



Trinity Evangelical Church

Supplements
Addendums

CHURCH DISCIPLINE AND RESTORATION

Edited transcripts of a sermon series presented in January, 2004.

I. INTRODUCTION: A BALANCED AND BIBLICAL APPROACH

Though this subject is commonly referred to as church discipline, we prefer the expression "restoration." Discipline is an accurate word, and one that we will use, but it tends to conjure up images of punishment, and that is not what this is all about. When a fellow member falls into sin and refuses to repent, the goal is not punishment, but restoration. It is critical that we always keep this in mind.

The Bible addresses this subject head-on. Jesus himself gives us specific steps for the church to take, and we find examples of this being practiced in some of Paul's letters, giving us even more insight. Because the Bible provides us with good instruction about all of this, we are not left with much, if any, guesswork. It is all pretty well laid out.

Because the Bible addresses this in a direct way, we have therefore decided not to take the space to defend this practice. We realize that some may have come from churches where this was abused, and church discipline was used as a weapon of control and manipulation. Understandably, any talk about this practice can make some folks quite uncomfortable. As you read the case presented here, we are confident that such fears can be quieted.

On the other hand, many of us have backgrounds from the other extreme, where the church we were a part never spoke of it at all. Even when a believer was involved in gross immorality, the church would keep its distance and not intervene. Some church leaders are afraid of upsetting people, and go out of their way to avoid accusations of judging. It becomes easier then to implement other measures instead of the ones outlined in the Scriptures.

Both examples are unloving. Church discipline cannot become a weapon in the hands of tyrannical leaders to enforce conformity. At the same time, we must love each other enough to be firm when all positive steps have failed. The Scriptures provide us with a clearly defined model that is balanced, effective, and altogether loving.

Therefore, all we plan to say in defense of church discipline is this: it is not something that originates in the traditions of man; it originates in the Word of God, and it is not presented to us as one of many options to consider, but rather we are commanded to implement it when necessary. A church does not have the luxury of choosing "peace with the people" as a higher priority than "purity of the people." A church that fails or refuses to carry out what the Scriptures clearly demand will have to answer to God for it.

One more thing, by means of introduction. This particular subject seems to have many related issues, each needing an adequate explanation before one can truly appreciate it fully. For here we must come to grips with such important subjects as sin and the fall of man and sinful nature, with the authority of God's word, with church structure, accountability, and church authority. There is also a need to deal with issues like the purity of one's example and witness, and the purity of the church's witness. The

subjects of repentance and humility and love and forgiveness and confession all, obviously, play a major part. However, we simply can't explore all of these here, as important as they are to the subject. We will assume that the reader is fairly well-grounded in these matters.

II. THE MATTHEW 18 PROCESS

Let us begin with an example: Sam and Bob are both Christians and members of the same church. Sam sells a car to Bob. Sam tells Bob that the car is in perfect condition, has never been in an accident, and is worth more than what he is asking for it. But since he wants to help him out, he is willing to offer it to Bob for a special price. Bob makes the purchase.

Soon, Bob notices small pieces of glass inside the bottom of the rear window and gets suspicious. After some research, he learns that the car indeed had been in a serious wreck. What is Bob's next step?

A. Step 1

The answer is given to us by Jesus in Matthew 18, verse 15.

IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU, GO AND SHOW HIM HIS FAULT, JUST BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU. IF HE LISTENS TO YOU, YOU HAVE WON YOUR BROTHER OVER.

Seems simple enough. Unfortunately, this is seldom the first step that Christians take. Let's take a moment to look at some things Jesus did not say.

First, Jesus did not tell us, "Just ignore it." It is true that we are to forgive those who wrong us, but the issue here is more than forgiveness. A brother who sins needs to deal with his sin and must, therefore, be confronted with his wrongdoing. Jesus is specific: "Show him his fault." If he is not confronted, then this sin will certainly be repeated again. Someone else will be swindled. The goal here is to force him to deal with it so that it will not be repeated. If Sam claims to be a Christian, then he must live a life consistent with that confession.

Secondly, there are some who would advise Bob to just pray about it and "leave the matter in the hands of God" or to pray for wisdom about what to do. Certainly Bob is to pray about it, and he is to place his trust in God regarding this situation. Indeed, Bob should pray for wisdom on how to approach Sam, that the Lord will help him to be gentle, yet firm, to express just the right words when speaking to Sam. But there is no need to pray for wisdom on what to do, for the Bible has already said what to do. That part is clear, and to substitute prayer for obedience is itself a contradiction of faith. Thirdly, Jesus did not instruct us to go and tell others. Nor did He tell us to tell the pastor and the elders. Nor to raise it up as a prayer request at the next home Bible study.

