

*1 Corinthians 11:17-19***PREFACE (1)**

I hope that every one of you by now has been made painfully aware of the damage being done to the body of Christ during these strange times—and how we must redouble our efforts to minimize the damage, and restore the fellowship we once enjoyed. One of the most insidious problems before us is the lethargy that has enveloped the church. One illustration:

A couple of months back my good friend out on the left (*very* left) coast was surprised to learn that the numbers at my web site had declined. Faced with the inability to meet together for worship and study, he had expected my numbers to actually *rise*, as people searched out online resources to replace what they were missing in person.

The sad truth is that instead of a hunger for God and His word, this pandemic, I fear, has instilled a seeping lethargy into the ranks of the church. For some of us, instead of hungering for what once was, we have become inured to what is, complacent and accepting of that which, in God's eyes, is unacceptable—just as God, through the apostle Paul's pen, declared unacceptable what was going on in the assembly in Corinth.

When the church fails to meet together—or, as in Corinth, when it meets together improperly—it is not just the threads connecting its members that are broken, but the threads connecting its members to God, and it becomes too easy to forget. As a result, the power of the Holy Spirit in the church and in its individual members is weakened.

Let us view the damage being done in the assembly in Corinth as a warning, a cautionary tale, for us today. The situation, while different from ours, was having much the same effect, of dividing and weakening the body of Christ.

**PREFACE (2)**

I always hated getting stuck at the children's card-table annex at any family or social meal. It made one feel like a second-class citizen—which of course, in the fifties, a child *was*.

Much the same thing was going on in the Corinth church when they would hold their "love feasts" (modern: potluck dinners) with Communion—we gather the second immediately following the first. Whether held in a separate building, or in a home of one of the church's more affluent members, the wealthy and prominent were reclining in the best room with most of the food, while those in the lower social strata were consigned to the cheap seats (sitting) elsewhere, probably with only the meager rations they could afford to bring.

It was hardly a “love” feast. Here we have one more case of the Greco-Roman culture and societal habits being practiced in the church. The rules of societal strata at play in the city—the wealthy looking down on their lessers—were being generously applied within the church.

In the following passage (vv17-34) Paul will make the point that the church’s coming together for their “love feasts” and Communion was not just being poorly done and a waste of time (v17: “...not for the better but for the worse.”), but was actually doing harm to the body and the individuals that comprised it. Paul itemizes these in the third section. Their behavior was placing them in a position where they

1. would be liable for the body and blood of the Lord: v27. (*Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.*)
2. might incur condemnation: vv29 & 32. (*For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly... But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.*)
3. were beset by sickness, even death: v30. (*For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.*)

It is not hard to imagine the impact this situation would have had on the apostle, who had written to the church in Galatia a couple of years earlier,

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-28)

Instead of unifying the church, the practice in Corinth was doing just the opposite, as David Garland writes,

The Lord’s Supper should accent and intensify group solidarity; the Corinthians’ supper accented and intensified social differences.

Let’s read the first section of this extended passage that will take us to the end of Chapter Eleven.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.**

Paul had already cued up this topic in Chapter Ten in his discussion of idolatry.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.**

v17

*But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.*

The preponderance of scholarship interprets “this” (*houtos*) as referring to what follows, not to what has just been written. This is helpfully (but far from literally) rendered by the NIVs and ESV, “in the following directives/instructions.” Here Paul contrasts how he introduced the previous topic in v2—“Now I praise you because...”—with, “I do not praise you.” He reiterates this at the end of v22: “Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.”

Why? “...because you come together not for the better but for the worse.” The purpose of the *agape* feasts, one purpose of the Lord’s Supper—indeed, one purpose of the church as an institution—was and is for its members to love and support each other into Christ-likeness as they dwell in a fallen world this side of glory.

### **Read Ephesians 4:15-16.**

In this and, as we know, other situations in the Corinth church, its members were not conducting themselves with love to their brothers and sisters in Christ. And now Paul will get down to particulars.

v18

*For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it.*

This is where we came in! The first thing Paul addressed at the top of this letter was the detrimental factionalism running rampant in the church.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.**

In Chapter Eleven, however, Paul refers to a different flavor of “divisions.” In Chapter One he was addressing, as it were, theological schisms, while divisions here are more socioeconomic—a gulf separating the haves from the have-nots. David Garland quotes from Murphy-O’Connor’s *Paul: A Critical Life*.

The potential for dissension within the community is evident. Most members have 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.

Paul has all along been hinting at the importance of love—or, if one prefers, not just *agape* but civility, consideration—in the church, because it has been demonstrated that it is sorely lacking in Corinth. He introduced his previous three-chapter treatise on things sacrificed to idols with the importance of love.

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. (1 Corinthians 8:1)

From the outset in this letter Paul has been nibbling around the edges of this, and in Chapter Thirteen he will burst forth on the topic in some of the most glorious prose in Scripture. How it must have broken his heart to see and learn of the Corinthians' lack of love for each other. And how it must break the Lord's heart when he sees it in us.

The phrase, “when you come together as a church” tells us that, just as in the first sixteen verses of this chapter, the setting is the corporate assembly of the church—its members coming together for worship, for instruction, for prayer, and for fellowship (*koinonia*: a sharing of lives). And (what should be to their shame) Paul reveals that he has heard from others (Chloe's people?) that “when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you.”

**divisions** = *schismata* = from <G4977> (schizo); **a split or gap** (“schism”), literal or figurative :- division, **rent**, schism.

*and in part I believe it.*

The apostle could easily see this taking place in Corinth—he had already heard of similar things going on. He allows that either the report was not balanced, or that not everyone was behaving the same—or this partial “belief” is tied to what he states in v19.

**Sidebar:** The ESV makes this phrase (“And I believe it, in part,”) the beginning of the next sentence completed in v19. All other of our common translations make this phrase the end of the sentence in v18. This difference has no effect on our interpretation of the text.

How ironic this is! At the very time and place that they should be encouraging, supporting, *loving* each other, they are erecting barriers and digging deep trenches within their ranks. The Lord's Supper is when we are to remember and commemorate Christ's sacrifice of His very life for others—sinners all. Yet these people were using the occasion as an opportunity to *alienate* their fellow believers, to keep them in their place, and deprive them of even a share of their food.

*For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.*

There is a minority interpretation for this odd verse that says that “this statement provides the evidence for Paul’s dismay in the previous verse. It explains *why* he cannot praise them.” That is, “he expresses bitter irony about these factions” (Garland). This is possible; Paul has done it before.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.**

There is much to commend, however, the majority interpretation that Paul is making another of his “now-not yet” eschatological references here.

**Sidebar:** “For there must also be...” is not necessarily synonymous with “It is a good and righteous thing that there is...” Paul is not changing his mind here, and now *in favor of* factions and schisms within the church.

It is not that factions and schisms are necessarily healthy for the church, but God can still put to good use even unrighteous behavior. When such situations occur in a church, it can be a “now” illustration for the ultimate and final “not yet” judgment in which Christ (“the Son of Man”) will separate the sheep from the goats.

### **Read Matthew 25:31-33.**

We need not exercise too many gray cells to guess the group in Corinth from which we might find the “approved” (ESV: “genuine”). It probably would *not* be from those reclining in the best room in their fine apparel, feasting on the delicacies they have brought exclusively for their own consumption, not sharing any of it with their poorer brothers and sisters in the cheap seats outside.

It is not that poverty automatically makes one righteous or a “genuine” Christian. But those self-described elites who are unwilling to share with the brethren are displaying behavior that just might put them on the left with the goats on The Day.