

1 CORINTHIANS 11:33, 34

COURTESY AT THE LORD'S TABLE

“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 judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.”¹

“**L**ove one another with brotherly affection,” wrote the Apostle. “Outdo one another in showing honour” [ROMANS 12:10]. This is a principle that should guide every activity for the Christian; we should always endeavour to express our love for one another through courtesy. The Corinthians acted nothing like brothers, and yet the Apostle addressed them as such. In fact, the Corinthian Christians were not even as courteous or generous toward their fellow members as we would expect any service club that gathered for a meal to be.

Listen to the Apostle’s rebuke of the Corinthians. “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” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-22].

In one denomination within which I pastored, it was the common practise to observe the Communion Meal at the conclusion of almost every convocation sponsored by the denomination. The ecclesiology of that group had evolved, recreating the denomination as the church rather than the local congregation being the church—the model presented in the New Testament. Consequently, the leadership of the denomination felt no hesitation in organising the Communion Meal for all the participants at the various assemblies.

However, I knew many of the pastors at these meetings. Let me tell you a secret: pastors are human. Pastors can be petty, mean-spirited, spiteful—they can reflect a sinful heart just as surely as can any other member of a congregation. Though I believe most pastors work hard to honour God, there are nevertheless pastors who have bought into the philosophy of this fallen world, seeing their ministry as an opportunity for personal advancement rather than an opportunity to serve the people of God and to advance the cause of Christ.

I witnessed at various assemblies individuals who privately castigated others in, and yet solemnly joined in faux fellowship at the Lord’s Table. Why not? There was no accountability. So long as one led his (or her in some strange instances) congregation to send money to the hindquarters, no attempt at accountability for Christian character and conduct was made. I am aware of pastors who had been disciplined for moral failure who joined in the Communion Meal. After all, they had been “cured.” However, the people whose lives they had destroyed had yet to hear a confession or to witness repentance. The denomination had become the church, and discipline was a foreign, uncharitable concept. Moreover, no one was teaching the people what the Word of God said. I never participated in such service, believing them to be unbiblical.

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We have observed the Lord's Table today, and I trust that none of us have fallen into such a trap as just described. However, slipping into such error is distressingly easy. It begins when we assume the Lord's Table is an designed for private worship. Whenever we fail to keep before us the biblical basis for what we are doing and the scriptural reasons for why we are doing it, we are moving toward a grave distortion of the Meal. Moreover, once an individual, or a congregation, has embraced such fallacy, the error insinuates itself into every facet of Christian life, enervating spiritual vigour and creating moral inertia.

I know the teaching is by now familiar to you, but the message is sufficiently important that I am compelled to review once again the instruction we have received through the Apostle. Join me, then, by turning to the closing words of the eleventh chapter of the First Corinthian Letter. There, the Apostle provides his final words concerning the Corinthian error.

THE MEAL IS AN ACT OF CORPORATE WORSHIP — “When you come together to eat, wait for one another.” I really shouldn't need to say anything on this point, but because errant assumptions have become so pervasive throughout Canadian Christendom it would be irresponsible for me not to remind you of what is communicated through the text.

Notice, first, that Paul specifies that he is speaking of a communal experience. He says, “When you come together to eat,” indicating that he has in view the act of congregational union for a specific purpose. The Apostle has in view the Lord's Table. Surely no one would assume that he is speaking at this point of entertaining guests in a home. He has focused throughout the latter portion of this chapter on an egregious abuse of the Communion Meal which was being perpetuated in the Corinthian congregation. At the heart of the abuse was the fact that many, perhaps even most, of the Corinthian church members were acting as if the Lord's Supper was a private act of worship rather than treating it as corporate worship.

I do not deny that individuals participate in the Communion Meal, but the model we have received is that of individuals uniting in commitment to one another to participate as the Body. Language is important, because what we say reveals our understanding of a situation. The choice of words demonstrates the precision with which we have defined a given action. In the case of the Lord's Table, we would undoubtedly benefit from precision in our language.

What I mean is that we must recognise that this is not an act of private worship, but of corporate worship. That is the purpose behind the declarations of the Meal. For instance, this is a Meal of Remembrance—each one participating declares that he or she actively recalls the death of Christ the Lord because of his or her own sin. Undoubtedly, we come to faith as individuals—a parent cannot believe for a child, or a grandparent for a grandchild. We are saved as individuals; but that does not mean that we continue as individuals in our relationship to the Master. The Word of God teaches that He places us within churches.

