

## “Until He Comes”

### The Nineteenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 11:17-26; Exodus 24:1-18*

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In chapters 11-14 of 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us a fascinating account of what actually transpired during the worship service of an apostolic church. From Paul’s account, it is clear that worship in the Corinthian church centered on the proclamation of Christ crucified, followed by the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The problem in Corinth is that the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord’s Supper in such a way that the Supper had become virtually indistinguishable from one of the banquets held in a pagan temple or guild hall. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for this behavior in no uncertain terms. Yet in doing so, Paul also spells out the meaning of the Lord’s Supper as well as informing us why the Supper occupies such an important role in Christian worship. All and all, this is a fascinating passage and we’ll spend the next two sermons working our way through the balance of this chapter.

In First Corinthians 11:17-34, we have the earliest account of the Lord’s Supper in the entire New Testament. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians was probably written about 54 A.D., before any of the canonical gospels had been written. The Corinthian letter, therefore, gives us a very important insight into the Supper as it was celebrated from the earliest times. The Lord’s Supper is the New Covenant equivalent of the Jewish Passover, and like the Passover, was celebrated as part of a larger fellowship meal, which followed what we might call the ordinary worship service.

As we have seen in previous sermons on this letter, it is vital that we attempt to understand Paul’s discussion of the abuse of the Supper against the backdrop of Greco-Roman culture, with its emphasis upon feasting and communal meals. Such meals were commonly celebrated in one of the pagan temples or guild halls throughout the city. On the one hand, the Corinthians would have been very familiar with communal meals like that one instituted by Jesus on his last night together with his disciples. Yet, on the other hand, the Corinthians would have dined only with those of the same social standing and profession, or with members of the same religious sect. The Supper as instituted by Jesus was intended to unite God’s people around their common faith in Christ, not divide people along racial or socio-economic lines as was apparently the case in Corinth.

There are at least two issues at stake. One is that it would be difficult to get people from different ethnic groups and social standing to eat together since eating together in the first century Mediterranean world indicated that a bond of some kind had been formed. The rich didn’t eat with the poor. The Jews, didn’t eat with the Greeks. And no one wanted to eat with the Romans. The other issue is that the Corinthians would quite naturally fall back into their old pagan habits and behave during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper just as they behaved at the guild banquet, or as they did at the feast in the temple.

In fact, the Lord’s Supper was being so badly abused in this congregation that Paul is now convinced that the celebration of the Supper was doing far more harm than good. The sacrament of Christian unity had become the source of more contention and only served to reinforce the-already existing divisions within the church. One striking thing about this account is mentioned by Leon Morris. “Accustomed as we are to the service of Holy Communion as the most solemn and dignified of services, this passage comes as something of a surprise. Clearly the worship was far from being edifying, or even dignified in first

century Corinth.”<sup>1</sup> That is probably an understatement. Paul writes to correct these abuses.

The first issue Paul addresses is the shoddy treatment of the poor as recounted in verses 17-22. Paul identifies some of the abuses associated with the celebration of the Supper in the Corinthian church, before offering correction in the balance of the chapter. As we read in verse 17, “*but in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.*” Paul is very abrupt and emphatic in his directive to the Corinthians.<sup>2</sup> He has no word of praise for them (i.e. “I do not commend you”). His only comment is that the abuses of the Lord’s Supper have created a condition in which their meetings (literally “their gathering together” for worship) were doing more harm than good.

Paul goes on to mention some of the specific abuses in the next few verses. In verse 18 we learn “*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.*” Paul has heard that when the Corinthian congregation gathers for worship there are divisions among the members. There are several things of interest and import here. First, it is highly likely that “the gathering together” of the church refers to regular Lord’s Day worship services on the first day of the week.<sup>3</sup> This means that when the Corinthians gathered for worship on the Lord’s Day, they also celebrated the Lord’s Supper. This is also the practice of the church elsewhere, as indicated in a passage such as Acts 20:7.