This process in Matthew 18 is comprised of several stages, and each stage has a purpose designed to achieve the desired outcome. The first stage, spoken here by Jesus in verse 15, is one that is private. It is to be “just between the two of you.”

All sorts of problems arise if Bob decides to go around bad-mouthing Sam behind his back. If someone has wronged you, do not say anything about it to anyone until you first meet with the offender. The goal is to resolve the situation, not to put others down or punish them. It has been our experience that problems between two people are almost always resolved in this first stage when things are done “by the book”.

So, Bob sits down with Sam and lovingly confronts him. “I bought this car based on your assurance that it had never been wrecked. I believe you owe me an explanation. And, I want to return the car for a full refund.” Bob deals with the situation factually, listing the specific offense and proposing a specific remedy. His goal is not to give Sam a piece of his mind, to get his anger off his chest, but to point out his wrongdoing and get it resolved both for his sake and for Sam's.

Jesus instructs that if he listens to you (in other words, if he takes to heart what you said and repents) then you have won your brother over. The matter would therefore be resolved. All would be over, nice and clean. No one else got involved. No gossip and rumors. It is handled privately, between two people. The situation, though embarrassing for Sam, should serve as a deterrent for any future temptations to swindle others.

B. Step 2

But what if that is not the outcome? What if Sam denies any wrongdoing? What if he digs his heels in and refuses to return Bob's money? What then does Bob do? We must move into the second stage as shown in verse 16.

BUT IF HE WILL NOT LISTEN, TAKE ONE OR TWO OTHERS ALONG, SO THAT 'EVERY MATTER MAY BE ESTABLISHED BY THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES.

Here Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 16, a verse from the Old Testament Law that deals with settling disputes between two people. The number of people now involved in resolving the offense increases from two to four or five. But notice that it is still contained within a very small circle, on a “need-to-know” basis. Bob is not to run around telling others of how Sam ripped him off and is refusing to make it right. Again, this only complicates the process and hinders the goal.

Two or three others, carefully chosen, are now to go meet with Bob and Sam, not necessarily for the purpose of teaming up against Sam, or even mediating between Bob and Sam, but primarily for the purpose of establishing the facts. Those called in should have firsthand information and should be individuals respected by both Bob and Sam. They need to be wise and objective in approaching the situation and asking the right questions to get to the truth. It is possible that Sam is telling the truth and that there is a good explanation for what Bob has discovered.

Suppose Bob returns to meet with Sam, this time with Ed, a friend who was there when Sam sold the car to Bob, and Henry, an elder in the church. The repair records at a local body shop confirm that the car was wrecked and fixed, and that Sam knew this and even paid for it. Ed recalls the conversation and confirms that Sam lied to Bob. Henry, the elder, facilitates the meeting, making sure that emotions don't get out of hand and that each party is given an opportunity to make his case.

Eventually, it becomes clear that Sam did swindle Bob. Now that the facts are established, Sam has the choice either to admit his wrongdoing and make it right, or blow everyone off and do nothing. Henry reminds Sam of his obligation to be Christ-like in his business dealings and urges him to confess his sin, repent, seek forgiveness from Bob, and refund his money.

Occasionally the offending party will not necessarily dispute the facts, he just won't own up to his wrongdoing and make it right. The need to bring in two or three others becomes necessary, therefore, to turn up the heat and exhort him to do the right thing.

Very seldom is there a need to go any further. Most of the time disputes and offenses can be resolved within this second stage. But if a resolution is not achieved, then Jesus lays out before us a third step. Though it is difficult, He expects us to take it.

C. Step 3

If Sam becomes stubborn and refuses to admit his wrongdoing and make it right, then Sam has a serious problem that must be confronted in a serious way. The issue now is not even so much the shady business deal--though that is a problem--but Sam's unwillingness to make it right; it is Sam's defiance. Ultimately, it is his claiming to be a follower of Christ, yet acting and behaving in a way that contradicts his claim. This not only spoils his own personal testimony, but damages the testimony of the church to which he belongs.

Therefore, we follow the instructions in verse 17:

IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN TO THEM, TELL IT TO THE CHURCH...

In step three, the circle of people involved increases from four or five individuals to the whole church body. Everyone is now asked to join in the effort of pleading with Sam and warning him in love.

Importantly, the purpose of informing the entire church is not to provide opportunities for gossip. Instead, the purpose is to restore Sam, as indicated later in verse 17:

AND IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH...