Those saved as the believers witnessed on the Day of Pentecost were added to something! The text states that “Those who received [Peter's] word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” [ACTS 2:40]. To what entity were these nascent saints added? The appropriate answer is that they were added to whatever entity the other believers belonged. The majority of ancient texts, reflected in the **NEW KING JAMES BIBLE**, say that “The Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved”² [ACTS 2:47]. If the believers gathered in the Upper Room together with those saved at Pentecost constituted a church, then it is reasonable to assume that those being saved that day and subsequently were added to that same congregation. It was an organised entity, and not an amorphous mass of people drifting in and out of fellowship.

² **New King James Version** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 1982)

It was within this organised entity—the first New Testament church—that the saved and baptised saints “devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” [ACTS 2:42]. Those who were saved were baptised immediately because they had believed and not in order to believe. Then, they committed themselves to the preaching of the Word, to the fellowship of the congregation, to the observance of the Lord’s Table as an act of worship, and to the prayer life of the community.

It is vital to note that within the pages of the New Testament there is not found a sole individual who can be said to be a Christian who was unaffiliated with a local congregation. Though I dare not argue from silence, the model is of Christians added to a congregation as they are saved; and having been added to a church those redeemed and gifted individuals exercise their several gifts within the context of the Body. To be specific, the model provided in the New Testament is that those who are saved are immediately baptised, identifying with the Master, and added to the particular congregation where the Spirit of God is pleased to place them.

One can only wonder about those individuals who profess to love Christ but see no need for the church. Surely they do not understand the love of the Master for the local congregation. Throughout Scripture we are presented with a consistent teaching demonstrating Christ’s love for the church. This was not love for some amorphous entity that cannot be witnessed by anyone living in this world, but it was love for the local congregation—the gathered community of those who come to faith. When the Risen Son of God says, “Those whom I love, I reprov’d and discipline” [REVELATION 3:19], He speaks to the corporate body of Laodicean Christians. The missive is addressed to “the angel of the church in Laodicea” [REVELATION 3:14]. It is intended for the assembly and not merely for individuals who are wayward in their conduct.

In the Letter we have received as Ephesians, Paul urges husbands to love their wives just “as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” [EPHESIANS 5:25]. Thus, we are taught that Christ the Lord loved the church—the institutional entity that we are compelled to distinguish as the local congregation. We are compelled to designate the “local” congregation precisely because of the creation by learned scholars *ipse dixit* of an unseen, nebulous monstrosity identified as the “universal church.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ is presented in the Word as “Him who loved us” [e.g. ROMANS 8:37]; a designation based upon His own statement of love for His people. His command that Christians are to love one another was first modelled through His love for us [see JOHN 13:34]. Thus, we Christians are taught to “be imitators of God,” which imitation is described as walking “in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” [EPHESIANS 5:2]. The glorious truth is that Christ gave Himself for His people. More particularly, each congregation can testify that Christ gave His life for that assembly.

Addressing the Ephesian elders on his final journey to Jerusalem, the Apostle admonished, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood” [ACTS 20:28]. While the warning undoubtedly applies in the broadest sense to every elder who has received divine appointment to provide oversight for a particular congregation, the immediate application served to caution the elders of Ephesus. Moreover, Paul recognised that these elders had been made overseers, not over an amorphous entity that no one could see or benefit from, but they were overseers appointed to the particular flock then meeting in Ephesus. The language makes it clear that their appointment was not to a vast, universal entity, but to a particular congregation. Just so, any elder serves the particular congregation over which he is appointed, and not to provide guidance over a great mass of unseen people.

I am well aware that you know that the Meal is an act of corporate worship. However, throughout the years of my service before the Lord, I have witnessed repeated instances of Christians who were presumably well versed in Scripture who nevertheless decided that the Meal could be served to an individual in a hospital bed, to a sick individual at home, or to a family who had been unable to come to church. In essence, they were focused on the faulty view that the Communion Meal was an act of personal worship, ignoring the corporate worship demanded by the Meal. Such action denies the corporate aspect of the Meal and enervates the congregational oversight for the Meal; but that is no greater violation of the doctrine than the commonly accepted attitude that treats the observance as an act of private worship.

