

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-22

### AN INVITATION TO THE LORD'S TABLE

“In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.”<sup>1</sup>

**I**t is with considerable astonishment that I witness what can only be seen as an insidious and sustained error within modern Christendom concerning the Lord's Table. Even among churches I have pastored, these particular errors were held so tenaciously by a surprising number of professed believers that it was virtually impossible to eradicate the deviant practises. When I left, the churches immediately gravitated back to the error. It is especially dismaying to see that generally, liturgical churches are more cautious about guarding the Lord's Table than are evangelical churches. The Word of God is quite clear on several issues that should not be controversial, but which have nevertheless become contentious issues within the congregations of our Lord.

Several principles that should guide Christian observance at the Lord's Table have been neglected among the Lord's churches. These principles will keep our attention focused on vital truths that are otherwise jettisoned in acts of faux humility or ignorance of what is entailed in Christian unity. I would invite you to make a copy of the principles I shall shortly enunciate and consider the import of their observance.

The first of the several principles that we must endeavour to keep in view is that ***The Lord's Table is a Church Ordinance, not a Christian Ordinance.*** Many, perhaps even most, evangelical churches no longer recognise this truth, and so they fail to guard the Communion Meal. The truth is more than merely a fine point to be debated among theologians; it speaks of our understanding of the congregation of the Lord and whether the people of God are competent to serve God under the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. The teaching testifies to the work of the Holy Spirit among His people.

The second truth that is frequently neglected among evangelical churches is that ***The Lord's Table is an Ordinance, not a sacrament.*** The act of communion is not a sacrament nor is it sacerdotal, though a disturbing number of evangelical Christians tacitly treat the ordinance as though it did confer grace. Too often, the people of God hold the view that partaking of the Meal will make them, if not acceptable, than more acceptable to the Risen Son of God. Consequently, I have observed even parents defending the practise of giving the elements of the meal to their children, all the while professing their deep offence when challenged about their practise.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The third truth, critical to a biblical understanding, speaks of the autonomy of the local congregation and the obligation for the congregation to guard the Lord's Table. The issue relates to the discipline of the local congregation. Though seldom exercised among contemporary churches, *exclusion from the Lord's Table is the most serious means of judgement that a church can impose*. Undoubtedly, ignorance of the teaching about the Lord's Supper underlies the failure of modern churches to exercise discipline.

These truths demand examination and call for application within a Christendom that professes obedience to the authority of the Word of God while practising a form of spiritual anarchy. Join me in exploration of Paul's instruction of a church that had failed to honour the Lord, though it would have professed to understand these truths.

**THE COMMUNION MEAL IS AN ACT OF CORPORATE WORSHIP** — “When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.” Establish in your mind the truth that the Communion Meal is designed to be an act of corporate worship. This means that it cannot be sacerdotal; neither can the Meal be a sacrament.

I have introduced two terms that are not commonly used outside of a theological setting. These two words are related, sharing the same root. Nevertheless, the terms demand clarification, if for no other reason than they are tossed about casually by people who should know better when referring to the Communion Meal. The first word to be defined is “sacerdotal,” an adjective that implies something quite different from the reality of biblical practise. To speak of an act as being sacerdotal is to indicate that the particular act is restricted to being performed by a priest or a priesthood. However, Scripture implies that the Communion Meal was given to the churches as an act of worship by the members of the churches. In practical terms, this means that the congregation of the Lord may designate whom it wills to preside over distribution of the elements. The congregation functions as guardian of the rite in question.

Though I believe that we are responsible to maintain the dignity of the institutions of the Faith, nowhere are we commanded to formalise the acts in such a way that every move is choreographed and precisely defined. In referring to maintaining the “dignity” of the institutions of the Faith, I do not want you to imagine that I intend to introduce stiffness into worship. I speak of honouring the One who instituted the traditions through holding the acts in their proper place. I want worship to be fruitful, meaningful, honouring the Lord Jesus who is glorified through worshipful participation.

Though sacerdotalism is prevalent throughout much of Christendom, it really has no place among churches that profess to adhere to the Word of God as the sole rule for faith and practise. There is no function within the church that cannot be performed by any member of the Faith Community designated to perform that action by the congregation of the Lord.

