“Correct Teaching about the Lord’s Supper”
Dr. Robert Bardeen
Ward Parkway Presbyterian
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1 Corinthians 11:17-34 NIV

1 Corinthians 11:17
17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.

Paul was upset with the people in Corinth. “I have no praise for you.” Actually, he was frequently upset with them. The list of contentions is very long: division among their leaders, the cross of Christ, the influence of worldly standards in their church, the nature of his apostleship, a case of sexual misconduct in the church, lawsuits among believers, confusion about married life, conflict about food sacrificed to idols, the need for self-discipline, and the place of worship. After this teaching about the Lord’s Supper, Paul addresses more issues: spiritual gifts, division and diversity in the body of Christ, the centrality of love, the problem of speaking in tongues, theology about the resurrection, and his personal relationship with them.

This list doesn’t include other concerns he addresses in 2 Corinthians. Paul was upset.

It doesn’t hurt us to have a church leader upset with us. I think it’s better if a church allows frank discussion. When I was a freshman in college, I was recruited to teach the 5th and 6th grade Sunday school class. No one else would do it. I was given the official Presbyterian curriculum. I hated it, and went to a Bible bookstore to find something easier to use. I found Gospel Light written by Henrietta Mears from Hollywood Presbyterian Church. I bought it myself and used it for two Sundays until the Christian Education committee, chaired by my dad, found out. “Bobby, the curriculum you have decided to use has not been approved by the CE Committee and the Session. Stop using Gospel Light immediately.” I responded: “What happens if I don’t?” My dad replied, “Then I will have to replace you as the teacher.”

Paul bluntly wrote: “Your meetings do more harm than good.”

Maybe our scripture passage today will help us consider some important matters about church life and worship together.

I have divided the passage into sections with a heading for each one.

**Why do you gather together?**

1 Corinthians 11:18-22
18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among
you to show which of you have God’s approval. 20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, 21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. 22 Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

Instead of unity in the Corinthian church, there is division. Earlier I listed all the issues where theology was the central problem, but in this first section, the issue is behavior. There are divisions because of their behavior.

Some of the people came early and ate before others arrived. Some got drunk even before worship started. The ones who came late went home hungry.

Paul wants them to ask why they are gathering for worship. Why are you in the Lord’s house? What is your goal? What do you want to do? Why do you gather together?

When I was a teenager, I remember my home pastor preaching on this passage. He said this warning by Paul did not prohibit pot-luck meals, but instead the passage asked about the purpose of being together. My parents helped start a new church in Orange County, California, and our first building was a fellowship hall that we also used as our place for worship. Pot-luck dinners were common, almost once a month, and helped the create unity in our new congregation.

After worship, the men and boys gathered the folding chairs from worship, set up the tables, and placed the chairs up again. The women and girls went to the kitchen and set out the food on long tables. Then our pastor, the Rev. Virgil Zirbel had us pause a moment to return thanks and ask the Lord to bless our meal as a sign of unity. Those meals made an impression on me. My mom brought the largest plates we had at home. It was the best meal we had during the month because my mom was a terrible cook. I can remember other church members kid us about having the largest plates in the church. It was fun. One guy brought a cafeteria tray as his plate.

Paul was not pleased with the behavior in the Corinthian church and wanted them to consider what they were doing. He didn’t give them praise. He wanted them to correct their behavior, and to do so by thinking through the purpose of gathering together.

**Remember Christ!**

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this,
whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”  

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

This could be the first written account of the Lord’s Supper. Most scholars agree that 1 Corinthians was written about 55 AD, and that the Gospels were written during the 60s or possibly afterwards. Of course, there were oral accounts of the Lord’s Supper, shared by the Apostles who were present in the Upper Room.

In Paul’s account – which he clearly states was given to him by Lord directly – has a central theme: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Paul is calling us to the central purpose of communion: Remembering Christ.

This remembering was placed within an historical context. “On the night he was betrayed.”

This remembering was given during a meal. Jesus took bread from the table.

This remembering asks us to consider the bread and cup as the Lord’s body and blood.

This remembering interprets the bread and cup to represent the new covenant.

This remembering proclaims that we understand both the death of Christ and his return.

This remembering means that as we eat and drink, we share the Lord’s Supper, and as we gather around the table for the right reasons, we honor the Lord’s intention for this meal together.

**Exam yourself!**

1 Corinthians 11:27-32

27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. 32 Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to prepare for the Lord’s Supper, and that meant self-examination. It’s an important meal and we could do harm to ourselves if we don’t take self-examination seriously.

Self-examination means discerning the Body of Christ.
Discern the Body of Christ as diverse, but also unified (1 Corinthians 12:1-31).

Discern the Body of Christ with Christ as the head, and not us (Colossians 1:18).

Discern the Body of Christ on the cross (Romans 5:1-11).

Discern the Body of Christ as those who are hurting and need our care (Matthew 25:31-46).

Discern the Body of Christ as this moment of sacrament.

There are some misunderstandings about these verses.

A small and obscure denomination in Scotland only has a person take the Lord’s Supper once in their life, namely right before they die. The person confesses one last time and then receives the bread and cup. Of course, the timing of such an event is complicated.

When I first preached on this passage in 1972, a woman afterwards said to me, “Rev. Bardeen, I feel unworthy all of the time to receive the sacrament. I almost didn’t take it communion this morning after I heard this passage for the first time.” I told her: “Communion is a gift to us. We don’t merit it or deserve it. It is pure grace. We need to just accept it.”

Nobody is worthy.

Eat all together!

1 Corinthians 11:33-34

33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. 34 Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

Here’s Paul last word. The key word is “all.” Although we come as individuals when you take the bread and cup, we come together.

We are here to worship together and love each other. Christ is here.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 using The Message translation.