Reading the passage that the Apostle wrote as a rebuke to the Corinthian Christians, it becomes apparent that the attitude of the Corinthians provided the motive force behind the error. Among the Christians of Corinth were a startling number of saints who were treating the congregation as secondary to their own ambitions, and this was reflected in their approach to the Lord's Table. They didn't think to share with others at the Agape Meal. They were likewise unwilling to wait on others to participate in the Communion Meal. In short, they would have argued that they were worshipping, and that worship was the purpose of the Communion Meal.

We still tolerate the same attitudes within churches today. In a former congregation, a pleasant and gracious couple attended the services for an extended period. Though invited, they did not wish to unite with the congregation; however, they were otherwise fully involved with the congregation. I spoke to them on several occasions, asking why they did not join the church, thus declaring themselves to be part of the congregation. Always, the answer was the same: "We're thinking about it." However, no action would be taken.

One day, the couple asked if Lynda and I would join them for lunch—they wished to discuss a matter of considerable importance to them. During lunch, they disclosed that at the conclusion of a Bible study led by my associate, they had requested that he expound his view of whether Communion should be closed or open. He stated his belief that Communion should be closed, and stated reasons for his position. Sean detailed his belief before continuing by stating that Pastor Mike had taken the position that we would not be a policeman at the Lord's Table, though we would state our understanding of Scripture. His statement so disturbed the couple that they sought to speak with me, enlisting multiple individuals to argue their case with them.

Though they were unable to state the basis for their belief, they were nevertheless certain that the Lord's Table was a personal act and only incidentally a corporate act. One concern that I heard the wife express repeatedly was that their adult children wouldn't be able to partake of the Communion Meal with them if they adopted the position I taught according to the Word. Consequently, they had decided that they would no longer attend services where I was pastoring. Despite pointing out that I had never denied their children access to the elements nor embarrassed them in any way by expressing disapproval of their action, their mind was set and they would not be persuaded.

One of their apologists spoke with me for over four hours, attempting to sway me from my understanding of Scripture. And though he appealed to what has become a ubiquitous practise among the churches of this day, he was unable to demonstrate from Scripture that the Lord's Table was a private domain subject solely to the conscience of the individual. He was quite unwilling to see the consequence of his logic, repeatedly acknowledging that though I was probably correct, adhering to Scripture in this instance would hurt people's feelings. Repeatedly, I cautioned that this was a church ordinance and not a Christian ordinance, showing from Scripture that this was so. However, it didn't feel right for him, and so his mind was made up.

Absent the corporate element, the Communion Meal is subject to our private judgement. Such attitude must soon lead to the selfsame error for which the Corinthians were rebuked. Unfortunately, that is precisely what the ordinance has become among many evangelical churches—an act of private worship that only incidentally maintains a corporate veneer.

THE MEAL IS AN EXPRESSION OF FELLOWSHIP — “My brothers ... wait for one another.” This is also a Meal of Fellowship, and it is this point to which we must now turn our attention. Paul actually begins these final verses with the conjunction *hóste*, which is employed as a marker of result or purpose. In this instance, it seems best to understand that he is providing an immediate application arising from the instruction he has provided. “So then,” because this is an act of corporate worship, and because we dare not continue to treat the Body of Christ with disrespect through insisting that we are worshipping privately, we must bring ourselves into alignment with the will of the Master who gave us the Meal.

Fellowship is often neglected among contemporary churches. Scripture speaks frequently of fellowship, and I encourage us to think biblically about this matter of fellowship. For instance, those saved at Pentecost “devoted themselves to ... the fellowship” [ACTS 2:42]. Here, the assembly of believers is identified as “the fellowship,” because within the Body of Christ there is a sharing of lives so that no one is compelled to stand alone. It is appropriate that we should be devoted to the Body of Christ since it is by God that each Christian has been “called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:9]. Christians are equipped by and situated by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of fellowship and service.