The other word that is frequently used concerning the Lord's Table is “sacrament.” Though many evangelicals speak of the Meal as a “sacrament,” Scripture implies that it is an ordinance. To speak of the Communion Meal as a sacrament implies that the Meal confers grace in some manner to the participants. The sacramental view holds that those participating are made more holy or perhaps they are made more acceptable to the Lord of the Table. However, to speak of the Meal as an ordinance implies that it is an act instituted or ordained by the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

Professor Tom Nettles, in a discussion of a document that excited great interest in the church world several years ago, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” wrote in response to a question of whether evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogues might have positive results, “[T]he Anabaptist view of baptism as an ordinance for believers, symbolic and non-sacramental in character was rejected as heretical [by the Reformers]. Baptists are much further from Rome than other evangelicals on ecclesiology and the character of the ordinances. Paedobaptists of all sorts will come closer to Rome more quickly than historic Baptists; the gravitational pull of paedobaptism always is toward sacramental efficacy. Like Bilbo Baggins’s ring, it is restless till it reunites with its owner.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is only through jettisoning a biblical view of the ordinances that evangelicals will find theological rapprochement with Catholics and Protestants.

Earlier, Paul wrote of the traditions delivered to the Corinthians: “Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:2]. The word “traditions” in this verse is almost universal in modern translations; however, older versions of the Bible used the word “ordinances,” referring to the commonly accepted rites as having been instituted by Jesus or by the Apostles. Jesus did institute, or ordain, the Communion Meal.

However, the universal and common understanding of the tradition delivered to the churches changed rapidly following the passing of the Apostles. Professor James Stitzinger writes, “The ordinance of believer’s baptism rapidly turned to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The Lord’s Supper shifted from being a memorial for believers to being viewed widely as a sacrament conveying saving grace. Christian leadership rapidly changed from the offices of elder and deacon to sacerdotalism with the rise of the ‘bishop’ along with his ‘apostolic succession.’ One of the major causes of deterioration was the importation of Greek philosophy into Christian thinking by the Church Fathers. This attempted ‘integration’ resulted in a complete erosion of biblical theology in the perspectives of many of the Fathers.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul deliberately withholds any commendation for the members of the congregation at this point. “In the following instruction, I do not commend you,” is his blunt censure of their attitudes. This is in contradistinction to **VERSE TWO** where he wrote, “Now I commend you.” They were indeed holding to the traditions they had been taught, but they were beginning to pervert them through altering the observances. What should have been an act of worship had degenerated into a personal observance excluding others who should have been included. The church had become sectarian in the worst sense of the word; they were deliberately excluding their fellow church members.

In an earlier portion of this letter, Paul spoke of the fellowship aspect of the Meal. In **1 CORINTHIANS 10:16, 17**, the Apostle wrote, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” At the Lord’s Table, church members confess their unity in worshipful assembly. When we observe the Communion Meal, it is always to be an act of fellowship as we share as one body in the act.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Nettles, “The SBJT Forum: Key Points in the ECT Debate,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 5, Winter 2001, pg. 99

<sup>3</sup> James F. Stitzinger, “The History of Expository Preaching,” *The Master’s Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring, 1992, pg. 12

In several congregations I formerly pastored, sacrament sets were tucked away in the office. On several occasions, I was informed that it was the practise of former pastors to hold private Communion services for those who were hospitalised. Admission of such practises clearly indicates that the sacramental view of the observance had grown to prominence within those congregations, primarily because of a failure in pastoral leadership and ignorance of the Word of God. I should not have been surprised, I suppose, when long-time members of one such congregation were offended because I failed to encourage them to continue holding sacramental views of the Meal.

The Communion Meal is intended to be a communal observance. This is the intent of the Apostle's words, "When you come together as a church." It is as the church is gathered, as the Christians are assembled as the believing community, that the Communion Meal is to be observed. No Christian has a right to decide that he or she will eat some bread and drink some juice, calling it Communion. No Christian has authority to decide to call a few friends or family members and invite them to eat bread and drink juice calling it Communion. It is a church ordinance in which the Body worships, confessing communally their fellowship in the Risen Head of the Church.

While it is true that central to the Lord's Supper is worship of our Sovereign Head of the Church, it is nevertheless vital that we understand the importance of the confession of fellowship made through the Meal. The Corinthians were divided even as they professed unity. There were splits ("divisions," literally, "schisms") internally. Though they were gathered in one place, they were divided as members of the church chose up sides to form factions promoting competing interests—even at the Lord's Table. The people had forgotten that this was a church ordinance declaring fellowship.

