

“PARTY ETIQUETTE”

I Corinthians 1:10-18

January 25, 2026

This past week schools and some businesses were closed in honor of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On Monday, Jill and I started receiving pictures from our children who had the day off to stay home and be with their children. The grandkids were having fun playing with toys, building Lego plants, gluing crafts and spinning for games. What struck me funny was the condition of the rooms all the activity was taking place in. They looked like a **great toy bomb** had gone off. There were colorful pieces and parts of these activities everywhere. And I was thinking, I’m glad I’m not picking all of that up. Sometimes it’s good to be a grandparent who doesn’t live next door.

Of course, I am not judging them. If you looked at the condition in my garage at the moment it is far worse. When I am in the middle of building a project, tools can end up just about anywhere. That’s why I have more than one tape measure. Rarely do I lose both of them at the same time.

Speaking of messes, the Apostle Paul received a report from Chloe’s people, aka her servants, that her church had a theological bomb go off that was tearing the church apart. Paul likens the mess to a large tear in a garment, which is schismata in Greek. Apparently, the church members were choosing their favorite Apostle Teacher. It was common in those days to follow a particular philosopher or rabbi. While there is no indication that Paul, Apollos, or Cephas were at odds with each other, these church members had made these teachers more important than Christ himself. Like I said, it was a big mess.

Exploring the 2,000-year history of the Church, I'm not sure we have fared much better. Look at how many denominations there are, then splits upon splits within those denominations, internal fighting, struggles to find common ground. Throw in differences in culture, the overlapping of state and church politics, the institutionalization of church, leadership power plays and corruption, political interference and you have all the makings of one big mess. How do even begin to clean it up? Perhaps we all need to learn a little party etiquette.

I. ONLY ONE HEAD OF THE TABLE

The dinner table in my childhood home was **round and made out of oak**. In other words, there was no head of the table. Everyone had equal reach to the food, which was in the center. Being creatures of habit we usually sat in the same chair, but there was no assigned seating, and no advantage to being in a particular spot. It was a table of welcome.

Paul wrote, “**Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purposes.**”

Paul calls them **brothers and sisters** twice in this passage. He reminds the people of their intimate relational nature. There is no special seating, assigned spot, just family gathered around the table eating the same food, worshipping the same God, working together in mission of the church. You are Knit together with same mind and purpose.

However, in Paul's world there was such a thing as the **head of the table**. It was usually the host of the party and that person sat or laid down in the center most seat. Paul uses an interesting phrase in this passage, "**By the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**". If we substitute the Roman Emperor's name, this is a pledge of allegiance soldiers made to swear fidelity of service to the throne. Paul uses it to remind the Church that there is only one head of the table and all of you have sworn allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is that Lord who invites and unites us at his table.

No theologian, no leader, no preacher, no denomination and certainly no politician is the basis of the church's faith and unity. The tricky part is we need good leadership and by definition a leader has influence over others. However, how leaders use their influence is important. They are not to use gossip, bad mouthing others, intimidation, manipulation, greed, deceit, shame, to gain power over others.

No matter how good a leader may be, they are not Christ and they have weaknesses and faults just like the rest of us. My problem with celebrities, mega church head pastors, politicians – is they often gain a cult following, which in turn grants them some kind of godlike immunity status, as if they can do no wrong, if they do the people ignore it, deny it, grant clemency and pardon, because our heroes have to be perfect. Then somehow, we are disillusioned when they fall from grace. The fault is ours because we are making these leaders out to be something they are not.

The Church is saved and sustained by one name only Jesus Christ, who is its head. **The first table etiquette is to keep Christ first at the table.**

II. APPETIZERS ARE NOT THE MAIN COURSE

Several years ago I attended a Credo Conference sponsored by the Presbyterian Foundation. It took place at Delray Beach, Florida. While the temperatures were great, we did not get much time to enjoy the ocean. Credo requires much homework and attendance at the day long seminars. It was not a vacation.

However, on the last evening of the Conference the leadership took us out to a great seafood restaurant. The whole group sat around a large table. For appetizers, the staff brought out plates of **fried calamari** to share among us. This was the best calamari I have ever tasted. It was fresh, cooked just right, and had a spicy sauce to dip in. There's where I made my mistake. I ate so much fried calamari that I left no room for dinner. I know I ordered something, but I have no recollection of what it was because I barely ate it.

No matter how good the appetizer is, it is not meant to be the main course. It is just there to whet the appetite, to give you something to munch on until you order the main meal.

Table lesson number two – focus on the essentials not the side issues.

Paul writes, “**For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.**” Baptism in itself didn’t seem to be the issue, but rather who baptized who was. Being baptized by a famous church leader, as though that made the baptism more real or special or spiritual was the ridiculous game they were playing. Paul was having none of this. Besides

the people were missing the point of baptism in the first place. They were focusing on an appetizer instead of the main meal, life in the Kingdom.

