

# *It's Easy to Tear Down*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2<sup>nd</sup> in a four-part series

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*1 Corinthians 11:17–34 (CEB)*

<sup>17</sup>Now I don't praise you as I give the following instruction because when you meet together, it does more harm than good. <sup>18</sup>First of all, when you meet together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I partly believe it. <sup>19</sup>It's necessary that there are groups among you, to make it clear who is genuine. <sup>20</sup>So when you get together in one place, it isn't to eat the Lord's meal. <sup>21</sup>Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. <sup>22</sup>Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God's churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don't praise you in this.

<sup>23</sup>I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. <sup>24</sup>After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." <sup>25</sup>He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." <sup>26</sup>Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

<sup>27</sup>This is why those who eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord inappropriately will be guilty of the Lord's body and blood. <sup>28</sup>Each individual should test himself or herself, and eat from the bread and drink from the cup in that way. <sup>29</sup>Those who eat and drink without correctly understanding the body are eating and drinking their own judgment. <sup>30</sup>Because of this, many of you are weak and sick, and quite a few have died. <sup>31</sup>But if we had judged ourselves, we wouldn't be judged. <sup>32</sup>However, we are disciplined by the Lord when we are judged so that we won't be judged and condemned along with the whole world. <sup>33</sup>For these reasons, my brothers and sisters, when you get together to eat, wait for each other. <sup>34</sup>If some of you are hungry, they should eat at home so that getting together doesn't lead to judgment. I will give directions about the other things when I come.

*"The tragedy of life is often not in our failure, but rather in our complacency; not in our doing too much, but rather in our doing too little; not in our living above our ability, but rather in our living below our capacities."*

*Benjamin E. Mays*

Last week we saw that a good way to understand Paul's advice and instruction is to read his letters through a lens that has four parts:

1. Do what builds up the body of Christ.
2. Do what is a good witness to Jesus.
3. Avoid what tears down the body of Christ.
4. Avoid what is a bad witness to Jesus.

That little 2x2 matrix provides a tangible shape to our lives in the body of Christ. So, here's the question for this week: What do you think poses a bigger threat to churches from within: people who actively work to tear down the church or people who allow the church to decline through complacency and neglect? My money is on the latter.

In researching this study, I came across a list: "Church members: here are ten ways to kill your church." Intriguing title. The article is by a North Carolina pastor, Tejado Hanchell, who was merely passing on, with some paraphrasing, a ten-point list that he found in a 1959 church newsletter that was given him by one of his church members. It

is so spot on, I'm reprinting it here. You'll see that it is just as apt today as it was more than five decades ago:

**1. Don't come.**

One of the biggest church killers is waning attendance. Many people simply can't find the time to spend an hour or two in the Lord's house. We find excuse after excuse as to why we can't come to church.

I wonder what our lives would look like if God only showed up at our house as often as we showed up at his. The Bible is clear about the importance of assembling or coming together (Hebrews 10:25). If we don't go to church, we just might be playing a part in killing the church.

**2. If you do come, make sure it's late.**

So many of today's worshipers (and apparently those of 1959) have a lackadaisical attitude toward worship. We have an "I'll get there when I get there" attitude when it comes to church attendance.

I wonder, however, if we showed up to our job the way we show up to our church ... how many of us would still be employed?

We say that God is an "on time" God, but can he say the same about us? A lack of punctuality when it comes to worship is a microcosm of our overall view of God. It says that whatever else we are doing is more important, and God can just wait until we get there. This type of attitude is a major church killer.

**3. Only show up when the weather is good.**

Ever been to church in a driving rainstorm? Neither have most of the other people in your church! Some people only go to church when the sun is out and there are no clouds in the sky.

We have produced a culture of "fair-weather" Christians, who only attend church when everything is going right in their lives. The moment a storm hits their life, they get mad at God, the pastor and the church.

There are some people who you can tell exactly what's going on in their lives based upon their church attendance. When things are great and they have a little money in their pockets, they're on the front row singing "Amazing Grace," but as soon as they get laid off or deal with some sort of difficulty, they're ready to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). The only thing that dies with that kind of attitude is the church.

**4. Find fault with everything (and/or everyone).**

Most homicide investigations begin by researching those who had something negative to say about the victim. Similarly, when a church dies, you can be sure that the fault finders are prime suspects. These are the folks who sit "in the seat of the scornful" (Psalm 1:1).

Fault finders can always SPOT a problem, but they never SOLVE a problem. They are definitely church killers.

**5. Never accept a leadership role or responsibility.**

Many people have a "renters" mentality when it comes to church; they take no ownership. When you rent an apartment, if something breaks, you call the landlord to fix it. Since you don't own it, you have no obligation to fix it. There are too many people renting pews (and some pulpits).

It's far easier to criticize than to mobilize. As Seth Godin says, "No one has ever built a statue to a critic." If we want to make a difference, we have to accept the responsibility to lead — whether formally or informally. Leadership is not about position; it's about productivity. A congregation full of followers is on life support and is getting ready to die.

**6. Get mad if you're not appointed to a leadership position.**

So many people in church are focused on titles. They want to be directors, deacons and dignitaries, and when they are not appointed to a position, they begin to stir up trouble. This is a manifestation of deep-seated pride, and pride is one of the most dangerous killers of all.