The important lesson to take from this is that the Lord's Supper is a church ordinance and not a Christian ordinance. If it were a Christian ordinance, it would mean that each of us should partake of the meal as individuals seeing participation as a personal act of devotion, which would ultimately lead to factionalism and sectarianism. However, as a church ordinance, the Meal is to be eaten with the Body in which one is a member. Together, the congregation worships the Saviour and confesses the sharing of their life in Him and looking forward in anticipation to His Return to receive His people.

Paul reprimands the Corinthians because their observance is "not for the better, but for the worse." Rather than building one another up in the Faith, they were making one another weaker. Instead of encouraging one another, they were discouraging others. Indeed, the congregation was drifting into grave error without recognising what was happening to them. They were no longer worshipping as a Body, but rather they were reducing the Faith to a means for personal advancement.

At the Lord's Table, participants are responsible to recognise the Lord's Body. In a few verses, Paul will warn the Corinthians, "Whoever ... eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died."

I have known people who refused to participate at the Lord's Table because they said they were unworthy. Usually, I agree with them. They are unworthy, just as I am unworthy to partake of the Lord's Table. At issue is a simple matter of grammar. The word translated "unworthy" is an adverb. It is not an adjective.

The significance of this observation is that as an adverb, “unworthy” modifies the verb. The word speaks, therefore, of the manner in which one eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord. The word looks at the attitude of the one participating instead of looking at innate worthiness of the individual. In other words, approaching the Table as though it were a private act of worship, rather than being a corporate act of worship, excludes others who wish to share in the act and dishonours the Lord who gave the act to His people. It is to be an act of remembrance, an act of fellowship, an act of anticipation.

**THE LORD INVITES WHOM HE WILLS TO HIS TABLE** — “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat.” The Lord’s Table was to be observed in the context of coming together as a church. This is emphasised throughout the apostolic rebuke to the Corinthians. Paul repeatedly writes, “When you come together” (VERSES 17, 20, 33, 34), and in VERSE 18 he pointedly writes, “When you assemble as a church” (RSV).

Moreover, in this 18<sup>th</sup> VERSE, Paul pointedly speaks of “the Lord’s Supper.” Paul is stating in clearest terms that the meal belongs neither to any individual nor to any group, but rather the Table and the Meal belongs to the Lord. Should it be surprising, then, that the Lord invites whom He wills to the Meal. It is not simply that an individual decides that he or she will partake of the Communion Meal, but rather the individuals are invited to participate. Those who interject themselves into the Meal without consideration of the One who owns it open themselves to His judgements [VERSES 27-32]. The Corinthians destroyed the character of the Meal by their conduct. In the strange theology of the Corinthians, it was no longer the Lord who determined the Celebration but the individual. Fellowship was thus cancelled as individualism was exalted.

In light of their egregious error, Paul asks the Corinthians a shocking question in VERSE 22, “Do you despise the church of God?” He might well have asked the question of us. The Corinthians had forgotten that the church is more than simply a human society; it belongs to God. The church is not a political entity; it belongs to God. To show contempt for the church, which is God’s, is to despise what God has made His own, and on which God has set His love, and therefore given it status and honour in His own eyes.

Paul does acknowledge that the Corinthian congregation was a church, though they were not necessarily acting very godly in their professed worship of the Risen Lord. Worshippers coming into the House of the Lord see the Table set for the sacred meal, and they assume that because it is set before them, it is their “right” to partake. It must be shocking for modern Canadians to hear that none of us has a “right” to partake of the Lord’s Table. So long as we hold such an attitude, it is unlikely that we will actually worship at the Table. What would truly benefit us is an understanding that Christ has invited us, and His invitation is never extended in isolation from the church. He invites His people to confess their “communion,” their “fellowship.” This means that God invites those who accept His Body to worship through participation at His Table!

This is the import of Paul’s words in this section of the letter to the Corinthians. The implication is that the church gathered observed the worship that we know as Communion—they came together; they met in assembly. Coming together implies that we cannot simply decide that we will eat bread and drink juice, and thus have a worship experience. Simply because we gather a few people to eat and drink does not mean that we have worshipped. According to the text, it is when we “come together as a church” [Gk., *sunerchoménon en ekklesia*] that we are enabled to worship at the Lord’s Table.

Numerous commentators have observed that the Corinthian congregation was amazingly like contemporary churches in both their attitudes and in their actions. One scholar has written, "The potential for dissension within the Corinthian Community of Faith is evident. Most members had in common only their Christianity. They differed widely in educational attainment, financial resources, religious background, political skills, and above all in their expectations. A number were attracted to the church because it seemed to offer them a new field of opportunity, in which the talents whose expression society frustrated could be exploited to the full. They were energetic and ambitious people, and there was little agreement among their various hidden agendas. A certain competitive spirit was part of the ethos of the church from the beginning."<sup>4</sup> Tragically, a "certain competitive spirit [is] part of the ethos" of many contemporary congregations.