It is also very interesting that Paul speaks of “church” (*ekklēsia*) without using the definite article (not “the” church). This would have the sense of the gathering of God’s people (i.e., “the assembly”) for worship, rather than a reference to the church as an institution. The problem is that when congregation assembles, “there are divisions” (*schismata*). Church members are tragically divided, likely along cultural or ethnic lines. Although Paul has already spoken of division back in the opening chapter of the letter (1 Corinthians 1:10—“*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment*”), he may not be referring to the same thing here. Recall that in the opening chapter the issue was that people had allied themselves with a particular teacher (Peter, Apollos, Paul, or others).

In this case the division is based on social standing (rich and poor), and/or racial-cultural divisions (Jew and Gentile). The particular issue seems to be that some have enough food to eat and others do not. There is no mention here of alliances to particular teachers causing the problem, although these issues may in some way be related—say, if the Jewish believers identified with Peter rather than with Paul. Sadly, the unity Paul has just mentioned in 1 Corinthians 10:17 (“*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread*”), is not present when the Corinthians celebrate the “fellowship meal.”<sup>4</sup> You can’t have true fellowship, if people are divided and mad at each other.

When Paul says that he’s heard that division is present (either mentioned in the letter sent to Paul, or

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 155. Cf. Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 260.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 155.

<sup>3</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 536.

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 261.

information based on what Chloe's family in Ephesus disclosed to him), to some extent he believes it. Literally, he says he believes part of what he's heard. Apparently, the news which reached him contained exaggerated reports, and while Paul acknowledges that there were real divisions present, the situation may not have been as bad as he's heard.

Nevertheless, there are divisions in the church and they must be dealt with. As Paul states in verse 19, *"for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized."* As Paul sees it, such divisions, while tragic, are a fact of church life. The word translated "factions" is an interesting word (*haireseis*) which refers to people who have chosen to go in a particular direction. In Acts 5:17, we read of the "party" of Sadducees. In Acts 15:5, we read of the "party" of the Pharisees, while in Acts 24:5, 14, we read of the "sect" of the Nazarenes and "the way." In Galatians 5:20, Paul speaks of choosing to go the way of the flesh.<sup>5</sup> While the word means something similar to "divisions" (v. 18), the focus is upon the self-determination of the individuals involved. It is when people choose to go in a particular direction that those who have God's approval—those who withstand the test—demonstrate themselves to be in the right. When there are differences, those who withstand God's testing (that is, their teaching and practices are in accordance with God's word) will show that they have God's approval. In other words, time will prove who is right.

But according to verse 20, there is something very serious going on which needs Paul's immediate attention. *"When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat."* Because of these divisions, when this congregation assembles for worship, it is not the Lord's Supper (that is, the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ) that they are eating. Instead of being practiced as instituted by Jesus and as taught to them by the apostles, the Supper as celebrated by the Corinthians has taken on the character described in the following verse—a character sadly not unlike that of the pagan banquet hall they were supposed to have left behind.

In verse 21, Paul describes the problem, *"for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk."* The members of the Corinthian church would have clearly been familiar with communal meals, such as those associated with guilds and temples. But this meal was different. While the Lord's Supper was celebrated as part of communal meal (the so-called "love feast" mentioned in Jude 12), if it were being celebrated correctly, everyone who participated would be filled and no one would be drunk.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, Christ would be exalted through the proclamation of his death. But that is not the case in Corinth.

Based on what Paul describes, some of the members of these various factions were going ahead and eating without waiting for others. Perhaps those who provided the food consumed it before anyone else could get to it. Or perhaps there are even cultural issues involved, wherein certain ethnic foods were prepared which others would not eat. This is not only rude, but if one group ate all the food before others had a chance to eat this would have further exacerbated whatever divisions already existed in the church. Its bad enough to be divided, but imagine how deep those divisions could become when some were getting drunk and others were going hungry. If people are tipsy, or crabby because of low blood-sugar, no wonder there is trouble! As an aside, it is hard to get drunk on grape juice!

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<sup>5</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 156.

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 263.

We also get a hint at what was going on from what Paul says in verse 22, where it is implied that the wealthy provided the food and then ate it before the poor got a chance to eat the food which was supposed to be shared. Those who waited (out of charity and good manners) got nothing to eat. Those who ate first, we are told, consumed all of the wine and so were getting drunk, bringing further shame upon the church. Such behavior was turning the Supper into something very much like a guild or temple feast, and completely unlike the sacramental meal that Jesus himself instituted.

