

## **"Putting the US back into Church"**

(Fellowship; Lord's Supper; Unity)

**I Corinthians 11:17-34**

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Please open your Bible to I Corinthians 11.

I'd like you to follow along in your own Bible as I read.

You will be quite familiar with verses 23 and following.

This is the passage that we often use on the first Sunday of the month when we celebrate the Lord's Supper - sometimes called "Communion"

But as we read this today, beginning at verse 17, I want you to notice that the subject of this passage is not the death of Christ but the subject is how the Christians are treating each other.

The section on the Lord's Supper is used to support a different subject that the Apostle Paul is addressing.

Please STAND as God's Word is read.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

"In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not!

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.”

What would you think of a church where the people formed into little cliques - you know, where there was a kind of social pecking order.

I don't suggest they were mean to others they just didn't have anything to do with other groups.

They weren't hostile to others; others were just irrelevant.

The same distinctions that separated them in all of the other places of life (work, recreation, neighborhoods) separated them in the church as well - The distinctions of how much money they had, the kinds of houses they lived in, the types of vacations they could afford, the level of education they had attained or where they went to school, the positions in business they had achieved, their ethnic or racial backgrounds, were the same distinctions that separated them socially in the church.

And it wasn't just the "haves" who had this attitude it was the have-nots" who had it just as much.

It was a church that seemed to believe it was just fine if "birds of a feather flock together".

What would you think of a church wherein the attendees had friendships and spent time with each other but never inquired about or cared about the spiritual welfare of the others in the church?

They did all the right things that you do in church, sang, taught, gave, even helped each other but never asked or even thought about the other person's soul.

Some of this was apparently going on in the church at Corinth.

When Paul starts chapter 11 he praises the people of the church:

1 Corinthians 11:2 "I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you."

But when he comes to verse 17 he specifically withholds praise in another matter:

1 Corinthians 11:17 "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good."

That's a strong indictment.

Why is he so critical of them?

Look at 1 Corinthians 11:18 "In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.

When are these divisions are taking place?

1 Corinthians 11:20 "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat..."

Something is wrong even as they gather to observe Communion.

Paul says when you meet together to celebrate the Lord's Supper I want you to know that whatever it is you think you are doing it is not really a celebration of the Lord's Supper.

In fact, as he will make obvious later, what they do is a contradiction of the Lord's Supper.

Again, strong language!

What were they doing that was so wrong?

1 Corinthians 11:21-22 "For as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not!"

This is not a statement against serving food in church.

I'm sure Paul ate his fair share of chicken at church potlucks and if they had had coffee, he would probably have drunk it.

So what is this problem they were having with food?

We know from the OT that the custom of the Jews was that Passover was celebrated as part of a meal.

We also know from the Gospels and even from verse 25 of this passage that when Jesus initiated the Lord's Supper he did so during the meal of Passover using the common elements of the Passover celebration – the bread and the wine.

Apparently these Corinthian Christians still had a full-fledged meal when they celebrated the Lord's Supper in their church.

From verses 21-22 we get a picture of what was happening when they met together - what these divisions looked like of which Paul is so critical.

At the end of verse 22 Paul notes there are those who "have nothing".

They are the ones in verse 21 who would remain hungry even after the meal.

Here was a church of "have's" and "have nots" - the wealthier and the poorer.

The wealthier would show up early and eat and drink to their hearts' content, with no concern whatever for those who would come later and have little or nothing to eat.

Or the wealthier would cluster together socially and disregard the others of the church who didn't have the same opportunities.

It was a church that had broken down into classes - at least two and probably more - classes based on social or economic advantage or lack of it.

Yes, in this fallen world there will be economic and social distinctions between people but they have no place in the church Paul says:

Verse 22 - "Do you despise the church of God?"

I think this question is a key to the whole passage.

Another way of asking it is, "have you no regard for the body of Christ – the church?"

The people of a particular congregation make up the body of Christ in that location.

All of the people of that church collectively, jointly, together make up that body of Christ.

Neither one person nor no single group of people in that church makes up the church.

And the church is also not simply a collection of independent individual units.

The church, the body of Christ is all of us together.

