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When You Come Together As a Church

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I Corinthians 11:17-34

[Abuses at the Lord's Supper]

¹⁷ Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²² What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

[The Institution of the Lord's Supper]

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

[Partaking of the Supper Unworthily]

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰ For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴ If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

My mother-in-law was the church cook at First Baptist Church, West Memphis for over forty years, 95% of which was weekly Wednesday Night Suppers. Four hundred people came for sit-down, family-style supper – food on the tables, not a buffet line. The deacons delivered boxed meals to shut-ins every week, and seminary students always ate for free.

At one point, she had parents starting to call to order box meals for their families – to pick up and eat at home. She told them No, which they absolutely weren't expecting. They got upset and said they'd just go speak to Brother Tommy about this. She agreed they definitely should. So they called up Brother Tommy, pastor of First Baptist for almost thirty years, who told them – no doubt in his clearest, firmest, kindest voice – that Wednesday Night Supper was for fellowship and worship. If they wanted pick-up, there was a Pizza Hut over on Missouri Street. He was working straight out of I Corinthians 11.

It's not clear exactly what Paul had heard about the situation there. Here's my best guess: someone in the congregation was very uncomfortable with what was happening at communion, someone maybe who felt caught in the middle, a peacemaker who didn't know what exactly was wrong but knew things weren't right. That sort of someone wrote to Paul.

We get together for regular Lord's Supper at the Briggs house – because, you know, they have a big house. The announcements said 7 PM so most everyone got there about 7, but the Cookmans and Tittelbaughs and Ensmengers were already there, and it seemed like they'd been there awhile because the dining room and kitchen were already messy with leftovers everywhere. Anyway, everyone else got there with the soup and bread and stuff, like the announcement said. So we eat and have communion and it's really nice, but it's also awkward – because, well it just is. And I felt like I shouldn't write you about it, but then some people said they weren't going to come anymore, since it's kind of embarrassing to bring food that is so small and plain, which made me think you might want to know – so hopefully it's okay that I'm writing, and I'm so sorry if it isn't.

Paul responded: *I can hardly believe it's true.* And yet, there it is. Paul makes everything into such a big deal. Everything. In this case it's a big deal, in that it is yet another example of where the gospel of Jesus has not yet infiltrated their thinking, feeling and behaving, their hearts, minds and bellies still full of assumptions about their own rights, needs and wants.

I can easily see how, when they were all together they planned an affordable meal that everyone could participate in. And later, the Briggs might have said, utterly without

malice, *Hey, want to come over early for steaks? Sure, say the Cookmans, we'll bring homemade pasta.*

See, poor and not-poor people sit near each other for nearly every meal everywhere, and the not-poor people are barely aware of it. *But not in church*, Paul said, *not among you. When you come together as a church, yes, there's food. But you're not here to eat, you are here to worship. And by worship I mean Remember.*

Wherein Paul reminds them of the language of Eucharist:

"This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

This is so *not* Pizza Hut, friends. You are so *not* here to eat. And whether you mean to or not, whether you recognize it or not, when you treat your meal together like you are just a bunch of unrelated tables at the Pizza Hut, you aren't just humiliating the ones who have nothing – which would be bad enough all by itself – you also vacate the very reason for coming together in the first place. You abuse the church. You abuse each other. And you abuse Christ Himself.

Friends, when we grow in Christ, the focus of our lives naturally begins to shift from the self to others. Not in an either-or way, but an ever-widening inclusiveness. My household isn't six people, but sixty people and always adding.

When Mariah was about two years old, a pair of graduate school friends came over and brought their McDonald's supper. Mariah cozied up to the one with the most French fries who said to her so seriously, "No Mariah, I'm sorry but this is mine." Mariah was shocked and then inconsolable for about ten minutes. And it's pretty obvious with a two-year-old, less so with one another, with the newest friends among us.

When we eat together, none of you call ahead to order carry out, but I notice you all who hang back and let everyone else be served first. You watch for what others at your table need, or look for new people to sit with. Because you know it isn't about the food; it's about the people.

When we abuse the poor, we are leaving them to feel at church what they feel everywhere – like they are less. The one place in all of life they are promised rich and poor doesn't count, *You made it count*, Paul says.

No 'church' can long endure as the people of God for the new era in which the old distinctions between bond and free (Jew and Greek, male and female) are allowed to persist. Especially so at the table, where Christ, who made us all one has ordained that we should visibly proclaim that unity. ~ Dr. Gordon Fee

Fee helps me with why Paul makes a big deal of this, reminds me that not everything called "church" is church. Where people sort out according to wealth or gender or race, they may be good people enjoying their time together, but they are not church. That is not church.

Third, you abuse (or despise or mistreat or simply fail to believe) Christ Himself, who is Himself the host of this meal. Host, as in the one who brings us together, who invited us. Host, as in the bread itself, broken for us. *Remember that?* Paul asks. *Are you remembering that when you gather? Or are you bickering and squabbling and making a scene? Or maybe just quietly shaming each other? Because that sounds more like Jesus' enemies than his friends.*

At Bible Chat on Thursday I learned a new word: obstreperous. It means cocky and obnoxious, the antonym of Christlikeness – meaning that the more obstreperous one is, the less of the gospel they reveal. I can't help but believe that Paul is not judging them for their affluence, but their attitude. Be it time or money or privilege, do they use it to accentuate the differences between believers or to erase them, in their shared life together? If you are that hungry, eat at home. But when you are together, wait for one another and share everything the same. Rich or poor, having given our lives to Him, we belong to the Lord. Right? What was ours is now His. Right?

Our paycheck may be signed Don R. C. Lewis or Michael McRobbie, but we work for the Lord, are employees of His kingdom, are here on His business. Our resources are ours only in the sense that we disburse them according to His will, which is always being more completely revealed to us. Maybe these Corinthians didn't know – *maybe* – until Paul said otherwise; they thought they WERE being kind, by not inviting people who would feel awkward.

Maybe. Also irrelevant, because we do know better. We know that when we come together and call ourselves church, we gather like no other people in any other place or time. We gather in remembrance of Jesus who was broken for us, and in whom every difference, every barrier – rich, poor, male, female, black, white, Indian, liberal, conservative – is broken too. Where we are one – the one for whom He died and rose, once and for all.