

“Unholy Communion” 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Introduction

- John Stott, maybe the one man whose ministry I respect more than any other, once told the story of [Hobart Mowrer](#), Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois. Mowrer, “neither a Christian nor a theist, once described himself as having a ‘lover’s quarrel with the church.’ Asked what he meant by this, he replied that the church had failed him when he was a teenager and continued to fail him today. How? ‘Because the church has never learned the secret of community,’ he said.” Stott says, ‘it is the most damaging criticism of the church I have ever heard.’”¹
- When I say the word ‘community’ as a Christian what comes to mind? For me it’s Acts 2:46. *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.* The picture of life in the New Testament is a shared life. Life lived as witnessing communities. It’s something that is, I think, sorely missing in this church. In fact, if we were to single out the biggest weakness of our church right now I would have to say it would be the lack of authentic community life. Just think about your own life for a second. If, in your mind right now, you were to evaluate your own life as a Christian. How well would you score when it comes to living life in community?
- Do you know what a tangram is? A tangram is a puzzle consisting of five triangles, a square and a rhomboid.² This is a tangram. I want you to notice something about this tangram because this tangram is a picture of our church right now. Notice, all the pieces of the tangram are arranged to form an identifiable shape, a square. In other words, there’s no division in the tangram. All the pieces are aligned into a recognizable whole. The pieces aren’t scattered and divided. By God’s grace we’ve been spared from factions and infighting and divisions. We’re not a divided church.
- Back to our tangram. Even though there’s no outright division among the pieces. I want you to notice, the pieces don’t touch each other. They’re isolated. Our lives don’t touch each other enough. There’s no community among the isolated pieces of the tangram and there’s not enough shared life going on here.
- The picture of the Corinthian church in the last half of chapter 11 is a church that has major struggles with living life in community. They are definitely a worshiping church. They are great worshipers. But, despite their worship prowess, Paul’s point in this passage seems to be that the lack of community in the Corinthian church was undermining the corporate worship experience.

¹ Stott, [Authentic Christianity](#), p. 301-2.

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Transition

If I may suggest to you, what God is trying to teach us through 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is that...

Proposition

- **Corporate worship without community is a farce**
- To come together corporately to worship in the name of Christ without a strong and active and vibrant and healthy community supporting that corporate worship experience makes our worship of God farcical. It's absurd. Let me state it positively. Vibrant witnessing communities where Christians share life together, where they deeply love each other—that kind of Christianity powerfully enriches corporate worship.
- One of the problems of the Corinthian church, one of the turtles in the road, was poor community life. Corinth was full of cliques. Remember the selfishness I highlighted the past two weeks? It rears its ugly head in full living color in verses 17-34. Selfish cliques of Christians; the rich, the poor, the haves, and the have-nots. Very unhealthy interpersonal relationships. On the surface, great worship. But very poor relationships. In fact, Paul's criticism of the church's community life is nothing short of scathing. Their community life is so scandalous that Paul says in verse 17, look at [verse 17](#). *In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.* How could that possibly be? *Your meetings do more harm than good?* Why? As we'll see in a minute. Poor community life.
- Really, what could be worse? How do you think the church felt as the elders stood up to read Paul's letter? I think we'd be naïve to think that we're immune from these issues. Just think about your interpersonal relationships here at church? Do you have favorites? Do you hang out with the same chosen few? Are you sharing life with any other Christians? I'm just curious. How many of you here this morning have been coming here less than one year? For those of you who have been here longer than a year do you know these people? Do you know their stories? Do you know their struggles? How would we feel, as a church, if someone told us like it really is? And more importantly what would we do about it? Again, **corporate worship without community is a farce.**

Transition

This morning I want you to see from this passage...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three reasons community is absolutely essential for authentic worship of God**

Transition

The background issue, the issue that revealed Corinth's poor community life was their practice of the Lord's Supper—Communion. Instead of an edifying, strengthening aspect of their life in Christ the way the Corinthians worshiped around the communion table was a farce. Their lack of community life made their worship a joke. Unholy communion.

Background/Setting

- Keep in mind, in Paul's day most churches met in houses. No big fancy buildings. Christians were kicked out of the synagogues so they assembled in homes. Again, Acts 2:46.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. Corinth would have been no different. They probably gathered at the largest house in order to accommodate everyone.

- Archaeology has shown, however, that most dining rooms weren't big enough to accommodate large groups—especially an entire church. In fact probably no more than 9-12 people would have been able to recline around the standard three sided dining room table called the triclinium. The rest of the church would have eaten in the larger adjoining atrium or courtyard—probably maxing out at 30-50 people.³
- Let me also say that the centerpiece of most Christian worship services was Communion. They probably practiced it every Sunday and it was probably accompanied by a full meal. Jesus, when he instituted the Lord's Supper on the night he was betrayed did so in the context of the Passover meal. The early church probably carried on the tradition of celebrating the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal called a love feast. Jude 12 mentions such a feast; *these men are blemishes at your love feasts.*
- You'd think gathering in homes, intimate table fellowship would have guaranteed close knit relationships—strong community? Nope. Meeting in houses is no guarantee against selfish, rude, sinful behavior. But what I do want you to see is how critically important community is to worship, however it is achieved. Without it the corporate worship service, like in the case of the Corinthians, does more harm than good.