So, the problem is that people were not sharing their food during that which was intended to be a communal meal. Instead of becoming one body, certain people were acting selfishly, causing division. Some were eating and drinking without any regard for the true purpose of the Supper. The consequence—as Paul has already told them, “*it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat.*”

To reinforce this point, Paul now pounds away in verse 22 with a series of questions designed to expose the extent of the problem. “*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.*” If someone is hungry and prone to consume too much wine without proper manners or charity, Paul points out that they should indulge themselves at home, where they are free to do what they want. If Jews want to eat kosher foods at home, or if the rich wish to enjoy gourmet foods at home, so be it. If people don’t want to share their food, or if they eat too much, that is fine at home. But such behavior should never be the occasion for division in the church.<sup>7</sup>

When people behave this way in church, they are not only despising the church and its members (as the body of Christ), but those who provide the food and then consume it are humiliating the poor who are not able to bring anything and who have to wait to eat what the others do not consume. It is not improper to work backwards and conclude that to belittle the poor is, in effect, to despise the church, since the poor as just as much members of the body of Christ as the wealthy.

Paul is clearly exasperated with the Corinthians by this point. There is nothing more he can say. There is no word of praise for their conduct in this regard. And so in verses 23-26, Paul now turns to giving instruction into how the Supper is to be celebrated within the church. Paul begins his correction of the Corinthian practice of the Lord’s Supper by reminding them of the words of institution, as well as including a command which we find nowhere else, namely that we are to celebrate this Supper until the Lord returns (v. 26) because when we do so we proclaim Christ’s death.

In verses 23-24, Paul writes: “*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 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.’*” In discussing the meaning of the bread in verses 23-24, Paul begins with the origin of these words (remember, the gospels had not yet been written). Says Paul, “I received and delivered” which are both technical terms which refer to the receiving and passing along of oral tradition, in this case information Paul was given by none other than Jesus himself.<sup>8</sup> Paul, no doubt, heard the facts of our Lord’s last night from the other apostles and was instructed in the meaning of these events by the Lord himself. Paul refers to direct revelation from the Lord in a number of texts—see for example, 2 Corinthians 12:7 and Galatians 1:12; 2:2.

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<sup>7</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 263.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 157. See also, Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 265.

As for Paul's theological point, Jesus instituted the Supper on the night he was betrayed by referring to the bread with the following words, "this is my body." Jesus does not say the bread *becomes* my body (as Rome argues), nor that my body is "in, with, and under the bread" (as with the Lutherans), or that this bread "represents" or "symbolizes" my body (the Zwinglian/memorialist view). Instead, Jesus says that "this bread *is* my body." Notice the problems for both the Roman and Zwinglian view in the next few verses, as Jesus does not refer to the wine as his blood, but as the New Covenant in his blood. Neither Rome's notion of the sign (bread) being turned into the thing signified (Christ's flesh), nor the Zwinglian focus upon the essence of the Supper being nothing but a memorial meal in which nothing is received, can make proper sense of the New Testament's sacramental language. "This is my body."

When we covered the first part of chapter 10, we discussed the fact that Jesus uses sacramental language when he speaks of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, just as Paul has done back in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 when he speaks of Christ as the rock, the manna as spiritual food, and baptism into Moses and the cloud as prefiguring Christian baptism. When we use sacramental language, we simply mean that there is a sign (bread and wine) and thing signified (body and blood) and when sacramental language is used, the one thing (the bread) can be spoken of as the other (this is my body).

It is also vital to notice that Paul emphasizes that Christ give this body "for us." The essence of the Supper is that the same Jesus who gave himself *for us* on the cross, gives himself *to us* in the Lord's Supper. The sacrament is both the sign and the seal of his redemptive work for us, and is a covenant renewal ceremony in which God's promises are ratified anew. Through faith, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we truly feed upon Christ (who is in heaven), since the bread is his body (understood sacramentally), given for the remission of our sins.

