

First Epistle to the Corinthians

22 – Essay Four: Women and Men in Church (4.2) – Order in Worship – Eucharist

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

1. Outlines

a. *ESV Study Bible*

- i. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2–14:40)
 1. Head coverings and worship (11:2–16)
 2. Social snobbery at the Lord’s Table (11:17–34)
 3. Elevating one spiritual gift above others (12:1–14:40)

b. *Reading the New Testament Series*

- i. Problems in Corporate Worship (11:2-14:40)
 1. Prayer and Prophecy (11:2-16) – Different Though Equal in the Lord
 2. The Lord’s Supper (11:17-34) – Social Significance of the Supper
 3. Prayer and Prophecy (12:1-14:40) – Regulation, Not Suppression of Spiritual Gifts

c. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*

- i. In Response to the Corinthian Letter (7:1-16:12)
 1. Marriage and Related Matters (7:1-40)
 2. Food Sacrificed to Idols (8:1-11:1)
 3. Women (and Men) in Worship (11:2-16)
 4. Abuse of the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34)
 5. Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual People (12:1-14:40)

d. Bailey¹

- i. Worship: Men and Women in the Church (11:2-14:40)
 1. Men and Women Leading in Worship (11:2-16)
 2. Order in Worship: Sacrament (11:17-34)
 3. Gifts and the Nature of the Body (12:1-30)
 4. The Hymn to Love (12:31-14:1)
 5. Spiritual Gifts and the Upbuilding of the Body (14:1-25)
 6. Order in Worship: Word (14:26-33)
 7. Women and Men Worshipping (14:3b-40)

2. Rhetoric

a. Three major sub-sections

- i. Problem – assembly and attitudes
- ii. Tradition – Lord’s supper and its significance
- iii. Judgment – self-examination and solution to problem

b. Familiar texts (Communion traditions, self-examination)

- i. Part of a larger context specific to Corinthian problem
- ii. Often taken out of context and made to say things Paul didn’t intend

c. One of the few places where Paul writes in detail about early Christian tradition

d. Ends with matters private and specific to Corinthians

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 3428.

Table 1: Bailey, location 3676

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (ESV)

A	1	17 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.	No Commendation Assembly - you
	2	18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church [<i>ekklesia</i>], I hear that there are divisions among you.	Church Divisions
	3	And I believe it in part, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.	Quarreling
	4	20 When you come together [in assembly, in the same place], it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.	Assembly - you Not Lord's Supper
	5	21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 What! Do you not have [your own] houses to eat and drink in?	Hungry and drunk
	6	Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?	Church Humiliation
	7	What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.	No Commendation For you
B	1	23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you,	Tradition - received Paul - delivered
	2	that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed	Jesus Betrayed
	3	took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks [<i>eucharisteo</i>], he broke it, and said,	Took bread
	4	This is my body which is [some mss. add <i>broken</i>] for you. Do this in remembrance of me [or, <i>for my remembrance</i>].	My body Remembrance
	5	25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying,	Took cup
	6	This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.	My blood Remembrance
	7	26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.	Bread and Cup Proclamation
C	1	27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.	Eat Drink Guilty
	2	28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.	Examine self Eat and drink
	3	29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.	Eat and drink Disregard of body Judgment on self
	4	30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.	Weak and ill Dead

5		31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.	Judge Self
6		32 But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.	Judged by the Lord
7		33 So then, my brothers [and sisters], when you come together to eat, wait for [or, <i>receive in hospitality</i>] one another— 34 if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home— so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.	Eat Wait Hungry - eat at home Otherwise, condemned
8		About the other things I will give directions when I come.	Private Corinthian matters