Among the Christians of Corinth were groups of people who disregarded others and did so even to the extent of gorging themselves on food and drink even when others had little or nothing.

Please note Paul's criticism of them is **not** just that they were impolite.

Also note that Paul's criticism is **not** that some Corinthian Christians had more than others.

His concern is that **their attitudes and actions are an outright contradiction of the very body of Christ** they claim they belong to.

When these Christians thought they are celebrating the Lord's Supper, they weren't doing anything of the kind but in fact they were desecrating it.

What evidence does Paul cite to support his criticism?

Is it their lack of Bible knowledge?

Is it their prayer life?

Is it their past sins against God?

No. It is the way they treat each other.

And how are they treating them?

Vindictively?

Harshly? No.

**Apathetically! They didn't care.**

They didn't care that there were others in the church who didn't have enough to eat.

After all, their needs were met.

They didn't care that there were others in the church who desperately needed a friend.

After all, they had their friends.

They didn't care that there were men, women and children who met alongside them each week who were dying inside - who were struggling with issues too big to handle, who were tempted and failing, who were fearful of the future, who wondered if God even loved them and who wondered and doubted that anyone else was struggling like they were.

The others didn't care because after all, their needs were being met.

Paul's criticism of the Corinthian Christians was their disregard for each other.

He called it a "despising of the church of God" - a **lack of serious appreciation for the importance of their oneness.**

Christians were treating church as if it was simply a building and a program to which they went and got what they wanted with no serious regard for the others.

Christians were treating their Christianity as if it was only a private affair between them and God.

They even celebrated Communion that way – as if it was a private "thing" between them and God.

Now Paul wants to correct that.

How does he do so?

Beginning at verse 23 he launches into a reminder of how the Lord Jesus **began** the ritual of the Lord's Supper.

Is Paul changing subjects at this point? No.

Look please at verse 18 again:

When Paul began his criticism he noted that it has to do with "when you come together".

Please look at verse 33: "So then my brothers, when you come together..."

So at verse 23, in the midst of this discussion about when they meet, what is still the greater subject?

Yes, the subject of **their attitude and conduct toward each other.**

Beginning at verse 23 Paul repeats instruction from the Lord that Paul had already given to the church.

Knowing that their problem was an uncaring attitude toward each other what would you expect this instruction from the Lord to be about?

I would expect it to address the issue of unity, of our oneness in Christ, of our need for each other in contrast to the isolation and separation that can so easily characterize people even people of a church.

And that is exactly what Paul is does in verses 23-26.

In these verses Paul is harking back to the very night that Jesus began the Lord's Supper and in doing so Paul notes two things in particular:

**The first of those is the basis of our oneness.**

Without a doubt the only possibility of all of us being the church at all is because Jesus died for us.

Jesus took the bread and he said, "This is my body which is for you."

He voluntarily took our sin upon himself and died on the cross absorbing God's righteous wrath against sin - our sin.

God the Son, with his own physical body did that for us.

After the meal, Jesus took the cup saying that it represented the new covenant in his blood.

Again, a clear reference to his death, his blood spilled out for us.

The Bible is clear, if the God/man Jesus had not died for us we could never be a part of God's church.

And every person who is a part of the body of Christ, the church, came to God the same way - "all ground is level at the cross."

No one becomes part of the church, the body of Christ by wealth, by prestige, by position, by abilities, by intelligence, by race, by ethnic background, by family, by gender, by anything else but by God's grace through faith in Jesus.

Every person who is part of the body of Christ is so on exactly the same basis - there are no distinctions.

That is why this morning when the Lord's Supper is served we will have men and women, younger and older, wealthier and poorer all together serving us - at the cross there are no distinctions.

And Jesus is the basis of our oneness.

That's why when we celebrate the Lord's Supper we ask you to break a piece of the bread from a larger piece - symbolic of the basis of our oneness - our common source - The Lord Jesus who died for us.

Not only does Paul make a reference to the basis of our oneness by referring to Jesus' words but **Paul also makes a case for how we ought to act in our oneness - especially when we are celebrating the Lord's Supper.**

Both when Jesus passed the bread and when he passed the cup he said do this "in remembrance of me".

