

Paul's Instruction Regarding the Lord's Supper

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Introduction

In the first few decades of the Christian church the Apostle Paul wrote a series of letters to the church in Corinth. These letters (of which there were likely four) confronted and corrected various expressions of division within this congregation. Paul communicates his intent when he exhorts the Corinthians to all “agree and that there be no division” (1 Cor. 1.10).

The issue of division manifested in a variety of ways. There was division over leadership - which apostles to follow (1 Cor. 1.11-13 and 2 Cor. 11). Some took their disagreements to the local court in search of a legal solution (1 Cor. 6.1-8). Others divided over the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12-14). Some were divided over the nature of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). There was also a lack of unity over dietary issues (1 Cor. 8).

New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell describes the church in Corinth; “The Corinthian church holds the dubious distinction of being the most confused congregation, or group of congregations, that Paul addressed.”¹ Powell continues; “All churches have problems, of course, but 1 Corinthians seems to deal with nothing but problems, one right after another.”²

One of the most prominent expressions of division in the Corinthian church was their practice of the Lord's Supper or Communion. Like most other aspects of their congregational life, their practice of Communion was infected with hierarchy and

¹ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Academic, 2018. (288)

² Ibid (289)

division. Paul rebukes their divisive attitudes and practices as an offense to the body and blood of the Lord. Paul's correction demands that they honor the body and blood of the Lord, remember the nature of Christ's death and inspect the state of their souls when they gather for the Lord's Supper.

Background and Context

As previously noted, 1 Corinthians is one of a series of exchanges between Paul and the church in Corinth. Most scholars suggest that Paul wrote at least four epistles to this church. In 1 Cor. 5.9 Paul references a prior letter in which he addressed the Corinthians need to disassociate themselves from the sexually immoral. In that case, 1 Corinthians would actually be the second letter written to the church in Corinth.

In addition, much of 1 Corinthians is Paul responding to questions and issues raised by the Corinthian church itself. This suggests that they responded to Paul's first letter with a letter of their own and that 1 Corinthians may even be the third piece of correspondence between the two parties.

It is generally agreed upon that 1 Corinthians was written in the mid-50's AD. Likely, Paul wrote this epistle during a two-three year stay in Ephesus. There is less consensus on the population of Corinth at the time of this writing. The NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible suggests a population of 80,000 to 100,000³, while the NASB Study Bible proposes a population of 250,000 free persons and as many as 400,000 slaves or servants, for a total of 650,000 residents in Corinth⁴.

³ Carson, D.A. *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 2018. (Introduction to 1 Corinthians)

⁴ Barker, Kenneth L. and Burdick, Donald W. eds. *New American Standard Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 2000. (1660)

No matter the actual population, the fact that over 60% of Corinth is would have been slaves is notable. This would suggest that the free citizens of Corinth were wealthy enough to each have multiple servants. Powell comments on this reality; “Corinth...prided itself on being a haven for the newly rich, offering enterprising young men and women their best shot at upward mobility...By New Testament times, the city of Corinth had come to be associated with lavish lifestyles and conspicuous consumption.”⁵ The lavish lifestyles and conspicuous consumption create the context for much of the issues surrounding Communion, as we will see.

As the church in Corinth formed it would have been comprised of wealthy citizens and lower class servants and slaves. Again, Powell comments; “Most of the Corinthian Christians also appear to have come from the lower classes...”⁶ Not surprisingly, those with lower social status seem to have been more receptive to the Gospel.

Establishing a congregation that was home to wealthy citizens as well as servants and slaves would have created some challenging social dynamics; “...the social integration of persons from different ethnic groups and economic classes may have been one significant cause of conflict in the church.”⁷

Exegesis

1 Corinthians 11 begins a four chapter long emphasis on how to conduct oneself in corporate gatherings. The previous chapters dealt with various topics like personal attitudes and conflicts. Once Paul begins the 11th chapter he has turned his attention

⁵ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Academic, 2018. (292)

⁶ Ibid (293)

⁷ Ibid (293)

toward how to get along and function in a larger group setting. In this section Paul addresses Communion and the exercise of spiritual gifts, primarily.

Paul begins his instruction on Communion with a direct rebuke: "...you come together not for the better but for the worse" (1 Cor. 11.17). Paul does not mince words. He suggests that their gatherings do more harm than good because their gatherings are fraught with divisions.

