

Meetings of the Church

Introduction

Two central passages concerning the meetings of the church are found in 1 Cor 11 and 14. These passages are remarkable because they are the only two places in all of Paul's epistles to use the verb “come together” *συνερχομαι* (11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34; 14:23, 26).

This verb occurs thirty times in the NT, including 16 times in Acts, where it describes

- the assembling of the disciples with the Lord after his resurrection in 1:6;
- the gathering in the home of Cornelius to hear Peter, in 10:27;
- the assembling of Jewish women by the river in Philippi for prayer, in 16:13;
- the assembling in the theater in Ephesus, in 19:32;
- the assembling of the Sanhedrin to hear Paul, in 22:30;
- the assembling of the Jews of Rome to hear Paul, in 28:17.
- and seven times in these chapters.

But the verb appears nowhere else in Paul. So it is right that we should focus our attention here.

At the same time, we should note that this is not the most common word used to describe the gathering of the church. That word is *συναγω*. It is even rarer in Paul, appearing only in 1 Cor 5:4. But it is the word with stronger associations with the church:

- The Lord used it in Matt 18:20 to describe “two or three gathered unto my name.”
- It is what the church did in Acts 20:7 on the first day of the week.
- It is regularly used in the LXX, alongside *εκκλησια*, to describe gatherings of God's people, while *συνερχομαι* is much rarer and has no clear Hebrew reflex. The Hebrew background of *συναγω* is seen in the derivative noun *συναγωγη* “synagogue.”

So these chapters describe Christians gathered. The choice of verb allows Paul to condemn some of what they are doing in certain meetings of the church, behavior that might be permissible in other cases where believers gather.

We learned from Acts 2:42 and Heb 10:19-25 that four activities characterized the early church: doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. 1 Cor 11 describes fellowship (in the form of a common meal) and breaking of bread, while 1 Cor 14, with its emphasis on “a psalm, ... a doctrine, ... a tongue, ... a revelation, ... an interpretation” (v. 26), focuses on doctrine and prayer.¹

1 Cor 11:17-34

It's only in v. 17 that Paul begins to talk about the church “come together.” The instruction in the first half of the chapter, concerning women's head covering, is conditioned not on meeting, but on praying

¹ This observation was suggested by Gene Parunak's suggestion to apply the four activities of Acts 2 and Hebrews 10 to each recorded instance of a church meeting in the NT. The meeting in Troas (Acts 20:7-12) explicitly mentions all but prayer, but that would hardly have been omitted.

Meetings in the Early Church

and prophesying. See the headcovering paper on the website for full analysis.

Structurally, we have four sections.

- 17-22 is set off by an inclusio, “I praise you not,” and describes abuses at something called, inappropriately in Paul's view “the Lord's Supper.”
- 27-32 and 33-34 are structurally parallel exhortations.
 - Both begin with the conjunction *οστε* “wherefore.”
 - Both end with a warning of condemnation if they are not heeded.
 - The second begins with a vocative, “my brethren,” which often marks a strong disjunction.
- What remains, 23-26, is a historical account of the institution of the breaking of bread.

The first two paragraphs are narratives, describing things that are happening or have happened. The last two are exhortations, telling the Corinthians what they should do. The first exhortation refers to the second narrative, vv. 23-26, while the second exhortation goes back to the first narrative, in 17-22. The passage is thus a chiasm, giving instruction about two activities in the life of the early church: a common meal (which ought to have served the purpose of fellowship), and the memorial breaking of bread.

To make the correspondence between these clearer, let's unfold the chiasm and consider each pair together.

17-22, Narrative of their “Lord's Supper”

The first paragraph, set off by an inclusio in “I praise you not,” outlines a problem in the church.

17 Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse.--Not all gatherings of the saints are profitable. It's possible for a gathering to do more harm than good, and that was the case in Corinth.

18 For first of all, when ye come together in the church,--The addition of “in the church” or “as a church” to “come together” shows that we are talking about assemblies of the entire church, not just smaller social engagements. Paul distinguishes between their occasional meetings as Christian friends, and meetings as a church.

I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.--We know from 1:10, 11 that there were divisions in the church, based on different doctrinal factions:

10 Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them *which are of the house* of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

The divisions of ch. 1 may have led to the behavior when they came together to eat; or the origin may have been social distinctions similar to those that James notes in another fellowship (2:1-4). Whatever

Meetings in the Early Church

the cause, the sequel shows how this division manifests itself:

21 For in eating every one taketh before *other* his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.

Paul laments any division among true believers, for whatever cause. The purpose of complementary gifts is (1 Cor 12:25)

That there should be no schism [division] in the body; but *that* the members should have the same care one for another.

It is important to keep in mind that Paul is speaking of true believers. As Tom and I were discussing a few weeks ago, the gate to eternal life is tight, and the way narrow, and the vast majority of those who think of themselves as believers may in fact not be. We are not at license to violate the Word of God for the sake of a superficial unity. In fact, one of the remedies for division that Paul prescribes is stronger discipline (ch. 5; 11:27-32). But at the same time, we should deplore schism among believers.

19 ... heresies ...--“Heresy” goes beyond “division,” in implying deliberateness. The word is used in the LXX to describe “freewill offerings,” that is, things offered voluntarily. It doesn't necessarily imply doctrinal aberration, though it is aptly applied to these. We see a progression here: some little thing leads to a difference among people. They get riled up over it, and a division ensues, leading to the formation of parties, each defending its position against the other. At this point, we have a heresy.

Heresies, deliberate divisions among true believers, are abhorrent to the Lord. Paul includes them among the “works of the flesh” in Gal 5:20.