The church is to speak to him, not about him.

Jesus does not give us the details of how exactly the church is to be informed nor how each member should approach Sam. There are a variety of ways this could be accomplished.

One method is to have each person write Sam a personal letter. The tone of such a letter would not be judgmental and mean, but sobering and serious, one of pleading with him to repent from his defiance. If Sam had been a Sunday School teacher, perhaps a person might want to say how much he/she had appreciated his teachings and example, but is now disappointed to see his unwillingness to embrace those same teachings for himself.

The elders could also call for a day of fasting and provide direction on how to pray for Sam's repentance. There are a variety of measures that could be taken, all with the goal of restoration. When done in love and with a true desire for restoration, this third step should prove to be very effective. In fact, the simple threat of it alone should be quite a compelling motivator for anyone caught up in sin.

D. Step 4

The three steps here, articulated in verses 15, 16, and the first half of 17 are what we might call the "warning stages" of restoration. If Sam owns up to his wrongdoing and makes things right, the process is over. However, if he does not repent, he is acting as a pagan (i.e., a non-Christian) and the church will be forced to treat him as such.

The last half of verse 17 is clear:

**AND IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH, TREAT HIM AS YOU WOULD
A PAGAN OR A TAX COLLECTOR.**

If he remains resolved in his unwillingness, even to the point that he can ignore the pleadings and appeals of the whole church, then there is nothing more than can be done. The warning stage is over and it must be accepted that the church's responsibility in trying to convince him has been fulfilled. Jesus commands the church to move into the final stage. But even in this, the hope for restoration continues.

In step 4, the offending person is to be expelled from the church. Though this includes excommunication (removal from the membership rolls) it involves something much more. Jesus is calling the church body to show integrity in the way it regards those who are, and are not, members of the community of faith. The logic is as follows.

Since the person is claiming to be a servant of Christ, one of his followers, yet is behaving like he is not, and has now rejected all attempts to persuade him to do so, even refusing the voice of the whole church body itself, then he must be treated like the very person he is living as, "a pagan." His testimony has no credibility. He might think of himself as a Christian and call himself that, but other Christians cannot. They have to show integrity here and not join in the masquerade and further reinforce his own self-deception.

Importantly, the expressions used here in verse 17, "pagan" and "tax collector," are not to be understood as instructing that he be treated with contempt or hatred. He is to be loved but neither regarded nor treated as a believer. Such privileges, especially Christian fellowship with other believers, must now be denied. In this we are not necessarily talking about shunning, although some elements might appear to be similar. It means that we can't do things together that Christians do – pray together, worship together, talk about the Lord together, do Bible studies together and so forth, pretending that all is well when it isn't. With such a person there can be no genuine Christian unity, for there can be no unity without truth, and the guilty party has denied the truth.

For instance, how can you join hands together with him in prayer, thanking God for his grace, when that grace has been openly rejected by his behavior? How can you meet with him for a Bible study when he has declared by his actions that the Bible has no authority in his life?

Does this mean that you can't say "Hi" when you see Sam at Wal-Mart, and ask about the kids and his weekend at the lake? No, it doesn't mean that. Be friendly. Don't turn your back. But don't pretend that all is okay. There should be, even there in Aisle 4 at Wal-Mart, an appeal made. "You know Sam, we really do miss you. You are still in our prayers. Is there anything I can do to help you get out of this sin that has ensnared you? It is not worth losing your church family and your relationship with God over."

What takes place here in step 4 is what might be called a change of jurisdiction. Up to this point, the offender has been under our care, our authority, our oversight. God has expected His church to deal with the situation according to the guidelines He has given us. Now that we have fulfilled all of that, it is time we remove him from under our umbrella and allow God to deal with him directly.

Imagine a police sergeant who is having problems with one of his officers. The sergeant has a handbook on how to deal with such situations. If he goes by the book, working through all the steps, but still has problems, then it is time to turn the officer over to the police chief himself.

Sadly, but necessarily, because the person has refused our warnings, he has, in that, broken fellowship with us. We must now formalize what has already occurred in his own choices.

E. The weight of these steps

As we move on to verse 18, we learn that this decision of excommunication is recognized by God Himself.

**I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, WHATEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH WILL BE BOUND IN
HEAVEN, AND WHATEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH WILL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN.**

While "binding and loosing" has become a charismatic free-for-all expression used to justify all sorts of bizarre practices in today's church, this verse is only properly

understood in its literary and historical context. Verse 18 is making clear that the decisions of the church, when made in line with God's Word, carry divine authority and are honored in heaven. They are binding¹.