Transition

Listen again to [verses 17-22](#). The first point Paul makes, and you can write this down if you're taking notes, is that **worship without community isn't really worship**. Listen. *In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes 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 praise you for this? Certainly not! **Worship without community isn't really worship.***

Main Points

- The scene Paul describes in these verses is fairly self-explanatory. You can kind of picture what's happening. The church gathers together for corporate worship which involved a communion meal as we talked about a minute ago. Except the meal probably wasn't like the traditional potluck you and I are familiar with where each family brought a dish to pass. More likely each family was responsible for their own meal—imagine each family bringing a basket of food to church to feed themselves.⁴
- Except some in the community had more than enough to eat while others didn't have enough. *For as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains*

³ Fee, note 11, p. 533.

⁴ Garland, p. 541.

hungry, another gets drunk. The problem was that they weren't sharing with each other. Verse 21 literally reads 'each goes ahead with his own supper.'"⁵

- Apparently the more well-to-do Christians who probably hosted the church meeting allowed their closest friends to eat with them around the triclinium in the dining room. The poorer Christians, some who were most definitely slaves and who had to take care of business before coming, probably found it difficult to make it to corporate worship on time—they were left to eat in the atrium—outside the inner circle so to speak. They brought what they had to eat but it wasn't like what was being served in the main dining room. Those who had nothing were being humiliated, [verse 22](#), by those who devoured an abundance right in front of them. Most likely, "the rich were eating their private meals at the Lord's Supper, which included both an earlier starting time and privileged portions not available to others."⁶
- The picture is of selfishness. Insensitivity. Favoritism. Special treatment. Status-seeking. Cliques. True Christian community where in the name of Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free—destroyed.
- And Paul's analysis comes in [verse 20](#). What does he say? *When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.* In other words, yeah, you eat. You break the bread. You drink the cup. But because your interpersonal relationships are in shambles, because you're not really sharing life together, because there is no true community among you, because by your behavior you prove you despise what the church is really all about, you really aren't eating the Lord's Supper. Your worship really isn't worship at all. Paul says in [verse 22](#), if all they're going to do is eat a meal they'd be better off eating at home. They needn't go to all the trouble of gathering together to eat. Since they weren't worshipping they could do what they were doing in the privacy of their homes. Then Paul says what he really thinks at the end of [verse 22](#). *What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!*
- Let me suggest to you that one of the ways to best enhance this, on Sunday morning, is to live in community with one another the rest of the week. If you care about this, if you care about corporately gathering to worship, if you really care, then you'll care about sharing life with each other the rest of the week.

Transition

Why? Here's why. [Verses 23-26](#). *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 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." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* **Worship without community mocks Christ's sacrifice.**

- These words that are so familiar to us give the theological reason why worship without community, apart from community, with broken community is a farce. The key phrase in this section is [verse 26](#). Look at it. Read it. *For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* The reason why their supper was just an ordinary meal and not the Lord's Supper, the reason why their worship really wasn't worship

⁵ Blomberg, p. 229.

⁶ Fee, p. 540.

was because their behavior during the meal was the antithesis of everything that Jesus stood for, died for. By their behavior they weren't proclaiming the death of Christ. By their selfish actions they were proclaiming something very different—something selfish, something very unloving, something ugly. By their lack of community, by their selfishness, by their lack of brotherly affection for one another they mocked Christ's sacrifice.

- As [Gordon Fee](#) put it, “The abuse of ‘the body’ (body meaning the church) is an abuse of Christ himself.”⁷ In other words they were breaking Christ's body two ways. Literally breaking the bread and then by their selfish behavior they were breaking Christ's body, the church.
- There is so much that more that we could say about these words. I think what we'll do is this. In two weeks, on [November 18th](#), when we next celebrate communion we'll spend our time prior to celebrating the Lord's Supper unpacking the major themes of verses 23-26 that we just don't have time to look at this morning.
- At least for now, what I want you to feel the weight of is how critically important community is to worship. How hypocritical is it to come together as the body of Christ to worship God if and when the so-called body of Christ is dismembered, disconnected from one another the other six days of the week? If we aren't sharing life together it makes so many themes we sing about, read about, talk about, pray about corporately—it makes a mockery of them.
- Earlier this week I had a conversation with someone in this church who was in tears over the lack of community at our church. By the way when you're an outsider like I am, when you're not native to the area, when you don't have family here, the church is family—you're all we've got. Those of you who have deep family connections need to be more sensitive to those of us who don't have those family ties. For many of us, you're all the family we've got.
- Anyway, this person I was talking to longed to be connected relationally to other Christians for the purpose of encouragement, sharpening, accountability, spiritual growth. And I'll say to you what I said then, we're working on it. I've got a team of people working with me right now; we've been working together the past six months on how we as a church can become more relational through small groups. It's coming. It's exciting. And you know what? When it's unrolled and we start living it, it will supercharge this—Sunday morning.

