

Corrections from Corinthians

Franklin Church of Christ
Edwin Crozier
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Introduction:

We often say that studying God's word is the same as studying anything else. In the sense that grammar is grammar, logic is logic and deduction is deduction no matter which field we are considering, that is true. However, there is a sense in which Bible study is different than many other fields. For instance, when you took Algebra and Geometry in high school, did your teacher show you a list of numbers and shapes say, "Here are the numbers and shapes; you need to study them on your own and figure out what Algebra and Geometry are"? When you took Chemistry or Physics did your teachers hand you some elements and some objects and say, "Here are the elements and some objects; you need to study these on your own and figure out what Chemistry and Physics are"? Of course not. They laid out for us the rules and principles that those before us had learned and we were simply supposed to learn that ourselves. Granted, if we became experts in the field, some times we might back up and redo experiments or we might study what no one has yet learned in order to develop more, but we do not expect everyone who dabbles in these disciplines to study it all on their own to figure out what they are supposed to believe, think and practice about Algebra, Geometry, Chemistry or Physics. Yet, that is exactly what we do with the Scriptures. In fact, that is exactly what we must do. Yes, we need teachers to give guidance and direction, but we must always remember that truth comes from God and His word. Men can get it wrong. Thus, each of us must do our best to show ourselves approved workers by rightly handling the word ourselves (**II Timothy 2:15**). We cannot simply rely on what some other person has studied. Nor can we set ourselves up as the premier authorities to whom everyone should simply listen. We must study on our own and we must encourage everyone else and each new generation to study that we may all have our own faith.

This, however, has its own set of problems. Namely, as each new generation goes back to question what they have been taught, studying the Bible for ourselves (as we should), we can make some mistakes. It is interesting to me how mistakes can be brought in by a few but be so aggressively pushed that whole sections of Christians buy into them. For some time, I have noticed some mistakes that seemingly entire groups of Christians are buying into despite what I see as the clear message of Scripture. I have wanted to talk with you about them for some time. Our recent reading together through **I Corinthians** provides some correction on several of these issues and I simply want to take this time to turn our attention away from the popular, vogue positions of the present generation and focus us back on what the Scripture actually shows. We will be looking at common mistakes put forward today in the area of the Lord's Supper, the congregational assembly and the collection.

Discussion:

- I. Corrections about the Lord's Supper
 - A. Today, it is becoming vogue and popular to claim that the first century churches ate the Lord's Supper as an actual meal or as part of a meal. Perhaps this mistake comes from the fact that it is called a "supper." Perhaps it comes from the fact that when Jesus instituted the Supper, He did so in connection with a meal. Perhaps it comes from our modern infatuation with eating. For whatever reason, it is becoming more and more popular to claim the first century churches gathered for non-formal get-togethers to eat and in the middle of such fraternizing participated in meal size portions of wine and bread. Then add to that the concept that these disciples sat around their tables eating the bread and drinking the wine as a meal and having tableside conversation about what Jesus, His life and His death meant to them. When these pictures are given, they seem amazing. They sound meaningful. They appear insightful. Their novelty provides great emotion and feeling causing some to believe it truly is spiritual. The only problem with these pictures is they just aren't biblical.
 - B. The only time we actually see any New Testament church taking the Supper as a meal or in conjunction with a meal is in **I Corinthians 11** and there it is rebuked. But before we address the text we read this week, let's back up to the institution of the Supper. Many make a very common mistake as they look at the institution of the Supper in passages such as **Matthew 26:26-29**. The disciples were in fact eating a very special meal together. They were eating the Passover that memorialized the Israelite escape from Egyptian bondage following the 10 plagues. I can somewhat understand why some jump from this to say we can or should take the

Supper as a meal or as part of a bigger meal. However, that is a jump; it is not what follows from the text.