3. Section A – Paul’s assessment of Corinthian problems regarding the Lord’s Supper

- a. This is not something that the Corinthians wrote about
- b. It is something Paul has heard – quite likely from slaves or household servants where the Corinthian church met
- c. Historical and cultural background considerations²
 - i. In some cases, people brought their own meals to a banquet, consuming it on their own schedule – this does not contribute to fellowship
 - ii. Another custom was where the served food at the same banquet differed depending on social standing –the wealthy would get better food and wine than the poor who may only get bread and scraps
 - iii. The main dining area in a home seated (recline around a triclenium) about nine people; the atrium could hold thirty to forty. Those who arrived early (again, the wealthy who didn’t have to work) would be in the dining area whereas the less well-to-do would find themselves in the atrium.
 - iv. Those who arrived early (the well-to-do) had pick of the best foods, and the late arrivals had to fight over what remained
 - v. These were cultural norms that would not have raised eyebrows or questions
- d. Paul writes against cultural norms and traditions
 - i. No commendation – no praise
 - ii. The church is worse off when following the cultural norms at issue here
 - iii. Church is accentuating the social divide rather than eliminating it
 1. In a normal social gathering, it would be rare to have people from social extremes together in one place, but it happens in a church
 2. Church is causing humiliation of one group through her actions
- e. A brief touch on the theology of the church (ecclesiology)
 - i. Church is not a collection of individuals who profess belief in Jesus Christ
 - ii. Church emerges when individuals come together at a location to imitate Christ
 - iii. There is no individual Christian, and someone who professes belief in Christ who refuses to come together cannot be a Christian
- f. Difficulty – verse 19, “for there must be factions among you...”

² Reading Corinthians from Reading the New Testament Series, entry for 1 Cor. 11:20-22a.

- i. Bad must exist for good to be recognized?
- ii. Or, good and bad are inevitable and likewise, divisions around them?
- iii. Or, Paul is being sarcastic or ironic?³
- iv. Best is that Paul is seeing the divisions and the factions as part of the eschatological sifting of genuine vs. false. It is not a good thing, but it is something that Jesus foresaw and is inevitable (Matthew 10:34-37; 24:9-13).⁴

Thus even though this sentence is something of an aside, it also places their divisions into a framework that is more than simply sociological. They may be acting merely as the rich would always act with poorer guests in their homes; but at the Lord's Table such activities must be seen against the larger divine drama. Such "divisions" have the net effect of revealing those who are genuinely Christ's. And the "proof" lies not in a correct belief system, but in behavior that reflects the gospel.⁵

- g. Paul's point: what you are practicing is not the Lord's supper
 - i. It is meant to bring together all people, but instead what you practice divides
 - ii. What you are eating is your "own [individual] supper"
 - iii. Paul is speaking to the wealthy – verse 22 – to people who "own houses"
 - iv. To treat others as less than – to humiliate (even though culturally it is perfectly acceptable, and the wealthy may not have even thought about it in that way) – is to despise and destroy God's church

The poor and rich were theoretically eating from the same table, and that was good. But being the "holy temple" and "the body of Christ" meant (and means) that the community was expected to be transparent with the pain of each known to all. When that did not happen and the rich lived in ignorance of the suffering they were inflicting on the poor, the consequences were dire. The major purpose of the gathering (the Eucharist) was thereby destroyed.⁶

- v. What Paul does not say directly is "share your wealth" – but he is indirectly attacking, through Christian theology, norms that contribute to social inequities

Self-serving activity, even when religious in nature, is not God's will or the purpose for the church.⁷

- 4. Section B – the received tradition and theology of the Lord's supper
 - a. Paul appeals to the authority of the Lord Jesus
 - i. "Received from the Lord" should not be taken literally that Paul received some kind of special revelation directly from Jesus. Rather, he writes that the tradition ultimately goes back to Jesus and his actions at the Last supper.

³ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:19.

⁴ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:19.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bailey, location 3730.

⁷ *UBC*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:22.

- ii. The received-delivered pair of words is standard Jewish formula for describing chain of authority
- b. Paul is not so concerned with the individual elements but rather the “remembrance” aspect
 - i. Paul’s concern is not with what each element represents or signifies
 - 1. Emphasis is on body, not bread; new covenant, not blood
 - 2. Emphasis is on Jesus’ death in the past, on his future return, and the proclamation of the gospel in the present time
 - ii. Remembrance is not merely recollection of data and events, but an active participation in what those things mean

In the OT "remembrance" rarely carries the common English nuance of simply a mental activity. Very often "memory" and "activity" go together...