Verses 19 and 20 offer further consolation to those faced with the difficulty of having to excommunicate someone.

I TELL YOU THAT IF TWO OF YOU ON EARTH AGREE ABOUT ANYTHING YOU ASK FOR, IT WILL BE DONE FOR YOU BY MY FATHER IN HEAVEN. FOR WHERE TWO OR THREE COME TOGETHER IN MY NAME, THERE AM I WITH THEM.

III. CONDITIONS FOR APPLICATION OF MATTHEW 18

It is natural to wonder, "What sorts of sins would prompt church discipline?" Would someone get rebuked in front of the church for habitual smoking, overeating, or too much TV watching? How far are we going to take this?

Just as abuse exists in the form of not going far enough and never confronting any sin, there is also abuse in the form of going too far and making a big deal out of things that are not deserving. Again, we can go to the Scriptures for direction.

The example given to us in Matthew 18 deals with sinning against other people. Jesus implies that it could be any reason for which another person has been harmed ("If your brother sins against you"). It could be an insult, gossip, slander, a bad business deal, or any number of things. But the New Testament provides other examples of unrepentant sins that demand the same response from the church, and it may be assumed that these sins should be confronted when they become known, whether an offended party makes them known or they become known by some other means.

It is possible that Paul did not necessarily have the Matthew 18 procedure in mind in every case, but these verses are helpful in that they show us the kinds of sins that Paul wants the church to confront. If the offender refuses to repent, as we will see, he is either to be avoided or put outside the church (after appropriate warning is given).

A number of sins are listed in 1 Corinthians 5:

BUT NOW I AM WRITING YOU THAT YOU MUST NOT ASSOCIATE WITH ANYONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF A BROTHER BUT IS SEXUALLY IMMORAL OR GREEDY, AN IDOLATER OR A SLANDERER, A DRUNKARD OR A SWINDLER. WITH SUCH A MAN DO NOT EVEN EAT.

This should not be understood as a complete list. Rather, Paul is simply citing some examples of sins that are of serious nature and would require action if not repented of. At issue, once again, is someone's willingness, or lack thereof, to repent.

In 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul adds that those who are idle and those who disobey apostolic teaching are not to be included in the fellowship of believers. In Rom. 16:7 and Titus 3:10, Paul instructs that those who persist in causing division are to be avoided. In each of these examples Paul gives basically the same command that Jesus does in Matthew 18: Do not have fellowship with the unrepentant person. Paul's purpose is to make certain that the churches do not in any way accommodate someone's claiming to be a believer while refusing to live like one. Yet there is never an eagerness to put someone out of fellowship. Even with a divisive person, Paul commands in Titus 3:10 that he first be given at least two warnings. There is ample opportunity for repentance.

Of course, there are many Scriptures that warn about false doctrine and many commands are given to rid the church of false teachers and false prophets. This, too, is an example of where the steps in Matthew 18 could be implemented.

IV. BIBLICAL CASE STUDY: OBSERVATIONS FROM 1 CORINTHIANS 5

In 1 Corinthians 5 we see a specific situation for which Paul prescribes church discipline. He scolds the church at Corinth for tolerating a member's illicit relationship with his stepmother. This particular sin is so perverse that even the pagans of the day would have considered it morally reprehensible, and it is a situation that the church at Corinth seems to parade as evidence of their liberty in Christ.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 (NIV)

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: a man has his father's wife. [2] And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? [3] Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. [4] When you are assembled in the name of our lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, [5] hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

[6] Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? [7] Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. [8] Therefore let us keep the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

[9] I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- [10] not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. [11] But now I am writing you that you must not associate

with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

[12] What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? [13] God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

We will make seven important observations about this text relating to church discipline:

1. Paul's purpose here is not to lay out a procedure for them to follow. We can assume that they would already be familiar with the procedure that Jesus taught in Matthew 18. It is obvious that he is very agitated that they are letting this immorality continue and seems to be more troubled by that than by the actual incest going on.

Right away, we should notice that Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 make two distinct contributions to the matter of church discipline. We go to Matthew 18 to learn how to do it. We go to 1 Corinthians 5 to learn just how important it is for the church to address sin within its ranks and to see the priority God gives to the purity of the local body.

2. Let us put to rest, once and for all, the most common objection we hear to church discipline. Many are quick to quote two choice words of Jesus: "Judge not." But, Paul is very clear: "I have already passed judgment on the one who did this" (1 Cor. 5:3) and "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?" (1 Cor. 5:12).