As those who are called by Christ into the light, we cannot have fellowship with darkness [2 CORINTHIANS 6:14]. In fact, this point was of sufficient importance that the Apostle John took special care to warn against attempting to fellowship with the Master while walking in darkness. The opening verses of his first letter [1 JOHN 1:1-7] repeatedly address this vital, neglected truth. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—the Life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the Eternal Life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

“This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

The gifts that we contribute to the advance of the congregation are described as fellowship—*koinōnía*—with those that are blessed [see 2 CORINTHIANS 9:13]. The Macedonian Christians, though impoverished, nevertheless begged the Apostle for the opportunity to share—to fellowship (*koinōnía*)—with needy Christians in Jerusalem through contributing to their relief [2 CORINTHIANS 8:4], and this generosity in turn stimulated the churches in Achaia to likewise fellowship (*koinōnía*) through contributing to the relief [ROMANS 15:26] of needy believers in Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul spoke of the financial support that underwrote his service as a partnership—a fellowship (*koinōnía*)—in the Gospel [PHILIPPIANS 1:5]. We are specifically commanded to share—to fellowship (*koinōnía*)—with fellow believers [HEBREWS 13:16], understanding that whatever we possess has been entrusted to us for that specific purpose.

As believers, we are saved for fellowship—both fellowship with the Saviour and fellowship with His people. This is apparently a major reason why the Spirit of God places His people within churches. Whenever we observe the Lord's Table, it is a declaration of fellowship in the blood and in the body of Christ [see **1 CORINTHIANS 10:16**]. In particular, in eating the bread we declare our fellowship—our participation—in His Body, with the church that He established. Earlier, we saw that Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, and now we realise that He places us within that particular assembly for which He has equipped us so that we may build others and be built up through the mutual ministry of the gifts He has entrusted to each of us.

Notice in particular a verse we examined previously as we studied these instructions concerning the Lord's Table. Paul cautioned, "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself" [**1 CORINTHIANS 11:29**]. It is possible that Paul is saying that we must recognise the physical presence of the Master as we partake of the bread and drink the juice. However, that would be the only place where we see such teaching in Scripture. It is conceivable, I should suppose, that the Apostle is instructing us to realise the spiritual presence of the Saviour. Such a position would certainly be easier to defend from the Word. However, the simplest sense is to realise that the congregation gathered is recognised as the Body of Christ, and that in light of the entire passage concerning the Lord's Table, Paul is instructing self-centred Corinthian Christians—and modern believers who are intent on a private worship experience—to demonstrate respect for the congregation, which is the Body of Christ.

The local congregation as the Body of Christ is not a novel concept; the Apostle certainly spoke of the local congregation as Christ's Body. In one extended passage, Paul provides the understanding that this was a comparison that would have been heard by those who knew him. In **1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27** he writes, "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

"For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together."

Pay especial attention to the final verse as the Apostle makes the surprising application. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." You Corinthians are the Body of Christ and individually members of it. Paul could say to those who have acknowledged placement in this particular Body, "You are the Body of Christ and individually members of it." Are you treating the Body with the respect it deserves as the Body of the Lord?

My great fear is that we will meet once a week, pray for one another and then effectively cease to be the Body of Christ for the remainder of the week. My fear is that we will drift back into the organisational mode that permits us to go to church without being the church. I fear lest we should become just another organisation that knows all the rules though lacking the heart of Christ. What a tragedy should we become just another community organisation that knows the words, though we have forgotten the music.

Fellowship means that we “Love one another with brotherly affection,” and that we “outdo one another in showing honour” [ROMANS 12:10]. It means that we “rejoice with those who rejoice” and also that we “weep with those who weep” [ROMANS 12:15]. It means that we “count others more significant than yourselves” [PHILIPPIANS 2:3]. Fellowship means that we “love one another earnestly from a pure heart” [1 PETER 1:22]. It means that we receive one another as gifts from the hand of a gracious Father who seeks what is best for us as a people. Fellowship means that we are committed to one another, standing as one against every onslaught against the righteousness of Christ as we build one another in this most Holy Faith.

OUR ACTIONS INVITE DIVINE JUDGEMENT — “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 judgment.” Here is the tragedy of the Corinthian congregation! They had forgotten who they were. They had forgotten what they were responsible to do. They had ceased to be discerning. Could such a thing happen to us? Tragically, the answer is, yes.