This "remembrance" is more than just remembering.

Certainly remembering is included but the word "remembrance" has to do with a "memorial".

The very action of taking the bread and drinking the cup is **a witness to what you believe.**

Or as Paul put it in verse 26 "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The Lord's Supper is not just a vertical activity where you privately remember and thank God for Jesus **BUT the Lord's Supper is a horizontal activity whereby you publicly declare to all around that you believe** - that Jesus died for you too –

**AND that you are one with the rest of us in this place** –

That **together** we are the body of Christ, the church.

And so when we come together we not only **are** one by grace through faith, but we are to **act** as one:

Caring about each other, having regard for each other, active in our love for each other, expressive in our concern for each other -

Understanding that **the Lord's Supper is a celebration not just of personal forgiveness but of oneness** - we are the people of God.

And so when we celebrate the Lord's Supper we ask you to hold the bread or the cup until we have all been served - so we can take it at the same time, symbolic of our oneness.

That's why this morning we will also ask you to participate in the "passing of the peace" which is another symbolic gesture.

As the servers come to your row with the cup (not during the bread) they will hand it to you with the words "The Peace of the Lord be with you." To which we want you to respond to them: "And with you".

Then after you have taken a cup you hand the tray to the person next to you with the same words given to you: "The peace of the Lord be with you." To which they will respond - "And with you."

We'll project the words on the screen so you can see and remember them.

This "passing of the peace" is another active way of noting that our salvation, while personal is not private - we are one in Christ.

Please remember only those who are trusting in Jesus Christ as Saving-Lord should eat the bread and drink the cup.

Many younger children are not yet old enough to understand the significance of the Lord's Supper, and so their parents wisely don't allow them to participate.

But after the passing of the bread, this morning, we will have a blessing for those children - acknowledging that though they may not take the bread and cup they are still very special to God and to us.

Beginning at verse 27 then, Paul states a warning with which most of us are quite familiar.

But I believe, as do many Bible scholars today, that we have misunderstood and misapplied these verses to the detriment of many in the church.

For too long we have assumed that taking communion (in the words of verse 27) "in an unworthy manner" meant taking the bread or the cup with unconfessed sins in our lives.

The word we translate "unworthy" is actually an adverb not an adjective.

They are acting unworthily, referring more to actions than character.

One NT scholar put it this way: Paul's "warning was not to those who were leading unworthy lives and longed for forgiveness but to those who were making a mockery of that which should have been most sacred and solemn **by their behavior at the meal.**" (I Howard Marshall *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, 116 so also Blomberg)

And we have also understood verse 28 (where it says we are to "examine ourselves") as a command to look deeply into our past and carefully at our present to see if there is some unknown sin that we must confess.

And we have looked at verse 29 and assumed that if we don't do this we will incur God's judgment.

It is not that we shouldn't concern ourselves with un-confessed sins in our lives.

There is ample Scriptural support for confessing our sins.

But if we think that private introspection and confession is what this passage is about it causes two problems:

One, we will often descend into a forced introspection - asking if there is anything in our lives that make us "unworthy" to take this communion.

The result is that **the most spiritually sensitive** and **the most needy** are least likely to participate in the very Lord's Supper they need.

The most spiritually sensitive may be so fearful of offending the Lord or "sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" that they cower into abstinence - seldom taking communion.

And the most needy (those coming with confessed but recent sin in their lives, those who are spiritually weary, and others who are spiritually weak) feel condemned and "unworthy" of taking the very spiritual food their souls most need.

No! Contrary to long-held popular opinion this passage is not asking everyone to search for some unknown and un-confessed sin before participating. (See also Fee, 560, note 10)

**But the second problem** a misunderstanding of the passage may produce is a looking in all the wrong places for what displeases the Lord when we come together.

What is it about the Corinthians that troubled Paul?

Was it their lack of a worshipful attitude?  
 Was it their lack of introspection about past sins?  
 Was it their lack of remembering Jesus' death?

No. **It was the way they treated each other.**

When Paul says they eat and drink in an unworthy manner it refers most specifically to their treatment of each other - they didn't appreciate the significance of their relationship to each other.