We must understand that there are different kinds of judging. Jesus was condemning judging, but not all kinds of judging. His words are not to be understood as an absolute statement. In fact, in John 7:24, He actually commands His opponents to judge rightly.

Furthermore, the Scriptures tell us to exercise discernment in judging the teachings of others and evaluating the doctrines of those who claim to be prophets and teachers. We are also to judge the actions of fellow believers in light of God's Word. Indeed, to obey Christ's instructions in Matthew 18 requires that we judge the person who is in sin to be in the wrong. But, as Jesus warned in Matthew 7, this should not be done hypocritically.

3. It is significant that the actual expelling of the unrepentant offender is not to be done secretly, but during a formal meeting of the members, as seen in the words, "when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:4). It is essential that everyone receive the same facts at the same time to protect the one being expelled from false rumors, speculation, and gossip.

Paul exhorts the body to tell it like it is. Once again, the purpose of frank public disclosure is so everyone can participate in the warning process and so that the hope of restoration may continue on. As stated earlier, it is not public information to be

broadcast to the whole town. It is an in-house matter and one that all are to be aware of and involved in.

4. The command to expel the offender and place him outside the community of believers is repeated no less than four times in this chapter (1 Cor. 5:2, 4-5, 7,13). This emphasis is an indication to us that we cannot flirt with the idea of alternative measures. Often, to maintain peace, church leaders will propose, "Let's not actually expel him, let's keep his name on the membership role. He may still come to worship services but we won't let him teach Sunday School or take communion." There is no biblical warrant for this type of compromise.

Now, if church discipline was primarily punishment we might discuss punishing people according to the seriousness of their offenses. But, as we have noted, church discipline is not punishment; it is restoration. If there is repentance, all is well. If all is well, there is no need for discipline. If, however, there is no repentance, nothing is well. Paul did not give the Corinthian church the option of replacing God's wisdom with their own, nor is this an option for us.

5. The seemingly harsh expression in verse 5, "hand this man over to Satan," refers to the "change of jurisdiction" mentioned here earlier. It is a change of who is now responsible for the offender's restoration. It is no longer the church, but God, who is free to use whatever means He will to work out His purposes, including hardship.

Indeed, when someone is expelled, he is placed in the devil's territory, severed from connection with God's people and the protection offered in the body. In contrast to the gathered community of those who experience the Spirit and power of the Lord Jesus in gifts of edification and loving concern for one another, the unrepentant man in 1 Corinthians 5 is to be put out into the world, transferred from the kingdom of God to the domain of the evil one.

The purpose and hope of this action is that being officially ostracized from the church will cause him such anguish that he will repent and forsake his wicked ways. He is not being turned over to Satan to be destroyed. Rather, it is his sinful nature that is to be destroyed. In other words, the defiance that is causing him to choose the path of sin over the path of life is what is to be overcome and defeated.

It should be noted that there is no implication in this text that the person expelled through church discipline is guaranteed eventually to repent. Still, the hope and prayers are for nothing less.

6. Finally, in verses 6-8 we see that the purpose of removing the offender is to clean out the old yeast so that the church might become a new loaf without yeast. In this case, yeast (or leaven) is a reference to sin and impurity. Not only must we love the offender enough to help him face his sin and repent, but we have an obligation to love the whole church enough to protect it from the spread of wickedness within its ranks.

V. CONCLUSION

We have considered what conditions will initiate the Matthew 18 process, but it needs to be stated that there is only one sin that will result in the removal of someone from fellowship: the refusal to repent.

Jesus commands that if the offender *refuses* to listen to you, take two or three others. If he *refuses* to listen to them, go to the whole church. If he *refuses* to listen even to the church, remove him from your fellowship. It is not the particular sin itself; it is the persistence in it, the refusal to stop it. Again, once there is repentance the process stops. If believers were excommunicated for their sins, even though they repented, who would be left in the church?

Finally, while church discipline is often viewed as mean and unloving, what is truly unloving is the refusal to apply it when needed. It is unloving to God, who instructs us that if we love Him we will obey His commands (Jn. 14:15). It is also unloving to the brother who is caught up in sin, because failing to apply church discipline is saying to him, "We care more about our own comfort and peace than your spiritual well-being. Continue unhindered in the sin that is destroying you." Therefore, we commit ourselves to obeying God's clear instruction and to love as it relates to the restoration process.

