nor could they say that their decisions reflected purified souls when they were deliberately provocative. Similarly, we who name the Name of Christ in this day cannot say that we reflect purified souls or that we are holy when our focus is on fulfilling our immediate desires rather than discovering and doing the will of God. We cannot aver that we are living for eternity when we consistently seek our own comfort.

A THOUGHTLESS PROVOCATION — Those Corinthians who chose to participate at meals dedicated to idols and also at the Lord’s Table, acted thoughtlessly. They were focused on fulfilling their own desires, and not on building others. This drive to fulfil their own desire appears to have been a systemic flaw in the make-up of the Corinthian Christians. Throughout this letter we see that the Apostle found it necessary to instruct them repeatedly in the need to build one another in the Faith.

The Corinthian Christians were determined to obtain spiritual gifts that would exalt them in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of others—they wanted to feel good about themselves. Therefore, they sought to make themselves exciting through attempting to seize what God had not chosen to give them. That is the background to Paul’s rebuke in 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-4. “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”

Clearly, the Apostle was concerned that each member of the assembly should focus on building up others rather than puffing up himself or herself. Similarly, this self-centred focus was seen at the Lord’s Table also. The reason the Apostle was compelled to provide instruction concerning the Lord’s Table was because a number of the Corinthians were inconsiderate of their fellow saints at the Love Feast that preceded the Lord’s Table.

“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, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses 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 commend you in this? No, I will not” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-22].

One other example of the selfish attitude that appears so prevalent among the Corinthian Christians is seen in Paul's censure of those same saints who were bringing legal suits against fellow Christians. "When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers" [1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-8]!

In biblical theology, the congregation is of greater importance than civic society. This does not mean that society at large has no validity, but it means that as Christians we are members of God's Kingdom, situated as aliens in this dying world. Having spoken of some of the patriarchs, the writer of the Hebrew Letter says, "These all died in faith without receiving the things promised, but they saw them in the distance and welcomed them and acknowledged that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth" [HEBREWS 11:13, NET BIBLE].

Christians must be conscious of the impact of their decisions when viewed either by their fellow Christians or by outsiders; and Christians must be conscientious in the conduct of their lives. This is the reason Peter writes as he does when he says, "Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul, and maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they may malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when He appears" [1 PETER 2:11, 12]. The reason for this is because "our citizenship is in Heaven" [PHILIPPIANS 3:20].

The Master said that He was sending us out "as sheep in the midst of wolves," and therefore we were to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" [MATTHEW 10:16]. Thus, we who are Christians are ambassadors of Heaven, serving now in foreign territory where we represent the cause of our Master. Here, we are to reveal the beauty of His holiness through godly lives, through wise choices and through self-restraint. We are responsible to be considerate of one another, and to accept responsibility for our own actions first, and then accept responsibility to ensure that the actions of the community of faith reflect our commitment to Christ and to His Word.

Failure to assume responsibility for our corporate actions is a thoughtless provocation of God's mercy and goodness. To fail to recognise the congregation as the Body of Christ, treating it (corporately) as an entity other than the Bride of Christ is a thoughtless provocation of the Lord. Failure to treat the members of the congregation with respect, receiving them with dignity and honour, is a thoughtless provocation of the Lord. More particularly, failure to consider the impact of our actions and our words on the lives of God's holy people is a thoughtless provocation of the Lord that invites His displeasure and ultimately invites His discipline.

Because of their self-centred lives, many of the Corinthians were weak and ill, and some had died. Paul cautioned that "if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:30-32]. As an aside of some considerable importance, when did you last witness God's discipline of His people? I suspect that the reason we witness less of His discipline is that His people fail to take serious the responsibility to hold one another responsible.

In modern ecclesiology we have reduced the church to an organisation rather than regarding her as the Body of Christ; and since we have created a political entity we conduct our affairs according to the rules of this world—appealing to votes and worrying about whether we might possibly be violating some individual's rights rather than considering what the will of the Lord might be and whether we are honouring Him. Consequently, since we are paralysed and unable to hold one another accountable, God Himself no longer works in power among us.

Modern Christians are more frightened at the thought that someone's feelings may be hurt than they are at the knowledge that their actions dishonour the Lord. We grow positively casual toward the Bride of Christ, treating her as our private concubine to be used for our own purposes rather than the holy entity created out of the riven side of the Saviour. Such abuse of the Saviour is thoughtless at best, inviting Him to intervene to hold us accountable.

