

*The Round Table & The Lord's Table*  
**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**  
**July 25, 2010**

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**First Christian Church**  
**Ninth Sunday After Pentecost**

When I attended Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, I belonged to a social service club called "Camelot." We didn't have Greek frats or sororities. One spring members of our club drove to Tulsa to view the release of the movie "Camelot," based upon the Lerner & Lowe musical of the same name. One scene I will never forget was that of Lancelot du Lac of France singing this rather amazingly egotistical, self-congratulatory song:

A knight of the Table Round should be invincible  
Succeed where a less fantastic man would fail  
Climb a wall no one else can climb  
Cleave a dragon in record time  
Swim a moat in a coat of heavy iron mail  
No matter the pain he ought to be unwinceable  
Impossible deeds should be his daily fare  
But where in the world  
Is there in the world  
A man so extraordinaire?

C'est moi! C'est moi!  
I'm forced to admit  
'Tis I, I humbly reply  
That mortal who  
These marvels can do  
C'est moi, c'est moi, 'tis I  
I've never lost  
In battle or game  
I'm simply the best by far  
When swords are cross'd  
'Tis always the same  
One blow and au revoir  
C'est moi! C'est moi!  
So admir'bly fit

A French Prometheus unbound  
And here I stand with valor untold  
Exception'lly brave, amazingly bold  
To serve at the Table Round! C'est Moi!

“Camelot,” of course, is the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. While vain beyond belief, Lancelot was as self-advertised: handsome, confident, brave, talented. He was an ideal candidate for Arthur’s Round Table. You see, “Whenever a worthy knight appeared, then his name appeared in letters of gold upon that seat; and when that knight died, then his name would suddenly vanish from that seat.”<sup>1</sup> The Round Table was a place of privilege. Only those found worthy could receive a place. And so Lancelot became a Knight of the Round Table.

This is why we have to wonder if many of the Corinthian Christians, whom we’ve been talking about this summer, wouldn’t have felt more comfortable dining with King Arthur than with Lord Jesus. Several wealthy members of the church thought the Lord’s Table should have limited seating and nameplates engraved specially for them. It was nothing to them to flaunt their wealth at the expense of the poor. This was just a normal thing for Roman upper classes to do—the Corinthians *were* Roman—Corinth was an important city in the Roman Empire. In their own Lancelot-like way, these rich Corinthians believed they were superior to their poor Christian sisters and brothers!

There was no clearer evidence of this than in the way they approached the Lord's Supper, which at mid-first century was a full fellowship dinner, not just a brief celebration with only bread and chalice. Because the rich Corinthians kept a leisurely schedule, they could arrive early at the home of one of their wealthy Corinthian peers where the communion was held. They didn't have to wait until they got off work, like their poor fellow believers.

So did they wait until their poor peers arrived? Not on your life! They'd dig in and stuff themselves and get drunk on the best wine, without a moment's thought of leaving some for those who had no choice but to arrive late. All the rich Corinthian Christians would leave were leftovers and crumbs. They had the same sense of entitlement and privilege Lancelot and the other Knights of the Round Table enjoyed in Camelot.

Except for Paul the Lord's Table wasn't—and isn't—the Round Table. The Lord's Table and the Lord's Supper are very different—and in a strange, almost indefinable way, very *equalitarian*.

Imagine, for a moment, showing up for the first day of classes at some exclusive university like Stanford, Chicago, Princeton, Rice, MIT; and saying, "I'm here because I understand that grades, test scores, and personal qualifications are irrelevant! We'd be kicked out on our ear! No campus dining card for us! Or imagine we walked into the Board Room of Goldman Sachs, Exxon-Mobil, or American Express, expecting to be seated

and said, “I’m sure that since I do business with your people I have a place at your table.” Security would be called in an instant and we’d be shown the door. Or remember the table where all the so-called “Popular Kids” at school sat and where we were unwelcome because we didn’t wear the right designer clothes, excel in the right sports, and weren’t the star of the school play? We knew where not to sit and may have even eaten our lunch alone! We knew precisely where we belonged in the pecking order. Truth is: there are all kinds of “Round Tables” all over the place, where we are not welcome.

Unless we think this never happens in church consider the reason our church, the Disciples of Christ, practices open communion. Barton Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, our founders, got fed up with how many churches mistook the Lord’s Table for the Round Table. They got tired of experiencing the fact that unless you believed certain things, recited certain things, and acted in certain ways, you wouldn’t find your golden nameplate here. Our founders dared to ask, “Whose table is this, anyway?”