¹The expressions "binding" and "loosing" were used by the rabbis of that day when pronouncing judgments upon certain policies and decisions they were faced with. Someone might have queried, "Rabbi, may a man walk his donkey on the Sabbath, not to work, but to exercise?" When a rabbi bound something it meant that he forbade it. When a rabbi loosed something it meant that he permitted it. Jesus draws upon this principle, familiar to those in the original setting, stating that those judgments, pronouncements, and decisions made by his church, when done according to His word, will be acknowledged and honored by God in heaven. Here, we are given assurance that Christ, the true head of the church, will be in our midst, giving us help. Of all the places to find this promise, it is especially comforting to have it here; the Lord promises help in dealing with these sorts of difficult situations.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Who should come to the table and who should not?

I. INTRODUCTION

While the New Testament contains several passages that speak of the Lord's Supper, 1 Cor. 11:17-34 is the only one where the subject is dealt with didactically, that is, where specific instructions are given.

The material presented here was first delivered in a five-part series in 2001 (those tapes are still available). The objective is to summarize those teachings and provide a clear explanation of 1 Cor. 11:17-34. Space will not allow for a detailed exegesis of each sentence of each verse. While that would be useful, it is not required to understand Paul's teaching in this passage. For further study we would recommend Gordon Fee's commentary on 1 Corinthians. His research on the historical background of the city of Corinth and the particular issues in its church are especially helpful.

Simply put, the goal of this material is to resolve any confusion about who should go to the table and who should not.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

[17] 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!

[23] 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.

[27] 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.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CORINTHIAN SITUATION

Historical and Cultural Context

1. When we examine all the information we have about the practice of the Lord's Supper in the early church, we see that it was originally eaten in conjunction with a larger meal. This is the only way to explain verses 20, 21, and 34. Other passages in the New Testament that support this include Matt. 26:26, Acts 2:42-46, Acts 20:7, and Jude 12. It was not merely a little wafer and an oversized thimble. Rather, it was a full meal that included bread and wine.

The 1 Corinthians 11 passage alone informs us that whatever was served could satisfy one's hunger. In fact, it could actually satisfy too much. Thus, the rebukes about drunkenness and gluttony.

2. We also know that the early church met in homes. Those with big enough homes to accommodate everyone were the wealthier members.

3. Also, from the information we have about the customs of that day, we know that the person who offered his home for these meetings and meals would most likely be the one responsible for providing the meal as well (though this may not have been the case with every meal). Perhaps the host of the home church didn't provide all the food, but he would have most likely provided the main dish. At the very least, this expense would have been shared among those members who had the means to provide.

4. Archeology has shown us that the dining room in such homes would scarcely accommodate many guests. Even the wealthy would have had limited space. The majority of the church members, therefore, would eat in the courtyard, which would still seat only about 30 to 50 guests on average. A modern image comes to mind of tables and chairs being set up on the back porch, in the garage, the driveway, the pole barn, and so forth.

5. Finally, and significantly, the city of Corinth itself was a class-conscious society. The rich socialized with the rich and the poor with the poor. No one thought anything about it. Therefore, it would have been natural for the host to invite those of his own class into the dining room while those of lower status ate outside. It was the "proper" and customary way to do things in a city that was much more Roman than Jewish.

In summary, homes and meals were provided by the wealthy. Homes were limited in space. The wealthy ate with the wealthy inside, while the others ate separately outside, or waited until the wealthy were finished. These facts help us understand Paul's rebuke and his instructions.

Identifying the Offense

Basically, there is one abuse here at Corinth, but it moves in two directions: horizontally and vertically. It is horizontal in the sense that it humiliated others in the church, namely the poor. The offense was also vertical because it showed contempt toward Christ's death, as will be explained later.

In verse 22, Paul condemns the Corinthians for observing the Lord's Supper in a manner that despised God's church and humiliated the poor. Because they were sinning against each other, they were also sinning against the One who had joined them together. They were showing contempt for that which was the basis for their unity, namely, the death of their Savior.

Paul complains in verse 21, "Each one goes ahead with his own meal." The words "his own meal" emphasize that this was not what it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be a community meal, all sharing equally together. Instead, because of this division between the "haves" and "have nots," some remained hungry, while others helped themselves.

The Lord's Supper was intended to be a simple common meal in which everyone shared equally for the purpose of remembering and proclaiming the Lord's death. This is why Paul says in verse 20, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat." In other words, they had ruined it to the point that it wasn't even the Lord's Supper at all. They put the emphasis on eating and not on remembering.

It is important to realize that Paul does not rebuke the wealthy for being wealthy, nor does he try to eliminate the social distinctions. Instead, he forbids them from bringing those distinctions to the common meal of the believers where Christ has made them all one, signified by their all eating "one loaf."