1. Jesus did not establish His Supper as part of a common meal. The Passover was anything but common. It was not merely a time of saints gathering for a good time to “fellowship”. It was not the saints just getting together to eat. It was itself a God ordained memorial with special emblems and instructions for preparation and eating. Thus, if we want to use that meal as a demonstration that our Lord’s Supper is part of a bigger meal, we need to make it part of the bigger meal Jesus was eating. We need to make it part of the Passover. However, we understand those Old Testament feasts are no longer bound on us. Jesus was not adding something to the Passover observance that we should follow. He was providing a new memorial for Christians.
 2. When Jesus instituted the Supper, He did not institute a memorial in the form of an actual meal that would do anything for hunger. Keep in mind that Jesus and His disciples were already eating their meal, a meal proscribed for them by the Law. They did not eat a second meal. Further, look at the descriptions given. In **Matthew 26:26**, Jesus took bread and broke it, dividing one loaf among 13 men. I imagine these portions were larger than the traditional pinch many of us take today. However, I have yet to meet the grown man who would tell you 1/13 of a loaf of bread would equal a meal for him or assuage his hunger. Notice in **Luke 22:17**, Jesus took a cup of the fruit of the vine and had the disciples divide it up among themselves (thus demonstrating for certain that we do not all have to drink from the same container). He did not send around a pitcher or a jar and then send it around again and again. He sent around a cup that they divided up among themselves. Again, it was likely more than the thimble-sized cups most congregations today use, but it was not a meal sized portion designed to be drunk as the refreshment for a meal.
 3. Finally, regarding the tableside conversation we should note that there is no discussion here. Jesus didn’t ask the disciples to share with Him what this meant to them. He simply directed their minds to the emblems and what they to mean and then told them to partake accordingly.
- C. Add to this picture of the establishment what we see in **I Corinthians 11:20-34** and the correction, to me, is complete. The church at Corinth was committing two violations with the Supper. The first is demonstrated in the contrast of **I Corinthians 11:20-21**. The people were not gathering to eat the Lord’s Supper. Rather, each one was trying to get his own supper. That is, instead of participating in a memorial, they were trying to get their own meal. Their second problem was that even in that meal they were demonstrating their overt selfishness as those who got their first were indulging themselves while those who got their late had nothing to eat. To get the point, we need to see Paul’s solution.
1. Paul did not provide directives for how to have a peaceful common meal. He did not direct portion size. He did not tell folks to only eat enough to assuage their hunger and make sure everybody got some. He did not tell them they needed to bring more food to make sure everyone had enough.
 2. Instead, he began his exhortation and ended it with the same directive. “Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?” (**I Corinthians 11:22**, ESV). “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home” (**I Corinthians 11:34**, ESV). Both directives make the same point. The Lord’s Supper is not a meal to assuage hunger. If they were hungry, they were to eat at home. He didn’t tell them, as some claim, that if they were just really, really starving eat something at home to tide them over so they won’t pig out and leave someone else hungry. He said, if you are hungry eat at home.
 3. The Lord’s Supper was not like the Passover meal. The Passover was a meal. It would assuage hunger. If you ate at home before coming together with your greater family to eat the Passover, you wouldn’t be able to do what God wanted. But that is not the case with the Lord’s Supper. You could eat your meal at home. You could come and not be hungry at all and still participate in the Lord’s Supper because it was not a proscribed meal. Certainly, God did not proscribe the portion size. If you want to eat a large piece of unleavened bread and drink a large cup of fruit of the vine, that is fine. But please do not act as though there is some Biblical precedent for making the Supper a meal or even part of a greater meal.

4. Further, note that throughout the chapter it is demonstrated to be a memorial, not a discussion. The Supper itself is a proclamation but is not demonstrated as a time where we take the supper and offer a different proclamation. Certainly, at any time we want, as a congregation we can have someone talk about the Lord's Death. Certainly, at any time we want we can sing about His death. Having talks or songs to prepare our minds for the Supper is scriptural but we need to understand those talks aren't the Supper themselves. The Supper is taking the emblems and using them to focus each of us on Christ's body, discerning His body. Anything else is preamble or additional to the supper. Certainly, we might even have someone talk to us while we are partaking or even sing while partaking, but not because we have gone to the New Testament and read examples of that happening the way some today want to make it seem. The purpose of the Supper is for us to remember the Lord's death, not relate our own feelings. It is for us to examine ourselves, not exhort others. It is for us to discern the body, not discuss the Lord. That is what we see exemplified and directed.