Paul saw these rich Corinthians turning the Lord’s Supper into their own private dinner party. He even tells them, “If you’re so hungry you can’t wait for your poor brothers and sisters, snack at home *and then* come to the table! The Lord’s Table isn’t about status, like the Round Table! It’s about being welcome because Christ is the host and we are all the guests!

Though even more than this was at stake for Paul. In the chapter before today's text, Paul says, "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*" Paul wanted the Corinthians' oneness as a church to be so palpable, they could taste it! He also wanted them to realize that when those who are rich turn their back on those who are poor, they are not only breaking the bond Christ made for them to have for each other, they are breaking the bond Christ has for them!

This is why Paul speaks of "*discerning the body.*" "*Discerning the body*" is about assessing not only our relation to Christ, but also our relation to all the other members of the body." Paul never conceives of the kind of radical individualism that marks the private faith of so many people who call themselves "Christians" these days. Contempt for one's sisters and brothers in Christ is tantamount to the sin of pride! The most graphic explanation of the consequences of this contempt is found in the Letter of I John, whose church, like Corinth was divided into all kinds of factions:

*"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20-21)*

Replace the word "hate" with words like "despise," "look down upon" "discriminate against" and we get the picture. The danger of engaging in a disembodied, de-churched, de-institutionalized Christianity is that the body

of Christ is broken. But when people taking their spiritual ball home with them and because they don't like the people in there, they will have nothing to do with Christ's Body, the church is wounded and shattered into pieces!

Though it isn't just those who will have nothing to do with the church who fail to "*discern the body.*" Churches also fail to discern the body every time they turn the Lord's Table into the Round Table and believe they are entitled to a place at Christ's Table!

Yet, how magnificent is the church when it remembers the Lord's Table is a place of hospitality and welcome! How glorious it is when we recognize Christ's Table as the only place in the world where all who seek Christ are welcomed, and all worldly barriers are torn down.

Once in a while, we sense this hospitality, this oneness, where we are welcomed. In his autobiography, Reflections on My Call to Preach, noted Disciple preacher Fred Craddock tells of the difference of the way he was treated at Sunday School, growing up in Central Avenue Christian Church, in Humboldt, Tennessee from the shabby way he got treated in elementary school because he was short and his family was poor.

According to the Sunday school records, I had been enrolled in the Cradle Roll, not because I was present, but because my parents were members of the church. There were no "privileges or responsibilities appertaining thereto"; they simply kept records and knew that I existed. My memory of Sunday school begins in the Primary Department: school grades one, two, and three. And first among those memories is the welcome I received. Even though our

clothing reflected a difference in the economic condition of the families of the pupils, I noted no such difference in the welcome, as highly sensitive as I was to such matters. Even when I learned that the charity shoes I was wearing were, in fact, girl's shoes, I found no reason to try to hide my feet. In the Primary Department there was "neither Jew nor Gentile." The chairs in which we sat were bright with many colors, and even brighter were the smiles of Miss Anna Sue and Miss Lucille, the two young women who played the piano and taught us to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and "Jesus loves the little children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world." It was years before I realized how revolutionary those songs were, clashing with the world in which I played and went to school. I do not know when I learned that Central Avenue was full of Craddocks, including Miss Anna Sue and Miss Lucille. Mr. Ben, a patriarch of the church was their father and father to a houseful—all my cousins since he was my great uncle. But it was not a cousin's welcome they gave me; rather it was a church welcome, the same as they gave everyone in the department. You can't imagine how much at home I felt.<sup>2</sup>

Craddock understood what Disciples poet Edwin Markham articulated so eloquently:

He drew a circle that shut me out—  
 Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout—  
 But love and I had the wit to win—  
 We drew a circle that took him in.<sup>3</sup>

It's the same circle that draws us here to the Lord's Table, the circle Jesus drew for the world. We don't call it the Round Table or Camelot here. We call it the Lord's Table, the church. We even dare to call it, heaven.

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<sup>1</sup>"This Is My Body," *First Corinthians Interpretation Bible Study*, Louisville, Geneva Press, 2000. p. 69.

<sup>2</sup>Fred Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009, pp. 74-75.

<sup>3</sup>William F. Barclay, *New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*: London, p. 101.