No only do we as churches fail to hold one another accountable, but we grow casual about the Lord's Table itself, treating participation as a right rather than a responsibility. What I mean is that the Lord's Table is no longer overseen by the church, but set before all with the decision to participate left up to the individual. Do they "feel" worthy? Do they "want" to eat and drink at the Lord's Table? The confessional aspect of the rite is forgotten, and consequently worship is neglected. This, also, is a thoughtless provocation of the Lord.

A KNOWLEDGEABLE DECISION — Paul has confronted the Corinthian Christians, exposing the provocative nature of their choices, in order to lead them to make a knowledgeable decision. The Lord's Table is not set before the people of God in order to purify their hearts; it is set before them because their hearts have been purified through faith in the Risen Son of God. The Communion Meal is not a time for private confession; it is an opportunity for corporate worship as a congregation of the Lord. So, as Paul that draws the text to a conclusion, he anticipates that the Corinthians will choose to do what honours the Lord.

Similarly, it is appropriate for us to draw the message to a conclusion by asking questions that will assist each of us to consider our life and our actions. Surely, we are not seeking to pick a fight with the Lord! For if we are, we must know that it is a fight that we cannot win. We dare not permit ourselves to compartmentalise our lives into cubicles labelled "secular" and "sacred." Should we attempt to do so, we will discover that we sacrifice our relationship with Christ and the privilege that attends that relationship. We will not longer enjoy power with God or with man. Neither shall we any longer know His peace ruling in our lives. Moreover, we will have surrendered access into His presence and the immediacy that we had previously known. The whole of life is lived out before the Lord, and as Christians we are responsible to live every moment to the glory of God. Now, about those questions.

First, since it is the day on which we observe the Lord's Table, I will ask each of us to consider these questions. Do we recognise the Body of Christ? Are we members of His Body? Or do we simply affiliate with His people? What I mean is, do we go to church? Or are we living as the church? Is "church" what we do for a period of time each week? Or does "church" describe who we are and define what we do?

It is apparent from reading the Word of God that each Christian is expected to unite openly with the congregation wherein the Spirit places him or her. There, the believer is to lend the gifts which the Spirit has entrusted to her or him in order to build up the Body. We recognise this responsibility in our church covenant which we read together from time-to-time. It would undoubtedly be an encouragement to read it more frequently.

Another question to ask ourselves is whether we are walking with the Master, weighing our actions in light of the impact of our deeds on the people of God. This brings us still closer to the thrust of Paul's concerns voiced to the Corinthians. We are each responsible to answer this query, for though any of us may inspect the fruit produced by an individual, we cannot know the heart of the individual. Do you yearn for God's glory to be revealed in your life? Do you long to see His Name magnified throughout our communities? Are you praying and anticipating that He will reveal His majesty among His people when you gather with them each week?

Sunday worship will be reduced to mere ritual if we fail to prepare to meet the Living God. If we do not pray, asking for His presence and asking Him to prepare us, then we will soon reduce our worship to a prescribed liturgy, imagining that reciting the liturgy is sufficient for worship. If we sing the hymns of Zion and fail to know the presence of the Lord, what have we accomplished? To what purpose do we recite prayers if we fail to address our deepest concerns before the Throne of Grace? Should we hear the preaching of the Word and fail to hear the voice of the Master speaking through His Word, we will have failed to worship.

Far too many of our fellow Christians attend church out of duty because they have not prepared their hearts to meet with the Great King. We must guard our hearts to avoid falling into the trap of complacency in the House of the Lord. We must determine that we will prepare our own hearts through reading the Word, seeking the face of the Lord, and serving one another in the Spirit of holiness throughout the week.

Moving to the motivation behind our service and our efforts at worship, we need to ask whether we have focused so intensely on our personal rights that we have neglected responsibility. Do you know the gift or gifts with which the Spirit of God has entrusted you? Are you exercising this divine allotment to build others? Are you seeking opportunity to strengthen others each week? Have we begun to treat the holy Bride of Christ as a common trollop, becoming so familiar with her that we address her in common, even vulgar terms?