In the previous chapter, Paul emphasized that this is one meal. One loaf. One cup. It was not, and is not now, supposed to be "one's own meal."

By going first and eating the privileged portions (in front of the less fortunate) the rich were despising the church by humiliating those who were their brothers and one with them in Christ. In this, the gospel itself was being despised— a gospel that proclaims that all who are in Christ are brothers and sisters of equal standing.

When the church meets, as one body in Christ, to eat from one loaf and give a visible witness to our unity, it is specifically to proclaim Christ's death and remember what he did for us. Therefore, its significance is not in the food itself, but that which the food symbolizes.

When we show equal concern for each other in a way that befuddles the world, we proclaim Christ's death, because it is Christ's death that has made us one. Nothing but Christ's death can explain our bond of love. When we don't act like a community of love, we proclaim the opposite message: that Christ's death means nothing, accomplished nothing, and is worth nothing, because, by our worldly behavior, all can see that it changed nothing.

Because Christ loves us, we love him. And because we love him, we love those he loves. We love each other. The infinite love enjoyed within the Trinity from eternity past is now a love that we literally participate in. It is this love that unites us, and this love works in us because of Christ's death. Had Jesus not died, there would be no reason for us to come together in such a spirit of oneness.

So when we live and move in that love, we testify to the remarkable quality of Christ's death to bring people together in an unexplainable bond. The Corinthians had failed to do this. By humiliating the poor and despising God's church, they committed the offense of failing to proclaim Christ's death.

An Unworthy Manner

Almost everyone has had the experience of not feeling worthy to take communion. Maybe you have lost your temper with a family member on the way to church. Maybe you hadn't prayed or studied the Bible much throughout the week. Maybe you gave in to some old temptations. Then Sunday rolls around and you read in 1 Cor. 11:28 that one should examine himself before participating in the Lord's Supper. Should you take communion or not?

Paul's command in verse 28, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks the cup," has caused many Christians to refrain from partaking of the Lord's Supper. There is a sense that one must pass a personal spiritual inventory test.

We go on to read about eating and drinking judgment on oneself and even getting sick and perhaps dying. Therefore, Christians are often told to sit still for a moment and do some quiet introspection and analyze their walk with God to determine whether they are worthy to go to the table or not.

Verse 27 warns against eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner." This also has led some to think that Paul is referring to one's personal worthiness. The King James Version (which many of us grew up with) seems to suggest this by using the word "unworthily." However, Paul cannot possibly be referring to one's personal worthiness because, in fact, none of us is worthy. Rather, we are all equally unworthy. And that is the beautiful irony of this. This is a table that symbolizes God's grace: what he did for us in spite of our unworthiness.

In verse 26, Paul says that the Lord's Supper is a proclamation about Jesus and his death. It is not a proclamation of anything to do with me, my walk with God, my worthiness to partake, or my self-examination. None of that. It is a statement about Him.

Let's look more closely at a phrase that is often misunderstood and misapplied. Verse 27 reads, "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." Unfortunately, the KJV and NLT both use the adverb "unworthily." But this is not the best word and it is even somewhat misleading. It is not the *person* who partakes of the Lord's Supper who is unworthy. Instead, it is the manner. It is the way in which the person partakes that is unworthy.

In fact, everyone is equally worthy (rather, equally *unworthy*). Even the rich who despised and humiliated the poor are no more unworthy than the poor they despised. Again, the Lord's Supper is not a proclamation about me, but about Jesus.

The question here is simply this: Does the manner in which the Lord's Supper is observed result in a remembering and proclaiming of the Lord's death, or not? If there is disunity or division then it is not.

Sinning Against the Body and Blood

How then does one become guilty of "sinning against the body and blood of the Lord"? We should first note that the expression "body and blood of the Lord" is simply a reference to the death of Jesus. Paul is not trying to give any unusual or special significance to the bread and wine as though there is something especially sacred or mystical about them. They are simply symbols that represent Christ's body and blood. His concern is how the participants "remember" Christ through the bread and wine, not the bread and wine itself.

In the preceding verses, Paul quotes Jesus' expressions "body" and "blood," given in reference to his death in establishing the new covenant. So Paul simply hooks into Christ's own language as he tries to convey just how serious their sin is. The sin is a sin against Christ himself, for it is a corruption of how his death is to be proclaimed.

The words "sinning against" are not in the original language and have been added by some translators to make it read more smoothly. Fortunately, some translations, like the New American Standard and the King James do not add these words, and they simply read: "...whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." The key word here is "guilty." In the Greek, that word is actually a technical legal term used to express liability. It literally means, "will have to answer for."

