

When This Gathering Does More Harm than Good

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Introduction – Don't be deceived by our mild manner, the warm room, and all the niceties of our gathering. This and every Lord's Day service is dangerous, even deadly. There is a way of assembling together here that leaves you or others "*guilty of the body and blood of the Lord*" (v27) that has left some "*weak and sick...and dead*" (v30). Paul described earlier how those who had partaken of the heavenly food and drink in the wilderness had done so and yet perished (10:1ff). He warned them of the consequences of eating at the table of demons (10:14ff), and of dishonoring the glory of the image of God, male and female (11:2ff). Our worship service is our highest privilege and the Lord's service culminates with a ritual supper of koinonia/communion. It's all grace; but don't mess with grace.

I Do Not Praise You – Imagine. These words are forever canonized against a particular local body in these Scriptures (also Gal 1:6-7, Rev 2:14-16, 20). Their assemblies are making things worse, not better. They are fraught with divisions and factions (1:10-13), and when they gather for the Lord's Supper as one body it becomes clear they are not one body, and worse, there are some that are good with that (vv17-19). Therefore, in one sense, they aren't eating the Lord's Supper (v20). If they were, they wouldn't be eating without each other (probably in some kind of extended feast), leaving some hungry while others overindulged even to drunkenness (v21). In this case, the division appears to be between the "haves" and the "have nots." And so those who "have" ought to eat in their own homes and show up caring about God and His people, rather than shaming those (maybe the slaves, or those of Chloe's household) who have nothing (v22). Such divisions are nauseating to God and not appropriate at His Table. We were all levelled at the cross (Rom 3:23, Gal 3:26-29). We are all elevated to this Table of Peace, all unworthy left to ourselves, all heirs according to the promise.

The Words of Institution (vv23-26) – Paul does not address these feasts that accompanied the Lord's Supper and there is no indication that all the churches were doing so. He delivers what he received from the Lord. In vv23-26 he makes clear what is the essence of partaking of the Lord's Supper as a ritual. It is simple bread and wine. It is a memorial of one body (Christ's) broken for one body (the body of Christ, 10:16-17). It is the cup of the new covenant in the blood of Christ, the atonement that is ours and the only way to be in a right standing with God. It is a Thanksgiving meal (v24) and so thanks is offered in both portions (and they are kept separate). And it is a proclamation of Christ's death (for us) that is to go on until He comes again. Since these chapters are all about the Lord's Service it seems reasonable that this ritual is to take place every Lord's Day. As we eat and drink by faith, we partake of Christ by means of the Holy Spirit.

That Unworthy Manner (vv27-29) – We are partaking of His body and corporately we are His body. Corporately, we are partaking of one another, the body of Christ. This is our fellowship, our koinonia, our communion. It is with Christ and it is with one another. So, if we partake while excluding others from partaking with us, we are not "*discerning the Lord's body*" (v29), we are making a mockery of the stated union and communion declared at the Table. The answer is to examine oneself (not others) that you are rightly manifesting unity with the others in your conduct with others at the Table. Having done that, one is to then partake (v28); it is not an opportunity for an individual to excommunicate himself.

Quick to be Corrected (vv30-34) – The Supper is not a place of automatic blessing. It is also a place of winnowing. But rightly judging ourselves, Paul argues, brings us to communion (with one another) and to the Supper rather than driving us away. Paul wants us to judge ourselves, be disciplined by the Lord, and therefore not be condemned (vv30-32).

Discern the Lord's Body – This phrase means that we must confess our pride, selfishness, division, and lack of love for one another in the body (1 John 4:7-11). Jesus admonished us similarly in our coming to this service of worship and to the Table (Matt 5:22-24). As much as it depends on you, be reconciled to one another as you come to the Table and do not exclude your brother or sister from your own participation. The phrase “discern the Lord's body” is not referring to being theologically sophisticated enough to know the location or mode of the flesh of Christ in the sacrament. It is not referring to reflecting adequately upon the death of Jesus in deep internal introspection. It is not talking about children coming to the Table, or the intellectually challenged people coming to the Table.

A Ritual Meal – This meal (the Lord's Supper itself) is not designed to fill you up, but to be a memorial of Jesus, of being His body and partaking of His body. In one sense it is the reformed (biblical?) version of an altar call. We are coming to Jesus. We are confessing Jesus. We are improving on our baptism. And we are doing so individually and yet as members of a body for whom He died, for whom He loves, and whom He has knit together in the fellowship of His love.

Dave Hatcher – March 10, 2019
