



Lesson Six

“NOW YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST”

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 11:17–34, 12

MAIN IDEA

In the life of a church community, united through baptism and at the Communion table, we are called to reject divisions and to seek to embody God’s abundant love for every person.

OPENING PRAYER

*Holy Trinity, One God,
diversity in unity is the heart of who you are.
But we forget this,
we forget we need each other,
and sometimes, this forgetfulness makes us cruel.
Help us remember we need each other.
Help us remember we are one in you.
Help us embody that oneness.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

Earlier in chapter 11, Paul commended his friends for maintaining the traditions he taught them. But now, he rebukes them for the shameful way they celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the clearest possible terms, Paul reminds the Corinthians that their baptism has made them one in Jesus Christ. The class divisions that are accepted, even celebrated, in Corinth have no place in Christian worship. Instead, worship needs to reflect the congregation's God-given unity, and God's love for every person present.

Today, Christians may not realize that the words of institution we use in celebrating Holy Communion were recorded amid a conflict that betrayed the unity to which Jesus Christ called his disciples. The fact that Paul reminded Corinthian Christians of Jesus' self-gift in a conflicted situation could prompt us to ask: How does the church express our unity in Jesus Christ today? Is the church caring for all its members in ways that reflect Jesus' own generosity? This rebuke by Paul can also remind us that experiences of conflict can call Christians back to our faith and to more generous ways of practicing it.

LESSON

Having answered his friends' questions about eating meat sacrificed to idols and about appropriate garb for female worship leaders, Paul turns to a conflict that touches the heart of what it means to be a Christian community. These are the matters for which, he tells the Corinthians, "I do not commend you" (11:17). In fact, he reprimands them, as the members who reported these actions likely hoped he would.

The first of these concerns is the way the Corinthians celebrate the Lord's Supper. Their practices are so far from the unity in Christ that Paul expects from his fellow disciples that he declares, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper" (11:20). Why? Because in the way they celebrate this meal, the congregation embodies, not Christian unity, but the norms of pagan society.

Serving the Lord's Supper in Corinthian Culture

When Paul wrote, the Lord's Supper was a ritual sharing of bread and wine that occurred at the end of a communal meal. In the Greco-Roman world of the time, when a wealthy person hosted a dinner party, it was common practice to offer food and drink of varying quality and amounts, and seats of varying comfort, to different ranks of guests. Only the richest, or the most powerful, or the closest friends of the host could expect the best seats, food, and drink. Everyone else would have to content themselves with less. The architecture of the ancient world compounded the problem. The Corinthian church was an economically diverse group, composed of perhaps forty to fifty members, possibly more at times (for example, if visitors from Cenchreae, seven miles east, joined in).¹ Only the few wealthiest members would have had homes large enough to accommodate a gathering of the whole church for the Lord's Supper. In such a house, the dining room, called the "triclinium," was an interior space that could be closed off and heated. The larger "atrium," however, was an outer room open to the elements through a hole in the roof, called a "compluvium"—from the Latin word for rain.²

1 Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "House Churches and the Eucharist," in Edward Adams and David G. Horrell, eds., *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 132.

2 Murphy-O'Connor, "House Churches and the Eucharist," 134.

Imagine being a self-employed member of the church, of modest means—say, a seamstress. You arrive at the same time as a wealthy member, maybe a banker or civil servant, who is ushered into the triclinium while you are told to stay in the atrium. You sit—or stand, if all the seats are already taken—and watch platters of meat, fruit, and cheese go by, along with large pitchers of wine. When you and your friends in the atrium are served, there's no meat on the platter, and you are given a small jug of wine to share. Still, you're better off than your friend who's an enslaved domestic worker with no control over her own time. She arrives after all the food has been eaten—except, maybe for a bit of cheese or fruit you saved for her. She will have to make do with the small piece of bread and sip of wine from the eucharistic rite that follows the evening meal, and she will go home with her stomach growling. Those with the fewest resources will leave the Lord's Supper hungry, while those who would have eaten well that evening, even if they had stayed home, will be satiated.³

When have you or your church behaved unkindly through thoughtlessness or selfishness? Did you realize on your own that you had been unkind, or did someone else bring the offense to your attention? In either case, how did you or the church respond?

Missing the Point of Communion

That's why Paul writes angrily that his friends are "not really" sharing the Lord's Supper: because they "show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing" (11:22). He isn't critiquing the uneven distribution of wealth in the church, or even in Corinth. His comment, "Do you not have households to eat and drink in?" (11:22) reveals that his problem is not with the existence of social classes. Nor is Paul concerned, as you or I might be today, with communicants having engaged in an appropriate examination of conscience and confession of sin, before the eucharistic feast. That is not what he means by "[eating] the bread or [drinking] the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner" (11:27). Likewise, later debates about transubstantiation, real presence, or communion as a memorial would have meant nothing to him.

For Paul, to eat and drink unworthily is to do so without perceiving that everyone who shares in the bread and cup is united into one body in Jesus Christ. As scholar Richard B. Hays says, rich Corinthians "are acting as though [Jesus'] death had not decisively changed the conditions of [Christians'] relationship to one another."⁴ The Lord's Supper, the moment when Christians remember the inauguration of a new age through Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice, must clearly express their unity in him, even if they might struggle to embody it at other times.

³ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor offers the basis for this speculation in "House Churches and the Eucharist," 135.

⁴ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 199.

Why do you think Paul refers to Jesus "on the night when he was betrayed" (11:23)? Is he simply referring chronologically to when the Last Supper occurred? Or is he also reminding the Corinthians that a friend of Jesus betrayed him once, and Christians are at risk of doing it again? What is the significance of those words for you today?