So, this sentence could actually read something like, "Therefore, whoever participates in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner will share in the liability of Christ's death." In other words, when one displays such great disrespect as this, he places himself under the same liability as those responsible for that death in the first place. He is no better off than Judas who betrayed Jesus, nor Pilate who sentenced Him, nor those who conspired against Him. He who participates in an unworthy manner has shown the same contempt for Christ.

Coming to the table with disunity and divisions is not only a sin against those in the church but is also a sin against the head of that church, Jesus. As Paul said earlier to the Corinthians in 8:12, if you sin against your brother, you sin against Christ.

So here is a question every person and every church must ask: Is the significance of our Savior's death exalted, or ignored? And not just at the table, but in everything the church does? To repeat, when we don't act like a community of love, we proclaim that Christ's death means nothing, accomplished nothing, and is worth nothing, because truly, it changed nothing.

Examining Oneself

Paul adds in verse 28, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup." These words are not intended to be understood as a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the table. It is, rather, a call to repentance, a call to unity, a call to remember that we, the church, are one body in Christ. It is a call to renounce those things that would impede and hinder such unity or, more specifically, anything that would injure a true proclamation of what has been accomplished in Christ's death.

Our behavior is not to contradict the very gospel we proclaim. Before we participate in the Lord's Supper, we should check our attitudes toward the church body itself, and consider how we treat others, and see if we are showing equal concern to each other.

We must then accept the challenge to repent of anything that would injure the unity of the body, be it unforgiveness, or pride, or selfishness, or prejudice, or arrogance, or gossip, or backbiting.

This table reminds me that Christ has extended grace to me. Do I, likewise, extend grace to others? If not, then I am to do so. Importantly, if the self-examination reveals sin, the solution is repentance, not abstaining from the Lord's Supper. Paul does not tell them, "Stay away from the table."

Recognizing the Body

Paul warns in verse 29, "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." The key to avoiding the confusion that has long surrounded this verse is answering the question: What body? Is Paul referring to the physical flesh of Jesus or the church body of believers?

First, consider the context of the passage. Paul's consistent concern is the body of believers, not simply in 11:17-34 but throughout the chapter and, indeed, the entire letter.

In addition, the prepositional phrase "of the Lord" found in the NIV, is not in the original language. It should simply read, "the body." It should be noted that each time Paul uses the expression "the body," that expression by itself, without the phrase "of the Lord" and

without any reference to the blood (as is the case here), he always has the church body of believers in mind, not Christ's physical flesh.

Judgment

The essence of verse 29 is basically this: "For anyone who participates in the Lord's supper, not being mindful of the intended unity of the church, eats and drinks judgment on himself."

"Not being mindful" means failing to recognize the significance of this unity. It is failing to honor each other in genuine fellowship, not appreciating what Christ did to secure this unity.

The section begins with Paul scolding the Corinthians in verse 22 for despising the church. Now, in verse 29 he tells them what to do about it: discern the church. In fact, on the heels of this passage, in the next chapter, Paul spends considerable effort driving home this very point, that the church is the body of Christ.

In verse 30, we see that the judgment Paul warns of in verse 29 has already begun in their midst. Paul steps into a prophetic role and, by the Spirit, observes a divine cause for some of the illnesses and deaths among them.

We must be careful about trying to impose a universal application here. The text does not teach that anyone, anywhere, at any time, who partakes of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner will get sick and might even die (nor should we assume such judgment cannot occur). Paul is simply commenting on their situation. He is providing an explanation for them.

Paul also offers the solution in verse 31: "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment." If the Corinthians had been judging (i.e., examining) themselves they would have honored the intent of the Lord's Supper by proclaiming Christ's death through their love for each other. Then such judgments would not have fallen upon them. But the judgments that did come were for their good, not to punish them with God's wrath but to wake them up, as Paul explains in the next verse.

The remedy is quite plain and simple: Wait for each other. And if you are hungry, eat at home first. Once again, it is not, "Don't go to the table." *Do* go to the table, but do so rightly (i.e., in a worthy manner). The expression "wait for each other" is a bit difficult to translate and could very well mean "welcome each other" or even "receive each other." Either of those possibilities would fit the context. The bottom line is this: They are to have equal concern for each other (an important subject to which Paul devotes much of the next chapter).

III. CONCLUSION

Who should come to the table? Simply stated, all believers. How should they come? In a worthy manner, that is, recognizing that Christ's death means something, for it has changed our lives, especially in the way we relate to others.