Earlier, I alluded to 1 CORINTHIANS 10:16, 17. The word translated "participation" in that passage, was translated "communion" in older translations of the Bible; hence, the derivation of the term "Communion" that is frequently used to designate the observance of the Lord's Table. The word is frequently translated "sharing" in contemporary translations. In Communion, we show fellowship in regard to redemption and to the very life of Christ. The meal is not for confession of sin, but for confession of fellowship. Universal communion is possible only as an ideal to be realised after the Rapture.

To be certain, there are people who contend that since we confess fellowship, any Christian is to be welcomed to the Table, since all Christians are in "fellowship." Individuals espousing this particular view hold that the Meal is a Christian observance, and therefore the sole qualification for admission is confession of faith in Christ. The practical consequence of this view is that whether one is baptised or whether one is unbaptised is immaterial. Likewise, whether one is under discipline by another congregation or whether one is subject to discipline of the congregation with whom they wish to share the Meal is of no importance. All that matters in practical terms, according to this view, is that the individual professes Christ at least privately. However, until quite recently in the life of the churches, most scholars recognised that the fellowship anticipated at the Lord's Table was congregational and not universal. In part, this was because only those subject to discipline by the congregation could truly participate. This is the implication of Paul's teaching in this first Corinthian letter.

I was recently questioned concerning my personal conviction and practise. I do not often state my position publicly, though I have expressed my understanding privately. I do not partake of the Communion Meal when sharing worship with other churches in which I do not hold membership. This decision is not a judgement of fellow Christians; it is based on my understanding that I am not subject to the discipline of that particular congregation and on my conviction that this observance is a church ordinance.

Perhaps you hold a view that differs from that which I have expressed. I have no argument with you over this issue; the point should not sever fellowship. The principle that the Apostle stated in another context should hold in this instance as well, "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" [ROMANS 14:5]. I would only ask that each Christian know what he or she believes and know why he or she believes as they do. I would expect that those to whom I declare the Word of God would appeal to the Word to support their position and to act confidently in their understanding.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Murphy-O'Connor, **Paul: A Critical Life** (Oxford:Clarendon), cited in David Garland, **1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2003) 537

I assuredly stand on solid biblical ground when I stress the need for each worshipper to recognise the fellowship inherent in the observance. Those who will worship through observing the Lord's Table will "assemble as a church," and in doing so, they confess their fellowship—first with the Lord and then with one another as they share the Meal. When I withhold myself from sharing my spiritual gifts and when I do not openly associate with the congregation, neither should I expect to enter into the most intimate declaration of fellowship with my fellow believers.

The Communion Meal assuredly emphasises our fellowship with the Lord. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that because we are in fellowship with the Risen Son of God, we must also be in fellowship with those who belong to Him. Especially must we be in fellowship with fellow Christians when we assemble to worship through the Meal. Therefore, Paul's words take on added significance as he instructs the Corinthians in etiquette at the Lord's Table. Paul is concerned that the Corinthians, and consequently that we also, understand what are acceptable manners at the Table.

Whether you are convinced in your own mind that the observance of the Lord's Table is a Christian ordinance, or whether you understand it to be a church ordinance, you *must* recognise that the Meal cannot to be permitted to become your own private ritual. As you partake of the meal, you are confessing that those with whom you worship share life at some level deeper than merely being alive at the same time. As you partake of the Meal, you confess that you are in substantial doctrinal and ethical agreement.

As we have already seen, central to the observance is "coming together." When we meet as a church at the Lord's Table, we are declaring fellowship—mutual accountability. I have stressed this truth because it is not often declared in our day. Consequently, we often fail to recognise that corrective element of the Communion Meal. Coming together, we are to settle differences and ensure that we are prepared to accept one another as brothers and sisters before the Lord. A congregation is to be family, to hold one another in esteem, to recognise the work of God in the midst of His people.

I urge you to see that the Lord's Supper not as communion only between the individual and the Lord, but that it is common-union between individuals and the Lord. Those who hold to the former view seem inclined to consider it a matter of indifference who is present or not, whereas the latter view disposes us to recognise the Lord.