Transition

I hate to end on a down note but [verses 27-34](#) are words we definitely need to think about. As chapter 11 ends, Paul describes what's at stake by worshiping without community. Follow along. *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32 When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. 33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. 34 If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.* There's a formula in these verses. This plus this equals this. I think what Paul is trying to say as chapter 11 ends is that **worship without community yields corporate discipline.**

⁷ Fee, p. 533.

- [Verse 30](#) describes a situation in the Corinthian church in which an unspecified number of people were weak, sick and some had even died. By the way, falling asleep was a euphemism for death. Those things were consequences of, as [verse 27](#) says, observing communion in an unworthy manner. The congregation was under God's chastisement for their lack of community as evidenced in the way they were celebrating the Lord's Supper.
- I think Paul's logic went something like this: "The Lord's Supper proclaims the Lord's death. Those whose behavior at the Lord's super does not conform to what that death entails effectively shift sides. They leave the Lord's side and align themselves with the rulers of this present age who crucified the Lord."⁸ They're no different than the world, [verse 32](#), who rightly deserve judgment and condemnation for crucifying the Lord of glory. **Worship without community yields corporate discipline.**
- Paul's recommendation, in light of what was happening, the weakness, the sickness, the death, which I think need to be taken at face value, actual weakness, sickness, and death, was for the Corinthians to properly examine their hearts prior to observing communion. [Verse 28](#). *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. Why?*
- Look at [verse 29](#). Verse 29 is the key to understanding why worship without community yields corporate discipline. *For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord drinks judgment on himself.* For the longest time I took this phrase *without recognizing the body of the Lord* as an introspective kind of thing. I took it to mean that during communion, if I did not properly reflect on Christ's for me, if I didn't recognize Christ's broken body, I was partaking of the elements unworthily. I want to suggest to you a slightly different emphasis.
- In the context of this whole passage, 17-34, with its emphasis on the corporate body of Christ what I think Paul is saying is that eating and drinking, celebrating communion without recognizing the body, body meaning the church, is to eat and drink judgment on one's self. "Before they participate in the meal, Paul's asking them to examine themselves in terms of their attitude toward the body of Christ. What's their attitude toward others?⁹ Have they been selfish toward others? Are they cliquish? Have they not met the needs of others throughout the week? Have they recognized the have-nots in the congregation? Have they lived in genuine community? Again, its kind of hypocritical to commune with the Lord at the Lord's Table if there hasn't been genuine community between believes during the week.
- What I'm trying to say is this. Eating and drinking like the Corinthians did, with utter disregard for the overall general health and well being of the body of Christ, the church, is to be *guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord*. **Worship without community yields corporate discipline.** Eating the provision of Christ's broken body and shed blood without providing for a brother or sister in need that was the blight on Corinthian church. That's what brought judgment on them as a congregation.
- The Christian life can't be lived in isolation. We have to start thinking of our walk not just as this personal thing between me and Jesus, which it is, but also me Jesus and all Christ's followers together. Corporate worship without community is a farce.

⁸ Garland, p. 550.

⁹ Fee, p. 562.

Conclusion

- On Sunday, July 20, 1969 *Apollo 11* landed on the surface of the moon. Most of us are familiar with astronaut Neil Armstrong's historic statement as he stepped onto the moon's surface: "That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind." But few know about the first meal eaten there.
- [Buzz Aldrin](#) brought aboard the spacecraft a tiny Communion kit provided by his church. Aldrin sent a radio broadcast to Earth asking listeners to contemplate the events of that day and give thanks.
- Then, in radio blackout for privacy ... [Aldrin] read, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit." He then silently, alone, gave thanks and partook of the Lord's Supper.¹⁰
- While the thought of the Lord's Supper being celebrated in deep space is kind of cool there's something incomplete in Aldrin's celebration. There was no body of Christ, no community of believers to surround and give meaning and depth to the words. This is my body which is for you, plural. Do this, break your bodies for others in remembrance of me, just like me. This cup is my blood, do this, pour out your lives as drink offerings for others in remembrance of me, just like me. For whenever you live like that, for others, you really worship, you really proclaim by your actions that I have died to save people from their sins. Let's pray.

¹⁰ Dennis Fisher, "Communion on the Moon," *Our Daily Bread* (June/July/August 2007); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky.