

“When You Come Together as a Church” (1 Cor. 11:17–22)

By Jacob Gerber

While the Corinthian church needed some correction regarding the roles of men and women in corporate worship, we should remember that Paul began the previous section with a commendation: “Now I commend you...” (1 Cor. 11:2). Now, as Paul begins to address their handling of the Lord’s Supper, he says the exact opposite: “But in the following instructions I do not commend you...” (1 Cor. 11:17). The issues that have drawn Paul’s criticism surround how the Corinthians have administered the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20); however, verses 17–22 deal more generally with schisms and factions in the church, a subject that Paul has been addressing since the beginning of this letter (1 Cor. 1:10–17; 3:1–4). Earlier, Paul addressed factions that arose from competing personalities and philosophies. Now, Paul addresses divisions that arise from socioeconomic divisions between the poor and the rich. That is, the divisions that Paul addresses here are not principled, philosophical differences among the members of the Corinthian church, but something much more petty. In this case, the poor are being excluded from the “cliques” of the rich.¹ In 1 Corinthians 11:17–22, Paul lays out a great irony: *division is worse than distance*.

Divided from One Another (1 Cor. 11:17–19)

Paul’s rebuke in v. 17 is extraordinary: “when you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse.” This word for “come together” appears five times in chapter 11 and twice later in this letter to describe the gathering of God’s people together for corporate worship (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34; 14:23, 26).² As I write this, the church around the world has been unable to come together for the last several weeks, scattered into our own homes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, many of God’s people (including me) have learned how much we have taken for granted the ability to “come together”—that is, to come together in the same place for corporate worship together. When we come together, we receive the means of grace that God has promised to bless: the word (hearing, reading, singing, praying, and preaching), prayer, and the sacraments. Because these elements are so *ordinary*, though, we have often failed to see how valuable they were, until we come to a moment in history when we cannot have them. What we wouldn’t give to come together again!

As bad as it has been *not* to gather during this time, Paul tells us that there is something worse: gathering together in the wrong way. Paul here informs the Corinthians that when they have gathered together, their gatherings have not been for the better, but for the worse. They have not only failed to glean the benefits that God has appointed for corporate worship, but they have also

¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 217–18.

² Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 594.

incurred guilt.³ Their corruptions are so bad that, when they come together as a church, they are more divided than when they are scattered (v. 18). The words Paul uses to describe these divisions are *schisms* and *heresies*, but the basic meaning of *heresy* in Greek means “an act of choice.” Thus, Paul is not talking about a willful choice to cling to a false doctrine (an *ecclesiastical* heresy), but simply a willful choice to separate from fellow believers.⁴ Paul describes this problem as the “first” he plans to address, but he never clearly identifies a “second” issue, which makes Paul’s concern about these divisions all the more emphatic.⁵ These divisions are the main problem, even though Paul will also address the abuse of spiritual gifts and other problems in corporate worship in chapters 12–14.⁶

Reluctantly, Paul acknowledges that these divisions in the church should not surprise anyone: “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” (1 Cor. 11:18b–19). The phrase, “there must be,” translates a little word in Greek, δεῖ (*dei*), which conveys some kind of necessity. In this case, Paul does not specify the reason for the necessity, so that commentators offer a variety of possibilities as to what Paul may have meant. In my judgment, the best arguments understand Paul as saying that these divisions are necessary in light of the sovereignty of God over all things, in this case toward the purification of his people.⁷ This does not mean that Paul is justifying the behavior, for, in some mysterious way, human beings are responsible *and* God is sovereign *both*.⁸ Instead, Paul’s point is that believers who are distressed by these factions should recognize that God is still working out his plan of refining his people *through* these divisions, so that the genuine believers may be recognized through these trials.⁹

Deprived of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20–22)

These divisions are so serious that Paul judges their meal to be no Lord’s Supper at all (v. 20). This is the only place in Scripture where communion is called the “Lord’s Supper,” that is, “the supper instituted by the Lord, one to which he invites the guests, and which is celebrated in commemoration of his death.”¹⁰ Leon Morris writes, “The adjective *kyriakon* (only here and Rev. 1:10 in the New Testament) stresses the connection with the Lord. The disorders at Corinth are so serious that it is not *the Lord’s* supper that is eaten; it has a different character (cf. 10:21). Chrysostom points out that what is the master’s is common to all the servants; to make a difference means that it is no longer the master’s.”¹¹ Instead of being the meal where the many become one body together in

³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 364–65. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.ii.html>>

⁴ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 218.

⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 537.

⁶ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 260.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 367. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.ii.html>>

⁸ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 241.

⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 596–97.

¹⁰ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 219.

¹¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 155.

Christ as they partake together of one loaf of bread, this so-called Lord's Supper has the opposite effect of dividing Christians from one another (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17).