I urge each member of this congregation, and you who share our service as friends and guests, to consider that God's redeemed people are destined to reign with Him. These who are called by His Name are not mere men destined for dust, but we are ambassadors of Heaven. Our presence in the earth delays judgement as we cry out to God for mercy, asking Him to save the lost and to deliver His people so that they can serve Him effectively.

When Christ removes His people, His Spirit will no longer restrain evil as is now the case. The restraining power of the Spirit is exercised through the people of God as they live holy lives and cry out to God for mercy. When the Master has removed His people, who shall be left to plead for mercy on the earth? When Jesus comes, who will be left to reflect the glory of God to lost people?

Look forward with me to what is shortly coming on the earth. Following the Rapture, there will still be churches among the earth dwellers. Though God's holy people will have been removed from the earth, church services will continue as they do now. The stately rituals will continue among the churches as they have for centuries. Preachers robed in gaudy vestments will continue to stand in pulpits to deliver pious sermons in stentorian tones. In the meetings dancers will continue to dance and flags will still be waved and incense will be burned, but all to no avail, just as today these activities are meaningless if there is no relationship behind the activity. I fear there will even be churches that will be identified as "evangelical" at that time. There, prayers will be said, songs will be sung and sermons will be preached. Though the people will feel good about themselves, they will be lost—without hope and without God in the world. There will be no relationship then, as there is no relationship in too many instances in this day.

When Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal, they became frenetic in their attempts to coerce their god into answering them. The Bible laconically observes that following their effort, “There was no voice, and no one answered” [1 KINGS 18:26]. After becoming still more frenzied in their efforts, the Bible again reports, “No one answered; no one paid attention” [1 KINGS 18:29]. Among the professed churches of God, how many labour feverishly to “worship,” and yet, no one answers, no one pays attention. Tragically, it would appear that the observation made of the prophets of Baal may well apply too frequently among the churches of our Lord.

There is yet another question that we should ask of ourselves. Have our desires begun to rule over us, supplanting the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ? Paul proscribed participation in that which was immoral, unethical and destructive. However, many of our desires are for activities that are morally neutral. There is an old saying that reminds us, “Good is enemy of the best.” Eating a meal is amoral—morally neutral; but eating at an idolatrous feast is immoral. So, the Corinthians were drifting into a trap that would lead them into defiance of Holy God.

We dare not permit ourselves to fall into the trap of imagining that because an activity is amoral, we do not need to exercise caution. Even morally neutral practises can become immoral. Drinking can lead to drunkenness, and drunkenness is sinful. Working long hours can turn one into a workaholic who ignores relationships. Membership in a gang can lead to criminal activities as the gang member seeks acceptance among his or her peers; and an over powering desire for acceptance by one’s peers can lead to tacit approval of a number of wicked practises. Devotion to one’s family can lead to supplanting worship of God with worship of the family, just as devotion to one’s parents can border on ancestral worship. Pursuit of recreational activity can lead to laziness. Excessive patriotism can produce idolatry of the state. Watching television or surfing the Net can displace beneficial activities. A desire for material goods can lead to materialism. Taking medication can result in addiction, and on and on.

We seldom intend on doing what is evil, but the transformation is gradual and painless. Therefore, from time-to-time it is good and wise for those who will honour the Lord to examine their current situation in light of the Word. If our desires have begun to rule over us, we must be ruthless in rejecting their rule, determining that we will serve God and honour Him.

Of course, it is impossible to honour God, much less to worship God, if we have no living relationship to God. The only way to have a relationship with the True and Living God is to be saved, to be born from above, to have received the forgiveness of sin. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” [JOHN 14:6]. It is impossible to know God except through knowing the Son of God. There are not multiple ways to God, however satisfying that philosophy may appear. You have heard Jesus’ warning that “The way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” He continued by cautioning that “The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” [MATTHEW 7:13, 14]. Thus, there is but one way to God, and that is through Christ Jesus.

The Word of God teaches us that “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [ROMANS 5:6-8].

Therefore, the offer extended to all people is the offer of life in the Beloved Son. The sole alternative to life is death; the sole alternative to forgiveness is condemnation. Either we are forgiven, and saved, or we are condemned, and lost. The Word of God declares that “Whoever believes in [the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the Name of the Only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18].

The promise of God is that “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That promise concludes with the citation of the Prophet Joel who prophesied long years before Jesus came, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

And that is our invitation to you. Believing the promise of God, receiving the Son of God as Master of your life, be saved today. Amen.