Betraying Jesus Christ, the Host at the Table

The abuses Paul condemned didn't end with the church in Corinth. Even as the Church has sought unity with Jesus through Communion, it has at various times tolerated and even encouraged sinful acts from the unkind to the horrifically violent. Most frequently over the course of our history, Christians have directed our violence against Jews, worshipping the Jewish Jesus while justifying murders of Jewish people by the claim that the Church had replaced Israel as God's chosen people. We see this kind of hatred centered on the Eucharist in, for example, charges of the desecration of Communion hosts brought against European Jews in the Middle Ages. From time to time, without evidence, Christians accused Jews of surreptitiously procuring a consecrated wafer with the aim of destroying it. Historian Lauren Winner writes that medieval Christian mobs might kill the individual Jewish person accused of stealing the host; they might

also kill some of the person's Jewish neighbors; or they might massacre an entire Jewish community. All in the name of protecting their Lord Jesus from a manufactured threat.⁵

In some times and places, Christians have sacrificed beloved children of God to the celebration of the Lord's Supper itself. One Sunday in the 1840s in North Carolina, a man refused to take Communion alongside his fellow enslaved persons and the family that held them in bondage. He refused because his brother had been sold so their Episcopal slaveholder could buy the new silver chalice and plate from which Communion was served. "I could not bear," he told friends after he had escaped to freedom, "to go forward and receive the communion from vessels which were the purchase of my brother's blood."⁶ That man, whose name was not recorded, understood Paul's insight about Communion: that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper without making good-faith efforts to address divisions and abuses of power among us, we betray the host who gave his life for all of us.

Perceiving and critiquing historical abuses is easier than discerning problems with what we ourselves are currently doing. Meditating on Paul's rebuke of the Corinthian congregation, however, might lead us to wonder: Are there ways our own congregations' actions could better express the unity to which Jesus Christ calls us? Are there ways we could better demonstrate that in him, we are a new people?

5 Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 20–21.

6 William Jay, *A Letter to the Right Rev. L. Silliman Ives, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina, Occasioned by his late Address to the Convention of his Diocese. By a Protestant Episcopalian* (Washington, D.C.: Buell and Blanchard, 1846), 19. In this letter, William Jay was rebuking Bishop Ives for having written about the marvelous unity Ives believed he saw embodied in slaveholders and enslaved people receiving Communion together.

How has your church reckoned with its history concerning Native American dispossession, slavery, Jim Crow, and other exploitative systems? Are there pieces of your congregation's history you're curious about? How might you learn more? Are there pieces you would like to share with your denomination or local community?

Varieties of Gifts But the Same God

If the Corinthians are one in Jesus Christ, in chapter 12 Paul develops the metaphor for this unity he hinted about earlier. Together, this congregation is the body of Christ, and through Christ, they have received all the gifts they need to thrive—together.

Some Corinthians have constructed a hierarchy of spiritual gifts. As we saw earlier, Paul has sought to impress upon his siblings in faith that any gifts they have come from God, and the only wisdom they need to live well is to realize that Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected for all. Here, he takes yet another opportunity to remind them of these realities: "Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (12:4–7).

God, not humans, decides who receives which gift. To hammer home this point, Paul repeats,

"but the same Spirit," "but the same Lord," "the same God," "of the Spirit," "through the Spirit," "according to the same Spirit," "by the same Spirit," "by the one Spirit," "by one and the same Spirit . . . just as the Spirit chooses" (12:4–11). Any gift individual church members might have, that builds up the church, was allotted by God. No gift is too humble to come from God, and no gift is so lofty that the one who has received it should become, as Paul wrote earlier, "puffed up" with pride. Any and all gifts are given so that their recipients may glorify God. The test of whether a gift is rightly received is in the opening to this chapter: "I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (12:3). The very ability to proclaim one's faith is a gift, and all other gifts help in this endeavor.

Has there ever been a time when you went to serve, or to offer a gift, and found yourself receiving unexpected gifts? What was that experience like for you? How challenging, if at all, was it for you to receive those gifts?

Theologian Rowan Williams wrote, "a well-functioning Christian community is going to be one in which everyone is working steadily to release the gifts of others."⁷ How does your church help members identify and offer their gifts?

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 108.

Even the Lowliest Member Is Part of the Body

To demonstrate just how closely God has united believers, Paul uses the strongest possible metaphor. The Corinthians are not just a family, as he has previously stated. They are, spiritually speaking, a single body. Whatever their ethnicity, whatever their social status, they are one body in Jesus Christ. In this body, everyone has a place.

“If the ear would 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 the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (12:16–17).

Not only does each member of the body have its place, each member also needs the others. “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’” (12:21). Paul might have wondered as he wrote: Will the wealthy, educated Corinthians understand? Will it gall them to think they have any need of their laboring, illiterate siblings in Christ, the people Paul has just reprimanded them for shutting out of the banquets ostensibly held in the name of Jesus Christ? Paul is not calling them to offer condescendingly kind treatment out of the goodness of their hearts. He is reminding them

that “those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor” (12:23). Perhaps Christians who have access to wealth and its benefits, like education and leisure time, could gain something, themselves, by honoring and serving siblings in Christ who haven’t enjoyed such advantages. Paul will elaborate on this theme in the next couple of chapters as he calls them to “a still more excellent way” (12:31): the way of Jesus Christ’s love.

TAKEAWAY

From the beginning, Christians have had trouble recognizing how social prejudices affect our worship and our discipleship. Paul reminds us to consider, honestly, whether our congregation faithfully remembers Jesus’ sacrifice for the sake of the whole world, and lives in such ways that we honor that sacrifice.

What picture of the Corinthian church has taken shape for you over the course of this study? What advice might you offer that congregation at this point? What one or two insights or pieces of wisdom have you taken from reflecting on its struggles?