Instead, the Corinthians were eating their own meals, so that some went hungry, while others became drunk (v. 21). It is difficult to understand precisely what Paul has in mind by verse 21. Some argue that Paul is describing a situation where the rich ate privately (with better food) in a small dining area called the *triclinium*, while the poor were excluded to eat elsewhere, with a lower level meal—perhaps something like coach passengers on a plane looking longingly at the passengers in the first class section.¹² Others point to the command “wait for one another” in v. 33, arguing that the rich were not waiting for others to arrive before they ate.¹³

Despising the Church of God (1 Cor. 11:22)

As with what Paul wrote about head coverings, this passage is a place where the *details* are obscure, while the *doctrine* is clear. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is not a place for feasting and drinking. If anyone wants to eat and drink, they may hold a private event in their own houses (v. 22). But, when the rich feast and get drunk, while the poor go hungry, they have despised the “church of God” and humiliated the poor. Paul closes this section by stating again that he will *not* commend them for their actions in this regard (v. 22; cf. 1 Cor. 11:2, 17).

Part of the problem arose from the fact that the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord's Supper as a part of what was called a Love Feast (*Agapē*). Rather than a sacrament within the context of a corporate worship service, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was often observed early on in the context of a larger meal. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, we should remember, in the context of the Jewish Passover Feast (Matt. 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–23). This connection to Passover is significant, since the celebration of the Passover underwent an observable development. So, the first celebration of the Passover in Egypt had unique features that were never again repeated (e.g., the lamb smeared over the doorpost; the coming of the Destroyer through the land of Egypt). Then, the celebration of the feast developed some when Israel celebrated Passover during their wilderness wanderings and during the conquest into the Promised Land, especially as the Lord made provision for keeping Passover in the second month for any who were ceremonially unclean in the second month (Num. 9:1–14; Josh. 5:10–12). Finally, the celebration of the feast developed even further once Israel settled in the Promised Land, since all the males of the nation had to journey to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the feast at the same time, in the same place (Lev. 23:4–8; Deut. 16:16).

In the same way, the Bible reflects that the celebration of the Lord's Supper also underwent a similar development. So, there were elements of the first Lord's Supper that were never again repeated (e.g., observance in an Upper Room; celebration in the context of a Passover feast; only males present). Then, early on, when Christianity had largely only reached the Jews, the earliest reference to the widespread celebration of the Lord's Supper among the first Jewish converts describes the “breaking of bread” as taking place “from house to house” (Acts 2:42, 46)—just as the Passover feast had been observed (Ex. 12:3). Later on, however, the practice developed significantly,

¹² e.g., Hays, *First Corinthians*, 196.

¹³ Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 211.

so that disciples came together on the first day of the week to “break bread” in the context of a larger worship service that included lengthy teaching (Acts 20:7, 11). Feasting is no longer the primary characteristic of this setting, but the “breaking of bread” of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in the context of a worship service. Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 11:22, then, expresses the final word on the subject: when the church comes together as a church for the Lord’s Supper, the context must be a corporate worship service, not a feast. Christians may feast (“eat and drink”) in their own houses, but they may not substitute feasting for the ordinary elements of worship that God has appointed for his people in the word, prayer, and sacraments.

We do know from broader church history, though that many continued to practice the Love Feast. But, as time went on, the Love Feast became less a solemn setting in which the Lord’s Supper was administered, and more a riotous party that resembled the pagan idolatrous feasts that Paul condemned in chapters 8–10. Ultimately, the church forbade Love Feasts at the Council of Laodicea in 364 AD, a decree that was subsequently reiterated at the Third Council of Carthage in 393 AD.¹⁴ Importantly, we should recognize that the church was not legislating new laws for the church. On the contrary, they were simply applying ministerially the implications of 1 Corinthians 11:22 to the church’s worship practices.

Discussion Questions

1. What *divisions* exist between you and others in the church? Are these philosophical divisions, personality-driven divisions, or petty divisions? Jesus tells us to leave corporate worship, if necessary, in order to reconcile with a brother before returning to worship (Matt. 5:24). With whom do you need to reconcile before Harvest can come together again as a church for corporate worship? What practical steps can you take this week to heal those divisions?
2. During the last several weeks, we have been deprived of the Lord’s Supper. Paul warns, though, that if we do not celebrate the Lord’s Supper rightly when we return, we will *still* be deprived of the Lord’s Supper, even if we eat bread and wine in the same room together (1 Cor. 11:20). What might you do to prepare for communion *with Christ*, in anticipation of receiving the Lord’s Supper when we return? What might you do to prepare for communion *with fellow believers*, in anticipation of receiving the Lord’s Supper when we return? Consider reviewing *Westminster Larger Catechism* questions #168–175 as you think through this question.
3. What is the importance and significance of membership in the “church of God” (1 Cor. 11:22)? What responsibilities do members show honor to one another in the body of Christ? What rifts in the church create tricky barriers for you to navigate personally? Young vs. Old? Married vs. Single? No children vs. Young children vs. Grown children vs. Grandchildren? Homeschool vs. Private School vs. Public School? Political opinions? Ideas on how our country, state, city, and church should handle the COVID-19 crisis? How can we avoid separating into schisms, divisions, and cliques?

¹⁴ For these three paragraphs, see Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 214–16, 219.