**THE CONGREGATION IS CHARGED WITH GUARDING THE TABLE OF THE LORD** — "I believe [the report of factions among you] in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not."

Human society ranks people, whether consciously or unconsciously. In the congregation of the Lord, however, there is to be no discrimination of persons permitted. When Paul says, "There must be factions among you," he is likely stating the obvious conclusion that dividing people—whether along socioeconomic lines, or whether by race or whether by supposed "rights" within the congregation—must inevitably result in factionalism. Whenever we begin to discriminate on any basis, we introduce an element into the congregation that is foreign to the spirit of the New Testament.

What is important for us to recognise is that Paul is not conceding the inevitability of factionalism; rather, he is censuring them in stern tones. Perpetuating the factions has violated both the letter and the spirit of the Word, and the people had failed to correct the situation. Paul is plainly charging that the Corinthians have failed in their responsibility to guard the Lord's Table.

Discipline is the forgotten element of modern church life. I am not speaking of punishment, but I am speaking of the need for discipleship imposed by the congregation. We have reduced discipleship to something for which the elders bear sole responsibility. We hire them to do our tasks, imagining that we have no responsibility to one another. However, the Apostle makes it clear in this letter that we are a Body, and as individual members, we bear responsibility for one another.

A congregation is responsible for the membership, holding one another accountable for living righteous and godly lives. When a member sins flagrantly and persists in that sin, the members of the congregation are charged with caring enough for that individual to hold him or her responsible for his or her actions. We don't like that; we imagine that we are accountable to no one. Actually, we are responsible neither to dishonour the Saviour nor to disgrace the Community of Faith to which we belong. This is the reason for the various instructions concerning discipline.

The member engaged in sexual immorality was to be held accountable by being excluded from the privileges of membership, "delivered over to Satan" when the assembly met [1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5]. The member that will not listen to the church when specific sin is addressed is to be treated as though he were an outsider [MATTHEW 18:17]. The undisciplined are to be admonished [1 THESSALONIANS 5:14 (NET BIBLE)] and the unruly avoided [2 THESSALONIANS 3:6 (NASB)]. Divisive individuals are to be removed [TITUS 3:10]. Paul instructs the church to hold sinning saints accountable. "I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one" [1 CORINTHIANS 5:11]. There are to be physical consequences to spiritual failings.

In a practical sense, the people of God can only exclude the unrepentant sinner. This is not to be a capricious act, but a solemn action because events have led to the conclusion there can be neither repentance nor reconciliation. It is a final step in which the church reluctantly acknowledges that the deliberate and persistent sin of a fellow member has ruptured the fellowship, and the congregation therefore acknowledges that they can do nothing other than recognise the breach in fellowship.

An individual under discipline is not to be proscribed from hearing the teaching of the Word, nor are they to be treated harshly. They must not, however, be permitted to partake of the Lord's Table. There is no discipline entrusted to a church except exclusion from the Table of the Lord. How can a person who is not a member of the church be held accountable when the congregation truly knows nothing of them and has no authority over them? In other words, only those who are members can be held accountable through admission to the Lord's Table.

Failure to guard the Lord's Table resulted in a generalised lack of discernment [VERSE 29], physical and spiritual weakness, illness, and even death [VERSE 30]. Because the Corinthian congregation was not guarding the Lord's Table, they brought judgement on themselves. In a similar fashion, the congregation that becomes casual in conduct of the Lord's Table invites judgement on themselves as individuals and as a congregation.



I am not advocating that we become policemen at the Lord's Table. I am, however, stating openly that we must be united in our understanding of what we are doing at the Communion Meal. We can go with the flow and try to avoid offending anyone by saying nothing concerning the teaching of the Word, in which case we will drift into the precise error that infected the Corinthians. Or, we can graciously and gently explain the teaching of the Word when guests are present, explaining that we take seriously the instruction of the Word, inviting them to respect that same Word and either uniting with the congregation or accepting responsibility for congregation scrutiny.

Of course, if all were to confess openly faith in the Risen Son of God, identifying with Him in believer's baptism and openly uniting with the congregation, there would be no difficulty. However, it would mean that we defy culture and embrace biblical tenets without reservation. And that is my prayer for you. I pray that each of us sharing these services have placed faith in the Son of God, believing that He died for our sin and that He was raised for our justification. Having believed this message of grace, I pray that each of us has openly identified with Him through baptism as commanded in the Word. Having believed, and having been baptised, there is no reason that we should not openly unite with this congregation and together work to honour the Lord, building His Kingdom through building this church. Amen.