The struggle from day one of the church was deciding what was essential to the faith and what is not. Do the Gentiles have to become Jews to follow Jesus? The debate continues as to what is necessary our faith and what issues, interests, and thoughts, while interesting don't further the kingdom of God. How much latitude can be given for differences of opinion and what are those beliefs that bind us? The Presbyterian Church came up with the idea that the essentials we hold tight to and the non-essentials we use great tolerance and love. In other words, not everything is the main dish. The problem in our day and age is we have replaced essentials with issues and personal preferences. Even worse, we have politicalized them, which drives us into legalism and that causes all kinds of problems at the table because there is no love behind this. Our main focus needs to be on the main dish, not the appetizers.

The PCUSA for almost 115 years have declared **The Great Ends of the Church are**

- The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.
- The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
- The maintenance of divine worship
- The preservation of the truth
- The promotion of social righteousness
- And the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Don't fill up on appetizers and neglect the main course, the purposes of the church. It is a rabbit hole that leads us astray and divides many.

III. GET TO THE RIGHT TABLE

Back in the mid 2000's a woman by the name of **Beth Moore** rose to prominence in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the US with 12.7 million members. Beth was a women's Bible teacher, best selling author and Her Living Proof events for women packed stadiums. She was a shining star according to *Christianity Today*.

Then a rising politician at the time bragged about sexually harassing woman and she publically condemned this person's actions. In reaction, her beloved denomination basically blackballed her. The pastors who once championed her now labeled her as dangerous and liberal. Book sales dropped as did participation in her ministry. Do you see what happened? The leadership of the SBC when faced with a choice of power or faithfulness, chose the way of power. Why, because they wanted a seat at the political table so they could push their religious agenda. They sold out the gospel.

The problem is they are sitting at the wrong table. **Our Table is the cross**. Paul wrote, "**For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**" We come to the table of body broken, blood that was shed, life given so that we might be one with God and live in Christ's service. The power to save isn't in the halls of Washington D.C. it is found in the path of the cross, sacrifice, love, compassionate justice, and death to self-serving.

The Church is not meant to run the government nor is the government meant to run the church. This is tricky business because we want the world to be a better place and government plays a role in this. But the way we go about it is important. We want a voice at the political table, yet we are not to imitate its power plays. We want influence but not political clout at any cost. We are called to be a conscious, a voice of God to the nation, especially uplifting those most in need.

The temptation is to adopt the world's methods, to forget our identity in Christ, to compromise our values and so lose our prophetic voice along with our integrity. In the process, we destroy our witness to Jesus Christ.

The power of the cross is foolishness to the world because it works from weakness, faith, spirit, and compassion, yet it is the key to changing hearts and participating in God's new eschatological age.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that faith isn't about having all the answers. It's about taking the first step anyway. It's about choosing love over fear, justice over comfort, and service over self-interest. His legacy reminds us that the work of loving God and neighbor isn't always easy, and the path isn't always clear. But faith calls us to begin anyway—to take that first step, trusting that God will light the way.

Church, get to the right table.

Speaking of tables, recently I watched a movie called **Table 19**. It is a 2017 comedy starring Anna Kendrick. Her character, **Eloise McGarry** attends her oldest friend Francie Millner's wedding. Originally, she was the maid of honor, but she "dropped out" two months ago after her (now) ex-

boyfriend Teddy, the best man and the bride's brother, broke up with her by text message after two years together. Yeah, he's a dufus.

Eloise decides to attend the reception anyway and finds she is assigned to **table 19**, the one in the back of the room, farthest from the wedding party. She meets her table mates: battling spouses **Jerry and Bina Kepp**, Facebook friends of the groom's father; teen **Renzo Eckberg**, whose domineering mom is an acquaintance of the groom and insists he attends to improve his social skills; **Jo Flanagan**, Teddy and Francie's childhood nanny; and **Walter Thimble**, the bride's cousin, who is out on parole after embezzling from his father's company to help a friend.

Being Eloise set up the table seating, she tells them they are at the misfits table. Just the last table in the corner with people the family didn't know where else to put. Nobody expected them to come, nor care if they are in attendance or not.

Yet, something interesting happens in the course of the movie. These misfits, outsiders if you will, come together and form bonds of support that change each of their lives. Isn't that the church? We are strangers, perhaps misfits who have been brought together by Jesus, who form bonds that transform our lives. **When we embrace Jesus as our Lord, when we keep to the essentials, and we sit at the right table, we become the unbreakable people of the cross, of the same mind and the same purpose. Now that's a table I want a seat at. Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, January 25, 2025

Second Scripture Lesson

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.

11 For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

16 I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel—and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.