II. Corrections about the assemblies

- A. Today, it is becoming vogue and popular to claim that the congregational assemblies of the New Testament churches were very casual and informal. We are told that what they had was really more like a discussion. We are often given the picture that it is just like having a group of people come into my home as we all sit around the living room and talk back and forth. The concept of "decently and in order" (**I Corinthians 14:40**) is often laughed at and kicked aside. This is usually based on the multiple speakers we see mentioned in **I Corinthians 14**. However, I suggest we read **I Corinthians 14** and see there is nothing there that resembles a back and forth, give and take, discussion based gathering.
- B. First, we must be honest and recognize that **I Corinthians 14** does provide a picture of more participants than we often have. **I Corinthians 14:26** speaks of each one having a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. **I Corinthians 14:27** has two or three tongue speakers addressing the congregation and then their respective interpreters. **I Corinthians 14:29** has two or three prophets speaking. Then **I Corinthians 14:31** says they could all prophesy one at a time. Thus as many prophets as were in the congregation, if they had a message, could address the congregation. We must be honest and admit the assembly described in **I Corinthians 14** has more participants than our usual song leader, preacher, two prayers and a Lord's Supper talk.
- C. Having said that, we must not miss **I Corinthians 14:40**. Even with the greater number of participants, they were supposed to address the congregation in a decent order. Two were not supposed to try to over talk each other. If one was speaking in a tongue, the others were to keep silent. If one received a prophecy, the others were to keep silent. This wasn't just a group of Christians in someone's home having a spiritual get together. This was not just some time for spiritual conversation back and forth. This was a time when those with a God given message addressed the congregation in turn and in an orderly fashion. As we relate that to our situation today, we recognize the general assembly of the church is not a place where Christians gather to talk back and forth, but a place in which Christians are edified and built up by those who have a message to give. It is not a time for anyone who has any idea pop into his head to jump up and share. It is a time for decent and orderly conduct. If we want to give the floor to more than one speaker, that is fine, but we must do so in turns allowing the congregation to direct their attention to each speaker in His turn.
- D. This is not to say there weren't ever assemblies that didn't have back and forth. **Acts 15:22** demonstrates the whole church was assembled during this discussion and debate (**Acts 15:7**). It is even possible that the assembly had a time for questions to be asked of those who had spoken (**I Corinthians 14:35**), though I am not sure that a restriction on the sisters from asking questions in the assembly is a demonstration that everyone else was asking questions. My point is simply that some people today act like they have figured out the assemblies in the first century were conducted in a wholly different manner from today. They act as if it was just a small number of disciples gathered together for a casual, informal discussion and that is just not the picture presented here. Rather, apart from the involvement of miraculous gifts, **I Corinthians 14** presents a picture very much like our modern day assemblies. The church is gathered, some

will lead us in songs, some will offer prayers, some will address the assembly with messages from God. That is what we are doing tonight and we are doing it in the same manner we see presented in **I Corinthians 14**.