Paul describes their gatherings as not "the Lord's Supper," but rather their "own supper." (1 Cor. 11.20-21). The result of their meetings is that the wealthy believers "shame those who have nothing." (1 Cor. 11.22) The Corinthians' observance of Communion neither lives up to Paul's ideal, nor accurately represents the meaning of the ordinance;

Paul's vision for the fellowship of God's people in Corinth was far from being realized. Indeed, at the very occasion where one would have expected the greatest realization of that vision for mutuality and caring—at their common meals—they manifested a haughty, individualistic disregard for others.⁸

Paul begins to get specific about the issues at hand in verse 21 when he confronts those who eat their meal, apparently in a gluttonous and excessive manner, while others go hungry.

For the average modern Christian whose Communion experience consists of a wafer and some grape juice or wine, it's hard to imagine that anyone is overeating or getting drunk during Communion. It is important to note that the early church, including

⁸ Brauch, Manfred T., Bruce, F.F., Davids, Peter H., and Kaiser Jr., Walter C. *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL. Intervarsity Press, 1996. (609)

the Corinthians, had a much more robust celebration of Communion, albeit at times out of order:

The early church held the agape ('love') feast in connection with the Lord's Supper (cf. 2 Pet. 2:13; Jude 12). Perhaps the meal was something like a present-day potluck dinner. In good Greek style they brought food for all to share, the rich bringing more and the poor less, but because of their cliques the rich ate more and the poor were left hungry.⁹

Excessive indulgence in rich food and alcohol was only part of the problem with how the Corinthians observe Communion. The reason that some were able to gorge themselves while others went hungry is that those who participated in the meal did not all arrive at the same time:

Some, apparently the more affluent among them, had brought their food and, without waiting for others, had gone ahead and eaten their meals. There was even excessive drinking of the wine. All of this took place while the poorer members of the fellowship, who were able to bring little or nothing, were humiliated (1 Cor. 11:22).¹⁰

Those who were wealthy were able to gather and eat earlier because they were not busy at work. The large population of slaves and servants on the other hand, were expected work until dark and naturally would arrive at the Love Feast late:

...the problem arose from people arriving at different times and eating in shifts. The wealthier members of the church came early and shared with

⁹ Barker, Kenneth L. and Burdick, Donald W. eds. *New American Standard Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 2000. (Comment on 1 Cor. 11.21)

¹⁰ Brauch, Manfred T., Bruce, F.F., Davids, Peter H., and Kaiser Jr., Walter C. *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL. Intervarsity Press, 1996. (609)

one another whatever they had brought. Members of the lower class, who labored until dark, came later, bringing whatever meager contributions they could afford. They arrived to find that the elite had already enjoyed a nice banquet and were seated with expensive food and sometimes drunk on fine spirits (1 Cor. 11:21). There might be some leftovers, but the second-shift meal for latecomers...was a decidedly lower-class affair.¹¹

What initially started as a “second-shift” of attendees quickly devolved into a second-class of community members. New Testament scholar Craig Keener sheds more light on this dynamic;

Some non-aristocrats may have been coming late from work as laborers or slaves (cf. v. 33), in contrast to the wealthier hosts who had leisure after their morning appointments. Alternatively, the hosts and any elite guests may want to eat their own high-quality food apart from the more modest meal being shared by the rest of the gathered believers.¹²

In addition to issues of overindulgence and lack of patience, there was also the very real dynamic of a large group of people eating in a home with separate rooms. Anyone who has ever hosted a family meal and set apart separate tables or rooms for adults and children can understand the challenges presented here. In the case of the Corinthians' love feasts, groups were not separated into adults and children, but by the punctual and the late-comers, the wealthy and the poor. The Jewish Annotated New Testament provides the following comment on this dynamic; “Paul disapproves of

¹¹ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Academic, 2018. (300)

¹² Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994. (Comment on 1 Cor. 11.21)

following Roman and Jewish dining customs, which reserved the best seats and the finest food and drink for the most esteemed guests; the poorest and least influential received inferior treatment.”¹³

With the wealthy providing food that was greater in both quality and quantity than the poor, and the wealthy arriving and eating earlier than the poor, and the wealthy seated separately from the poor, it’s not hard to see why Paul claims that their gatherings did more harm than good and was a source of embarrassment for those with less resources. Inevitably, the church members from the lower social and economic class would have been embarrassed and may have even dreaded attending these events. Mark Allan Powell suggests that “[Paul] is appalled that a meal meant to be eaten in remembrance of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:24) has become an occasion for humiliating the poor (1 Cor. 11:22).”¹⁴