Thus just as the Passover meal itself was such a "remembrance" to be kept forever in Israel, so Jesus is now reconstituting the "memorial" for the true Israel that will gather around the table in his name to "remember" its own deliverance through him. That is why he describes it as "my remembrance." It is not simply "in memory of him," but it is eaten as a "memorial" of the salvation that he has effected through his death and resurrection...

The Corinthians' meal had turned into such a fiasco that the "remembrance" of Christ is precisely what is missing. Thus Paul's great concern in repeating these words is to remind them of the "manward" implications of this "remembrance."⁸

- iii. Paul’s concern is with how the Corinthians have forgotten the gospel that is proclaimed in the participation in the Lord’s supper
- iv. Jesus died for all – not just the wealthy
- v. All are equal in Christ – the cross birthed a new community that is not based on social standing, national identity, or gender – but on what Christ has done
- 5. Section C – Judgment incurred when the church behaves inappropriately around the Lord’s Table
 - a. This is a paragraph that has often been lifted out of its overall context and used inappropriately. Where interpretations have frequently run into trouble:
 - i. “Eats... or drinks... in an unworthy manner...” (27)
 - ii. “Let a person examine himself, then... eat... and drink...” (28)
 - iii. “That is why many of you are weak and ill...” (30)
 - iv. “When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined...” (32)
 - b. Context is important
 - i. Problem: The Corinthian believers have forgotten what it means to be God’s church. The assembly has become just another social gathering with all its associated social and cultural tradition from secular/pagan gatherings
 - ii. Theology: The Lord ’s Supper is “The Lord’s” supper; not “my” supper. It is participation in the new community formed at the cross through Jesus’ self-giving love in which all who come hold an equal place around the Table. It is participation

⁸ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:23b-24.

in the process of the restoration of the Kingdom of God. This restoration includes elimination of human-originated distinctions that place one over another.

iii. When Paul writes, “therefore” (27), what follows is a conclusion of what has just come. It must be interpreted in this light.

c. What is the “unworthy manner”?

i. It is the abuse of the poor by the well-to-do

In the context of this letter and in the light of the discussion he has offered the Corinthians up to this point, one should see that, for Paul, to eat the bread and to drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy way is eating and drinking with an attitude of self-centeredness, of individualism or arrogance.⁹

ii. “Guilty concerning the body and the blood of the Lord” (27)

1. Abuse of the marginalized in the church is the same as abusing (crucifying) Christ

Such an abuse of the “body” is an abuse of Christ himself. The bread represents his crucified body, which, along with his poured out blood, effected the death that ratified the New Covenant. By their abuse of one another, they were also abusing the One through whose death and resurrection they had been brought to life and formed into this new eschatological fellowship, his body the church.¹⁰

iii. In a more general sense, it is not about individual wrong-doing, but allowing classes of people to exist in the church where some are marginalized while others enjoy privilege.

d. “Let a person examine himself”

i. The question is not “am I worthy” but “Are we proclaiming the gospel in our actions?”

This is not a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the Table... [It is] a call to truly Christian behavior at the Table. It is in this sense that the Corinthians are urged to examine themselves. Their behavior has belied the gospel they claim to embrace. Before they participate in the meal, they should examine themselves in terms of their attitudes toward the body, how they are treating others, since the meal itself is a place of proclaiming the gospel.¹¹

e. “Discerning the body” (29)

i. Examine how the church is treating one another

Most likely the term “body”, even though it comes by way of the words of institution in v. 24, deliberately recalls Paul’s interpretation of the bread in 10:17, thus indicating that the concern is with the problem in Corinth itself, of the rich abusing the poor. All the evidence seems to point in this direction...

⁹ *UBC*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:27.

¹⁰ *NICNT*, introduction entry on 1 Cor. 11:17-34 (D. Abuse of the Lord’s Supper).

¹¹ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:28.