Furthermore, we are commanded to do this receiving of Christ's benefits on regular basis. "'Do this' is present continuous: 'keep on doing this,'" which certainly seems to imply that we are commanded to do this remembering (*anamnesis*) on a regular basis.<sup>9</sup> The remembering that Paul is speaking of is not merely being sad upon considering the fact that Christ had to die because of my sins—although my sorrow for my sin and my intention to repent is certainly part of the process of preparing to come to the table. But "remembering" also means recalling to mind and considering what the saving death of Jesus means for us, his people. Given Paul's language here, it is very difficult to argue for infrequent communion (quarterly) on any kind of biblical basis.

In verse 25, Paul turns his focus to the wine in the cup. "*In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'*" As Jesus took the bread, so too, he took the cup, and likewise invests it with new meaning, speaking of it as the new covenant in his blood, a clear reference to the new covenant prophesy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and to the covenant renewal ceremony recounted in Exodus 24 (our Old Testament lesson), where Moses and the elders of Israel, ate, drank, and saw the glory of God while up on the mountain. This means that Jesus is saying that the shedding of his blood will be the means by which the new covenant is ratified, the means by which our sins are forgiven, and the means by which the law is written upon our hearts.<sup>10</sup> This "new" covenant is renewed every time we come to the table of the Lord.

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<sup>9</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 159.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 159.

In verse 26, Paul now adds an important element, not found anywhere else in the New Testament. “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*” When we eat the bread and drink the cup—receiving what Jesus offers to us, namely forgiveness of sins because his body was broken for us and his blood was shed for us—we “show forth” in the sense that we “announce” or “proclaim” the meaning of the death of Christ. The Greek word means something like to proclaim or announce, and is often used in connection to the preaching of the gospel.<sup>11</sup>

The celebration of the Lord’s Supper during the worship service is a vivid proclamation of the gospel. This is why the Reformed believe that the sacrament should be celebrated only in conjunction with the preached word through a re-enactment of sorts of the Last Supper. This is also why Calvin spoke of the Supper as the visible word—the visible sign and seal of what was offered in the gospel. What is promised to us in the gospel—the forgiveness of sin—is given us in the sacrament through those same elements Jesus instituted with his own disciples. We take in our hands the same elements Jesus handed to twelve. And in faith, we take this bread and wine to be Christ’s body and blood, and in believing Christ’s promise, we receive the very thing promised.

Notice too, there is an eschatological dimension here. Christ’s death is not the end, it is the beginning of the end, which is why the Supper is to be celebrated by the church until the Lord returns as a testimony to, and in expectation of his return.<sup>12</sup> We are to do this not only because the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper nourishes us as Paul has said earlier, but because it reminds us every time we celebrate it of God’s mercy to us in Jesus Christ. As Jesus has conquered death once and for all, our celebration of the Supper also points us to the Marriage Supper of Christ the Lamb at the end of the age (cf. Revelation 19:1-7). Indeed, all of God’s covenant promises are ratified to us anew whenever we partake.

What then, do we say by way of application?

**W**In 1 Corinthians 11:17 ff, we learn a great deal about how the apostolic church worshiped. No question, the Corinthians focused on Christ’s person and work as proclaimed in the gospel and as ratified in the Lord’s Supper. Although churches today practice the Supper differently than the apostolic church—we don’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper during our potluck—nevertheless we do receive the same Christ and all his benefits that the Corinthian Christians received. Word and sacrament ties us to the apostolic church.

Like the Corinthians, we are to center our worship in the proclamation of Christ’s death until he comes. We come to church to hear words we can hear nowhere else. We come to hear that Jesus died for our sins. We come to be reminded that Jesus lived a perfect life to fulfill all righteousness, and that his righteousness becomes ours through faith. We come to this place because it is here that the same risen and ascended Jesus speaks to us through his word, and offers himself to us at the table of the Lord. This is why we assemble together, because we are one body with one common faith and one common Savior.

All Jesus asks of us is that we believe his promises, that we take what he offers us in faith, and with gratitude, and as we do this, we consider both the blessing and the gravity of what it means to come to this table. At this table, beloved, we are given but a brief foretaste of the glorious Marriage Supper of

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 557.

Christ the Lamb. And this is why we are to proclaim Christ's death in the Supper "until he comes."