The social dynamics surrounding Communion would not have been unfamiliar to citizens of Corinth. It was normal for the wealthy to be inconsiderate to the poor. It was normal for the lower social classes to feel marginalized and embarrassed. While this may have been a normal (albeit, unfortunate) aspect of Corinthian culture, Paul was not satisfied with a church that reflected the culture more than it reflected the crucifixion; “The problems in the Corinthian church derive from contemporary cultural values of Greco-Roman society that some of the Corinthian believers never abandoned or to which they returned after Paul left the city.”¹⁵ Craig Keener shares a similar thought;

¹³ Brettler, Marc Zvi and Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition*. New York, NY. Oxford University Press, 2011. (341)

¹⁴ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Academic, 2018. (300)

¹⁵ Carson, D.A. *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 2018. (Introduction to 1 Corinthians)

“Instead of relating it to its Jewish Passover background, Corinthians were treating the Lord’s Supper like a typical Corinthian banquet.”¹⁶

Paul, in his typical apostolic manner confronts this issue head on. His method of correction is to direct the believer to consider the dynamics of their gathering in light of the cross of Christ:

As regards the neglect of poor Christians by rich Christians during the meetings of the congregation, Paul extensively narrates the tradition of the Lord’s Supper with its remembrance of Jesus giving his body and his blood (11:24–25), reminding the believers that as they “proclaim the Lord’s death” (11:26) in their meetings, they must be willing to share with others as Jesus shared, indeed sacrificed, his life.¹⁷

The Apostle reminds the Corinthians of the meaning and purpose of the bread and the cup and clarifies the meaning of Communion itself - “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” (1 Cor. 11.26). From this point on, Paul is unsatisfied to observe Communion without it being focused and centered on the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians may very well be an outworking of his stated purpose earlier in the epistles, when he reminds them that he came to “preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1.23) and that he “knew nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” (1 Cor. 2.2). Paul himself took a Christ-centered and cross-centered

¹⁶ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994. (Introduction to 1 Corinthians)

¹⁷ Carson, D.A. *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 2018. (Introduction to 1 Corinthians)

approach to ministry and his thinking on Communion was a natural outworking of that paradigm.

Application

As was previously noted, for the average Christian in the Twenty-First Century whose experience with Communion consists of a wafer and one ounce of juice or wine, these issues can seem foreign and irrelevant.

For those who do not practice Communion as part of a larger love feast, there is no danger of gorging themselves or getting drunk. With Communion often being served as part of a church service, rather than a meal, it's less likely that people would arrive at substantially different times and thus be treated differently.

While the contemporary church in America may be protected from the specific issues that plague the Lord's Table in Corinth, one has to wonder if the church is missing out on the meaning of Communion by not incorporating it into a larger love feast or meal. It could be argued that while the common practice of Communion effectively avoids the errors of Corinth, it just as effectively avoids the purpose of the ordinance altogether. Perhaps a return to Communion as part of a shared meal (in a home) would provide a more robust and valuable experience for the participants.

An additional application became more visible during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and beyond. Many churches wrestled with the question; "How do we observe Communion when we are prohibited from gathering?" The practice of offering Communion solely during church services would certainly preclude some in participating, creating a similar two-tiered Communion practice as was present in

Corinth. What about those that are watching online or at a later time or who cannot attend due to health related concerns?

In such a situation it may be wise to inform participants in advance so that they are able to procure their own Communion elements. In some cases, perhaps the elements can be provided in advance by the church.

Similarly, churches may benefit from equipping more people to serve Communion in smaller and more frequent settings. If the only place to observe Communion is at a church building with several hundred other people on a Sunday morning, this is likely to create some of the same issues faced in Corinth. However, if Communion can be observed at various times and locations (perhaps in home-based Bible studies or in prayer meetings or as families) it would make the ordinance more accessible to people.

It seems that the primary transferable principle is that Communion should be centered on the cross of Jesus Christ and that everything about the observance of Communion should direct us to the cross. Observing Communion without recognizing the atoning death of Christ is to miss the point of Communion itself.

The Communion meal plays a unique role in the life of the church and of the individual believer. It is a time of re-focusing on the atoning death of Jesus Christ. It is a time to serve and to share (assuming a meal is included). It can be a time for fellowship and hospitality. It is a time for self-inspection which often results in repentance and confession. When practiced in light of the cross of Christ, Communion can have a profound and life-changing impact on a follower of Jesus and a local congregation.

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