Should I become so focused on private worship that I fail to consider your welfare and advancement in the Faith, I am moving dangerously close to becoming a Corinthian in worship. Should you come to a service that includes the Lord's Table, and while seeking a great personal experience with the Risen Son of God fail to recognise that beauty that He has provided in giving you the blessing of the Community of Faith with which you share the observance, you are moving into confrontation with the Living Christ. We must avoid giving offence to the Master, not least of all because we would not dishonour the One who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Should I ever lose the wonder of being permitted to be a member of the congregation, having been placed here by God Himself, I am in danger of failing to discern the body of Christ. Should I ever discover that I am able to move mindlessly through the comfortable and familiar liturgy surrounding the Lord's Table without thinking of what I am saying or what I am doing, I am in danger of failure to recognise the Body of Christ. In that event, I am placing myself in jeopardy, challenging the Master. I know that He is jealous for His Bride, just as any honourable man is jealous for the honour of His wife. It is possible to eat and drink judgement on ourselves. The result will be weakness and illness, and possibly even death.

God has given but one means of discipline into the hands of the church, and that is exclusion from the fellowship of the Lord's Table. When a man in Corinth arrogantly ignored moral strictures so he could pursue his own desires, Paul demanded that the congregation deliver the man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh [see 1 CORINTHIANS 5:3-5]. The act appears to have been a formal declaration of the breach of fellowship and exclusion from the Communion Meal. The discipline was effective, and the congregation, moving from one extreme to the opposite extreme failed to remember why they disciplined the sinner. Thus, Paul would be compelled to instruct them to remember that the purpose was to see restoration of fellowship, urging them to restore the penitent to fellowship [see 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11]. The discipline administered in Corinth in that day will work just as effectively today to restore the errant—if it is employed. The text warns that if we do not discipline ourselves, God Himself will correct us.

I have seen this discipline administered both by the church and by the Master Himself. Early in my walk with the Lord, I was present on a Sunday evening when a man was put out of the fellowship with the congregation where the Lord had placed me. He had forsaken his wife and two children, taking up with another woman. The church acted, first pleading with the man to do the honourable thing and be reunited with his wife. However, he refused the pleas of the pastor and the deacons. At last, he refused the plea of the congregation, and with broken hearts, the people of God acknowledge that he had broken fellowship.

Months later that same man came to a prayer service. He confessed that he had sinned against God and against his family, and asked forgiveness of the congregation and to be restored. Seeking restoration, he made a strange statement about his exclusion from the fellowship of the Lord. The man said, "Please let me come back; it's cold out there." With many tears, the people received him again into fellowship. God's way does work.

I have witnessed on several occasions God judging individuals and congregations because of their arrogance and refusal to recognise the presence of the Lord. I knew a man who arrogantly said to the pastor, "I'm not coming back to this church until one of us dies." That foolish man died suddenly in the same week. Perhaps it is coincidence. On the other hand, God is quite clear in Scripture that if we refuse to recognise the Body of the Lord then we must prepare to meet the Lord.

We no longer believe that God is able to discipline His people according to what is written in Scripture, so we draft constitutions and bylaws, submitting them for governmental approval to ensure that all is fair and that a proper hearing is afforded any who are aggrieved; but the Spirit has long since departed from our midst when we appeal to the thoughts of man to accomplish the work of God.

Paraphrasing the Apostle, the instruction of the Lord is to be reverent and courteous with one another. It is a matter of showing respect to the Lord by showing respect to one another. The Lord's Table is not a time for you to become lost in your own private worship; it is an opportunity to strengthen the Body through recognising what God is doing through the lives of His people.

It is appropriate to invite all who are not members of this Body to unite with us. If God has led you here, then you should make that open commitment to be a part of this Body. If this is where God is blessing you, giving you spiritual nourishment and providing instruction in the Word, then you should make the formal commitment to declare that this is the place God has placed you. It will be an encouragement to others and a source of blessing to you.

We receive members into this assembly through confession of faith and baptism. If you have faith in the Living Son of God and you will obey His command, we invite you to follow Him in believer's baptism. If you are a member of a church of like faith and practise, we will be pleased to receive you on the promise of a letter from that congregation. If it is not possible to obtain a transfer of membership because that congregation no longer exists, or because of another difficulty, we will accept you on a statement of Christian experience. However you will come, our invitation is for you to come now, placing your life in the fellowship of this church.

Above all, ensure that you are saved—that you have faith in the Risen, Living Son of God. The Word of God promises, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." The Word promises, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. Our prayer is that you will believe this message and be saved today. Amen.