**7. Never give your opinion in a meeting ... wait until AFTER the meeting.**

A surefire sign of a church that is on its deathbed is one that has major "meetings-after-the-meeting." You know, where no one voices their honest opinion or offers useful insight during the official meeting, but are quick to huddle in a corner or the church parking lot after the meeting to harp on how "it ought to be done."

There are chalk lines all over church parking lots outlining exactly where the murder took place.

**8. Do nothing more than absolutely necessary.**

Show up, go home, but don't be an active, engaged member of the church. It's hard to reach "the least of these" when we're only doing the least we can do.

The sad reality, however, is that most people who only want to do the least, love to criticize those who are doing the most! They howl about how the church is being run by a clique, when they never offered or took initiative to get any work done.

They just stand on the sideline and watch the church die. At the very least, they are an accessory to the murder.

**9. Hold back on your giving to the Lord.**

It takes money to do ministry — especially to do mercy ministry for the underserved in our communities. Tim Keller says that "Mercy ministry is expensive." When we hold back on our giving to the Lord and His work, we are limiting the work that can be done through the local church.

Additionally, since there are operational costs associated with a church or ministry, a lack of giving can lead to the church being foreclosed, laying off staff and other adverse results.

Some people say, "Well, all the church wants is money." The same can be said of Walmart, yet they keep taking their money there! While I do not discount that there have been those who have abused and misused the church for financial gain, there are thousands of churches serving in their communities who are dying because of a lack of finances. When we stop giving, we are killing those churches ... and the countless lives they touch each day.

**10. Don't reach out to the unchurched.**

The primary purpose of the Church is to introduce people to Jesus. The people in the pews must take ownership of that responsibility and become "minichurches" that reach out to the unchurched every day of the week and bring them to the house of the Lord to be disciplined.

Churches need regular and consistent "transfusions." When new people are brought into the church, they bring new life and vibrancy. They ensure that the church doesn't get stuck in the old way of doing things. They bring fresh perspective, and they help keep the church alive. Don't kill your church! Go and bring in some new people today.

Quite a list. I'm sure that all of us have found ourselves somewhere on that list at one time or another. Churches aren't torn down by people who are actively seeking to wreck the place; churches are torn down by the slow and deadly work of complacency and indifference. Paul's letters are replete with problems in the newly-born Christian communities as the believers strived to understand the shape of their new lives in Christ. Let's take a look at one such problem.

### *Tearing down communion*

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth on a number of different topics. One is their abuse of the Lord's Supper. Now, I'm sure that none of them thought they were tearing down anything. Nonetheless, their unwillingness to embrace their new identities in Christ were creating deep and deadly divisions in this fragile outpost of God's kingdom.

In the first decades of Christianity, when the followers of Jesus gathered they shared a meal. For some, it was probably the best meal they got all week. It is clear from Paul's scolding of the Corinthian Christians that they often forgot why they shared this meal that Jesus had given them. Some ate like gluttons. Some even got drunk. And, worst of all, some were excluded from the meal. I haven't seen anyone ever stagger away from our Holy Communion at St. Andrew, but I wonder how much thought we ourselves give to what is really happening when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant, but ask "What is really happening?" and you'll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn't help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said "This is my body . . . this is my blood?" or "Do this in remembrance of me." The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to "primitive" Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion.

### *The Real Presence of Christ*

In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ's presence. We hold that "in remembrance" is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus' death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from "This Holy Mystery"<sup>1</sup>:

"United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ's presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord's Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God's saving gift for the whole world." [Underlining added]

When we come to the Lord's table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God's time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven's clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying "This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . ." Of course, it wasn't the night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was the night in God's time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

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<sup>1</sup>From "This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion," which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004. It is available at [www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery](http://www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery).

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God's future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord's table. It all takes a lot of imagination doesn't it? But does it really take any more imagination than to trust that God actually resurrected one thoroughly dead Jew from a place called Nazareth. And so we do all we can to avoid falling into complacency about Communion, about church, about worship, or even about Jesus. We commit ourselves every day to doing all we can to build up the body of Christ and to be a good witness to the saving love of our Lord.

*So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)*

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Take another look at those ten church-killing practices. In what ways do you think they are deadly? Do you think some are more deadly than others? If so, in what ways? Do you think some are more prevalent than others? If so, why? Do you think any of the ten shouldn't be on the list? If so, why do you think the practice(s) should be struck from the list? Finally, do you find yourself anywhere on that list? If so, what are you going to do about it?
2. Take a few minutes to share and to reflect upon your own perspectives on and experiences with Holy Communion. What were you taught about Holy Communion? Where did you learn this? How has your understanding of Communion changed over time? Perhaps you were once Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist. How does this affect your understanding of Communion at St. Andrew? Do you find Communion to be a rewarding experience or just another ritual we practice? Why do you think that Communion Sunday is often a poorly-attended service at some churches.

### Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

*This week, we'll read through Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians.*

*Try to use the 2x2 matrix on page one of this study to make sense of his instruction.*

<p><b>Monday 1 Corinthians 1:1-4:21</b> Opening; church divisions; Paul's message, ministry, and authority</p>	<p><b>Tuesday 1 Corinthians 5:1-7:40</b> Immorality and lawsuits in the church; marriage and divorce</p>
<p><b>Wednesday 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1</b> Food sacrifices to idols and problems in the Lord's supper</p>	<p><b>Thursday 1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40</b> Problems in worship; the gifts of the Spirit, and the power of love</p>
<p><b>Friday 1 Corinthians 15:1-16:24</b> The resurrection and some concluding matters</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

