

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

(1 Corinthians 11:33)

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul addresses an assembly of conflicted Christians who gathered for an important ritual (the Lord's Supper) while at the same time denying its message (v. 17). In fact, Paul hints that their misbehaviour was tantamount to betrayal (v. 23).

One manifestation of this denial/betrayal was a refusal of members to wait for each other before partaking of this meal. Some members—likely slaves—could only gather later (due to work responsibilities). But rather than waiting for the whole church to gather, the meal was consumed before all could get there. This was a denial of the value of each member—a denial of *communion*.

Hence, in v. 33, Paul urged the church to wait for them—to consider the empty stomachs of those less privileged. We, too, are to be considerate of others in the church so that no member is excluded. One practical expression of such communion is how we observe the Lord's Supper.

The Problem Explained

It would seem from 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 that, when the early church came together, they *weekly* celebrated Communion. But it also seems that a church-wide meal was in some way connected to this—a so-called “love feast.” Whether it was before or after the sharing of Communion, we have no way of knowing for sure. Nevertheless, the church seems to have shared potluck meal. Well, at least some of the church did.

Apparently in the church, this meal became a scene of much sin. Drunkenness and gluttony occurred. Some apparently selfishly gorged themselves to the point that others went away hungry (but at least sober!).

In this context, whether Communion was before or after, clearly the purpose of Communion was being disregarded. They were disregarding—betraying—the body and blood of the Lord. It was a hypocritical pretence. No wonder there were many who were chastened by God with sickness, and some even with death (v. 30). They were making a mockery of the atoning work of Jesus Christ and thus mistreating those for whom he died, his body, the church.

It is within this context that Paul wrote to straighten things out. He wrote, quite literally, to sort out their table manners. And what he said to them has relevant application to every local church.

First, when we gather as a church to eat, we need to consider Christ and his church. We need to put others first as a practical recognition of Christ as our Saviour and Lord. That is, we need to consider one another. We need to approach the eats with a heart of service.

But, of course, the same attitude is to be exercised when we gather for Communion. We are to consider one another. Serving one another is to be our heart attitude. (This is why I prefer passing the elements rather than each coming forward to serve him- or herself.)

Quite clearly, this was not happening in Corinth. In fact, it appears that the Lord's Supper was being served without thought to those who could only gather later. They were not waiting for one another, thereby demonstrating a less-than-loving attitude towards every member of the congregation. They were observing what was intended as a means of grace while showing very little grace.

The Practice Exhorted

Or text reads, "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another – if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home – so that when you come together it will not be for judgement" (vv. 33–34). We want to primarily focus on v. 33, though v. 34 is relevant.

Some footnotes read "share with" instead of "wait for." It makes no material difference to the point that Paul is making. He wants the congregation to be concerned about each and every member.

It seems that Paul concludes his lengthy argument with this very simple, straightforward exhortation. Of course, he is assuming they will deal with their heart issues, but the practical must then match the principle. After all, the failure in their practice was a failure of principle. David Jackman notes, "Respect and acceptance of one another lie behind the word translated 'wait.' There is to be a mutual valuing of one another as members of the church of God."

A failure to do so is serious, as v. 29 warns us. This verse says Jackman, "serves as a strong warning against despising my fellow Christians and not discerning them as the body of the Lord."

As Jackman helpfully points out, the Lord's Table provides us with an opportunity to examine how selective we are in our fellowship.

At the cross, all the old sinful divisions are obliterated, as every individual, whoever he or she may be, prays the same prayer, “God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). And yet, how many contemporary Christian congregations are still divided? Social and financial distinctions are allowed to harden into indifference and separatism. Snobbery, whether social, intellectual or even “spiritual,” denigrates gospel humility. Members of the church of God are despised and degraded. How can such a “church” call itself by Christ’s name when its lifestyle betrays its belief?

What Are You Waiting For?

By preparing beforehand (v. 34), and by patiently waiting for one another, they could practically display their unity in Christ.

They were to wait until everyone in the church who *could* gather was *able* to gather.

Again, some no doubt were bondservants (7:21) who would be required to work till late and they faced the possibility that they would miss the corporate gathering – including the meal. The church was to wait for them. The church was to consider the empty stomachs of those less privileged. The congregation was to consider the needs of others and to esteem them at least equally important as their own needs. They were to reject individualism, resist consumerism, and repent of consumptionism.

Why Wait?

Because each member matters to Jesus Christ, each member should matter to each of us. No one should be excluded. Every member should be valued. Unity is to be demonstrated.

Note that the chapters that follow emphasise the value of each member of the body of Christ. This is a theme central in Paul’s concern throughout the entire epistle.

A Proposal Explained

This principle will look different from church to church, but we must learn from it. Let me illustrate by highlighting a change that the elders of our church recently proposed in light of his text.

For the past twenty-plus years, BBC has observed the Lord’s Supper exclusively at the Sunday evening service. There is good reason for this.

First, it was originally an evening meal—the Lord’s Supper, not the Lord’s breakfast. Second, helps to fence the table from those who are not Christians, including those who do not esteem, value the Body of Christ. After all, there are generally far more visitors in the morning than in the evening. Third, in light of the above, it is an act of hospitality to visitors

who should not partake. Fourth, at least in our church, the evening service has typically been a more family-oriented time.

For these reasons, and perhaps some others, we will most likely continue this trend. And yet this wait-for-one-another principle has brought us as a church to a proposed change in the way we do things. For reasons I will explain below, we have decided, on occasion, to celebrate the Communion meal during the morning service.

The Reason

As some of our members are getting older, they are finding it increasingly difficult to gather with the church in the evening. Some battle with eyesight, others with frequent ailments and weakening bodies. They have asked the elders to consider occasionally having Communion in the morning. We have heard their request. We see this as an opportunity to serve them, to express our love to them by “waiting” for them – by practically sharing the body life of Christ with them.

An occasional Sunday morning Communion service will go some way towards this goal. Sadly, in our day and age, the aged are dismissed as irrelevant, if not horribly neglected. Brothers and sisters, this ought not to be! Our older members are valuable, and we want to express their value in this practical way. This change does not imply that we have not valued them until now. It does mean that we have become aware of an opportunity to practically demonstrate our love for them, and so we want to do so.

The Plan

Having thought through the issues, and, having contemplated the truth of this verse and its related passage, we have decided to try this. If we are satisfied that it proves both constructive and doable, we may more occasionally repeat a morning Communion.

A Caution

Of course, the table must continue to be fenced. Moving the table to the morning will not result in the moving of the Lord’s prescribed goalposts for his meal. These prescriptions are clear.

It is a meal only for Christians – repentant sinners who are trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation from sin. It is for baptised repentant sinners who are trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation from sin. It is for covenanted repentant sinners who are trusting Jesus Christ alone for their salvation along with other repentant sinners trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation from sin. That is, it is for church members.

Second, it is a meal for hungry Christians. This is not a meal to be partaken of by those who treat it merely as an appendage or as a mere convenience. If members are able but unwilling to regularly attend Sunday evening gathering, they should be consistent and refuse the meal in the morning. That may sound harsh, it is not intended to be. Rather, it is a call of consistency. It is a reminder of what it means to be a Christian: one who loves Christ and his people.

The Lord's Supper is for the Lord's disciples. By definition, disciples follow – always and at all times, not merely when it is convenient.

Conclusion

As we go to the table, may we do so better equipped to consider one another as we consider the Lord Jesus Christ who steadfastly loved and loves everyone who belongs to him. His sacrificial death for his own is what gives value to each of his own. And this provides all the motivation we need to “wait for one another.”

AMEN