III. Corrections about the collection

- A. Today, it is becoming hip and cool to essentially dismiss the pattern of **I Corinthians 16:1-2**. The general point made is this was just one mere example of the myriad ways these early Christians could have raised their money. Paul was not giving them a pattern, but giving them advice. His real point is that we need to merely take up collections for the work we are going to do in whatever way is convenient and efficient. The other modern day vogue interpretation is that the Corinthians were simply setting aside their contribution individually in their own special spot so that when Paul arrived they would give him the money.
- B. I must admit that this passage does not command the congregation to take up a collection. This is not a pattern that says no matter what, if we are gathered on Sunday one of the things we have to do is have a collection. Rather, it demonstrates that when the congregation is going to pay for something and needs to raise funds, that it does so through free will offerings of its members. I believe it is true that if the congregation and brotherhood had no financial needs then we are not here commanded to have a collection anyway. If there were no preachers that needed supporting, no brethren in any need anywhere, no work that needed financial backing, then a congregation might forego the collection. But so long as the congregation has financial needs, this passage does provide the authorization for how to pay for it. But is this a pattern for all congregations or was it merely the convenient and efficient way for them and we can do whatever we want?
- C. First, we need to understand biblical authority. One question we ask is can we find any other passage that provides any other example, statement or logical inference that tells us some other means was authorized? Without Biblical authority to fund our work in some other way, we recognize that this passage provides the only means authorized. That alone should let us know we are limited to what is done here. However, there are more indicators in this passage.
- D. In **I Corinthians 16:1**, Paul points out that this is not merely his advice to Corinth, but he gave the exact same directive to the congregations in Galatia as well. In other words, this wasn't just friendly advice for Corinth, but was the same pattern Paul taught everywhere. Any congregation that asked how they were supposed to provide for their financial needs would be given this same picture. Take up a collection on the first day of every week.
- E. Further, in **I Corinthians 16:1**, Paul did not advise them but "directed" them. The Greek word here is "diatasso" which means to appoint, give order or even to command. The same word is used in **Acts 24:23** there it is translated "command" (KJV) or "give orders" (ESV). This was not Paul's kind and friendly advice that they could dispense with if they decided something else was more convenient. This was Paul's order to them as an inspired apostle directing them with God's pattern.
- F. Please, recognize this. The Corinthians were every bit as intelligent as we were. If Paul believed that it didn't matter how or when they took up the collection and was only interested in them doing it in a convenient and efficient way, why didn't he just say that? Why didn't he say, "Now concerning the collection for the saints; it doesn't matter how you do that just pick out a convenient and efficient way"? Instead he said, "I give you orders to do it this way..." That means if we were asking him how to take care of our congregation's work today, he would give us the same direction and orders.
- G. Finally, please note in **I Corinthians 16:2** that the purpose for Paul's direction was so there would be no collection when he came. He did not want to have to gather the people together to take up a collection when he got there. He wanted it already together in one place. This passage is not remotely about individual Christians taking their daily earnings and setting aside a special portion of it in their special collection cookie jar on Sundays and then having a big collection when Paul arrived in town. Think about how silly that makes the direction of the passage. Considering the most common way folks were paid in the first century was a day's wages for a day's work, to have any money on Sunday, they would have to set aside a portion every day. Thus, they are already setting aside a portion every day but then on Sunday they have to move what they set aside each day into a special set aside spot. It is as if each day they

what they set aside each day into a special set aside spot. It is as if each day they set aside a certain amount under their pillow, but then on Sunday they pull it out from under the pillow and move it into their special Sunday set aside cookie jar. That makes no sense whatsoever. Instead, the people were setting aside their individual money as they made it and taking it with them to the Sunday assembly in which they took up a collection and held the money in a treasury, if you will, until Paul arrived.

- H. The fact is, they were doing exactly what we have done to follow their pattern. When there was a financial need present, pressing or on the horizon, they took up a collection in their assemblies so that when the need was immediate, they didn't have to take up a collection but had the money together already to use. That is what they did. That is what Paul ordered them to do and that is what we must do.

Conclusion:

Here is the key we must understand. I'm not saying that everything we do is exactly right. There may well be things we are doing that are not really authorized. There may well be things we don't do that aren't authorized. There may well be other authorized ways to do some of the things we already do. We should not be afraid to question and go back to the Scripture to make sure we are doing what is right. We must each study for ourselves and learn what God says not just what some man interprets God to be saying. We need to discuss and study these things together. But I hope in our journey to study and learn for ourselves that we don't get so enamored with coming up with something new that we swallow hook, line and sinker some points and issues that sound good on the surface but just aren't biblical. Let's us always give our best to show ourselves approved workers who handle the Word accurately (**II Timothy 2:15**).