When he asks them to "examine" themselves he is asking them to think about the way they treat others in the church, and the attitude they have about belonging to each other.

When he says they will incur judgment if they don't "recognize the body of Christ", **the "body"** he is talking about **is not the physical body of Jesus on the cross but the metaphorical body of Christ – the church.**

I believe he is saying, as verse 32 indicates, God's children will be disciplined by God if they don't recognize, or judge correctly the uniqueness and special-ness of this oneness that is ours as members of the body of Christ. (See Fee, Blomberg, et al)

God will discipline those of his children who disregard the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to each other.

Christians living in isolation from each other, and in disregard of each other in the church are contradictions of what the Lord's Supper is all about.

And so Paul ends the instruction with few words, but words that are loaded:

Verse 33: "So then my brothers when you come together to eat, wait for each other."

In light of what has been written, is this just a call to be polite and don't start until all are present?

No. This is so much more - it is a call to welcome each other, to include each other, to depend on each other, to help each other grow in Christ, to love each other – it is genuine spiritual community.

It is caring enough about the people of my church that I take the initiative to know some of them well, to even learn about their souls, to know how I can pray for them and then do it, to know where they hurt and truly empathize with them, to know their spiritual needs and do my part in meeting them.

It is a call to recognize and act on our oneness in Christ.

Now with this reminder of the basis of our oneness and this call to an expression of our oneness by the way we act - I invite you to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Will our servers please come?

"Come to this table not because you are worthy but because of God's grace.

Come to testify not of your own righteousness but that you have been given the righteousness of Jesus.

Come not because you are strong, but because you are weak; not because you have any claim on heavens' rewards, but because of frailty and sin you stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help..."

Come to this table not alone but with all of us who have been forgiven.

Come to this table not in isolation but in the company of these people - our people.

As we take the bread and cup this morning let it be a witness to you and from you that we are one IN CHRIST and that we are ONE in Christ.

Let your thoughts be about what Christ accomplished on the cross – he made us in this room ONE.

Let your thoughts be about what that ONENESS means with all its privileges and responsibilities.

God help me to know how my relationship with these people should change in the days ahead.

Serve the bread

After we have all been served the bread and before we eat, do the children's blessing:

AS I mentioned earlier there are children in our midst who, by their parents' wise estimation, are too young to understand the significance of the Lord's Supper and therefore are not allowed to take the bread or the cup.

**To you children we want to give a blessing.**

In just a minute I'm going to ask the parent or adult with you to place their hand lightly on your head or shoulder as I lead in a prayer for you.

You are special to us and we know that you are very special to God.

Let's all bow together as one parent, or other adult with you, places their hand on the child who hasn't taken the bread.

*Lord God, we thank you for these children.*

*We take seriously the responsibility you have given us in regards to their physical and emotional welfare.*

*Father, protect them in the days to come.*

*And we also take seriously our responsibility for their spiritual welfare.*

*O God grant us wisdom and maturity as we model for them what it means to love and obey you.*

*The Scriptures say of Jesus that as a boy he grew strong and he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him.*

*We want that for these children as well, O God.*

*Protect them and bless them until that day when with fuller understanding they too stand as one with us.*

*We bless you children now in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*AMEN*

Before taking the bread:

"The Lord Jesus broke the bread and said, "This is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me."

As an active and verbal symbol of our oneness in Christ I want for us to "pass the peace" even as we pass the cup to each other.

As you pass the tray you say to that person:

**"The peace of the Lord be with you."**

And as you receive the tray you respond:

**"And with you."**

You might say this is contrived.

I say yes it is, it is contrived to get us started thinking about the others around us who together with us make up this church by God's grace.

It is contrived to get us to begin to think of our coming together not so much as a private affair between God and each one, as a family affair – us and God.

And all of this is to remind us of our relationships and responsibilities to each other.

You, who are serving, help me start it:

"The Peace of the Lord be with you." ("And with you.")

Each time you hand the tray to another row of people, please pass the peace.

Pass the CUPS

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Please stand for the benediction:

“The Lord Bless you and keep you,  
the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. AMEN”