The Lord's Supper is not just any meal; it is the meal, in which at a common table with one loaf and a common cup they proclaimed that through the death of Christ they were one body, the body of Christ; and therefore they are not just any group of sociologically diverse people who could keep those differences intact at this table. Here they must "discern/recognize as distinct" the one body of Christ, of which they all are parts and in which they all are gifts to one another. To fail to discern the body in this way, by abusing those of lesser sociological status, is to incur God's judgment.¹²

- f. "That is why many of you are weak and ill"
- i. Is Paul claiming cause and effect? That if a church participates in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, God will punish them with disease and death?
 - ii. It is historical and specific to what he observed in the Corinthian church. He is not making a general statement for all time.

Paul's troubling statement is open to misunderstanding and abuse. He is explaining that he perceives God to be at work disciplining the members of the Corinthian church. Whether or not he was right in his conclusions, he does not say that all sickness and death are the result of inappropriate behavior. Paul's analysis at this point is concrete and historical in nature and should not be treated as an observation on all of life and the difficulties that are encountered in daily living.¹³

- iii. A general principle we might extract is that when a church persists in un-Christ-like behavior within itself, it (as a whole) will become unhealthy, diseased, and possibly even die.
- g. Judgment and discipline by the Lord
- i. These texts are not about personal salvation
 - ii. It is Paul's perception and explanation of the ills the Corinthians are experiencing
 - iii. God allows ills to come about (natural consequences?) to his people so that they will correct their ways so that they won't end up being condemned with the world

As noted throughout, this paragraph has had an unfortunate history of understanding in the church. The very Table that is God's reminder, and therefore his repeated gift, of grace, the Table where we affirm again who and whose we are, has been allowed to become a table of condemnation for the very people who most truly need the assurance of acceptance that this table affords—the sinful, the weak, the weary. One does not have to "get rid of the sin in one's life" in order to partake. Here by faith one may once again receive the assurance that "Christ receiveth sinners."

On the other hand, any magical view of the sacrament that allows the unrepentant to partake without "discerning the body" makes the offer of grace a place of judgment. Grace "received" that is not recognized as such is not grace at all; and grace "received"

¹² *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:29.

¹³ *UBC*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:30.

that does not recognize the need to be gracious to others is to miss the point of the Table altogether.¹⁴

- h. Solution – wait for (or receive in hospitality) one another, or if you want to gorge yourself, do it away from the church
 - i. Paul doesn't directly write against tradition and cultural norms. He doesn't directly condemn the "haves." But he indirectly challenges the propriety of holding to secular priorities of wealth by putting a negative spin on traditional banquets.

It ["eating" v.21] probably means something more like "consume" or "devour." If that be the case, then v. 21 refers to their gorging on privileged portions in the presence of the poor... In this context "If anyone is hungry..." [v.34] almost certainly means "If anyone wants to gorge..." That is, if you want to satisfy your desire for the kinds of meals that the wealthy are accustomed to eat together, do that at home, but not in the context of the gathered assembly, where some "have nothing" and are thereby humiliated (vv. 21–22).¹⁵

- i. These are issues, although found in Corinth, have applicability to all God's churches. There are apparently other issues which do not have general applicability and which Paul will address in private when he comes.
6. What does this all mean for us in the 21st century?
- a. Dangers of individualism
 - b. What are our attitudes toward those unlike us, especially those whom culture and society looks on as "less than"?
 - c. What kind of tradition-based divisions might we be accepting in our churches?
 - d. What are groups of people that are sometimes "shamed" by the church?
 - e. How are our attitudes toward wealth and wealth accumulation like that of the wealthy Corinthians?
 - f. Danger of prioritizing religious maxims and observances over relationships

One wonders whether our making the text deal with self-examination has not served to deflect the greater concern of the text, that we give more attention at the Lord's Supper to our relationships with one another in the body of Christ. The final imperative is perhaps the most significant one: "Receive/welcome one another." It is the Lord's Supper, after all, not ours. Our task—and joy—is to receive anew the benefits of his grace in the context of truly welcoming others, who are recipients of that same grace.¹⁶

¹⁴ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:31-32.

¹⁵ *NICNT*, entries for 1 Cor. 11:33 and 34a.

¹⁶ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 11:34b.