There is a caution here for us in our present discussions. As a church, we are not divided over whether to follow Paul or Cephas, like the Corinthians. Nor are we divided socially: at various times in the past, the Lord has brought impoverished people among us, and we have done pretty well in integrating a wide range of social levels. But there are differences among us with respect to how we should meet, whether we should have one meeting a week or several, whether we should break bread Lord's Day morning or evening, whether we should have a common meal. We are not all of one mind. On this subject, we have not attained to 1 Cor 1:10,

that there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

In reading his exhortation to the Corinthians here, we should be exhorted to seek such unity among ourselves.

19 For there must be also heresies among you,--Division and even heresy are unavoidable. Paul probably has in mind Matt 18:7, where our Lord taught,

Woe unto the world because of offences! for **it must needs be** that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!

Paul has his own explanation of this necessity:

that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.--The Corinthians, like all of us to some degree, were driven by personal pride—pride in the teacher from whom they learned the gospel (ch. 1), pride in their spiritual gifts (ch. 12). Paul reminds them that the ability to lead God's people

Meetings in the Early Church

away from divisions is a sign of someone who is “approved.”

Matthew 5:9 Blessed *are* the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children [sons] of God.

“Approved” has the sense of being shown genuine by testing. The mark of a true child of God is the ability to deal with strife and division. The Lord allows division to arise within the church in order to give his true children a context in which to demonstrate their genuine character.

We might paraphrase: “Your selfishness at what you call the Lord's Supper is leading to a division that poses the threat of hardening into deliberate separation from one another. Yet you are proud of your spiritual ability. Show your ability in taking steps to heal this rift before it grows worse.” Similarly, the challenge for “you who are spiritual” in our present situation is to demonstrate that you are “approved” by working together in loving patience to move from difference, not into division and party spirit, but back into unity.

20 When ye come together therefore into one place.--A resumption of v. 18, “come together as a church.” We are reminded again that the church did gather as a church, in a single place.

... the Lord's supper.--This is the only place that this expression occurs in the Greek Bible. The church apparently gathered for a common meal, which they called “the Lord's Supper.” The “love feasts” of Jude 12 appear to be a similar event. The objective of these meals would have been fellowship, and in particular providing food for the impoverished (cf. v. 22 “them that have not”), but the way the Corinthians were conducting this meal completely vitiated that purpose.

Acts 2:46 mentions common meals in connection with both their temple gatherings and the breaking of bread, but at the same time distinguishes them:

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

“Eat their meat” can no more be identified with “breaking bread” than with “continuing daily.” Their table fellowship enhanced the other two activities, but was distinct from them.

Acts 20:11 also seems to distinguish the breaking of bread from a meal taken in proximity to it:

When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed.

This distinction encourages me to try to avoid calling the breaking of bread, “the Lord's supper.” The two have come to be considered synonymous, but without biblical warrant. If we find “breaking of bread” cumbersome, we might consider another term that Paul uses. In 10:16, he describes the elements in a way that leads to the name “communion”:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

A few verses later, in 10:21, he tells them that it is inconsistent for them to participate in the breaking of bread while eating meat offered to idols:

Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils.

Meetings in the Early Church

This expression originates in Mal 1:7, 12, where it describes the altar. Paul may well have the breaking of bread in mind here, as the memorial of the great sacrifice by which our Lord procured our forgiveness. The parallel in Malachi makes it clear that this term cannot be applied to a common meal.

this is not to eat the Lord's supper. 21 For in eating every one taketh before *other* his own supper:--The verse division is misleading. Note the contrast with v. 21. “You can't call this the Lord's supper; your focus is on your own suppers.” They were sanctifying their common meal with an exalted title, but their attitude did not correspond with the appellation. The focus was not on the Lord, but on themselves.

and one is hungry, and another is drunken.--The food was not shared evenly among the participants.

22 What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?--This statement, along with v. 34, shows that Paul views the common meal as optional. It was not essential that they eat together.

or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not?--Paul joins these clauses in a chiasmic sentence: “the church of God you despise, and shame those who have not.” By doing so, he ties them closely together, and in fact they are different sides of the same offense.

- They despise, look down on, count of no value, “the church of God.” Their conduct when they “come together in the church” shows the value they put (or do not put) on that church, which consists of all the saints.
- The way in which they “despise ... the church” is by putting to shame the poorer brethren, by showing off the fancy food that they bring. “I brought lobster—you only brought sardines.”

What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise *you* not.--The similarity with v. 17 closes out the first paragraph

33-34, Exhortations regarding the Supper

Paul begins each of the exhortation sections with the conjunction $\omega\sigma\tau\epsilon$ “wherefore.” These sections correspond chiasmatically to the two narrative sections. To make this correspondence clear, we are unfolding the chiasm and expounding each exhortation section with the corresponding narrative.

The repetition of the conjunction “wherefore” $\omega\sigma\tau\epsilon$ from v. 27 marks this as a separate section. The two instructions he offers allude directly to vv. 17-22, and show that he is returning chiasmatically to that portion.

33 Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another.--This echoes v. 21, “in eating every one taketh before *other* his own supper.” If you're going to have a common meal, wait for each other.

34 And if any man hunger, let him eat at home;--This echoes v. 22, “What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?” That question now becomes a command: if you're hungry, eat at home.

Some people insist that the memorial should be associated with a regular meal. But one function of regular meals is to satisfy hunger, and here Paul rules out that function for their “Lord's Supper.”

When I was a boy, my parents would often have to go out for a dinner party in connection with my Dad's command of the air station. He would always eat supper at home before he went. When I asked

Meetings in the Early Church

about this, he told me that the purpose of the “dinner party” was not to eat. It was to build relations with others. Paul's instruction constrains even their common meal to a symbolic function, the manifestation of their relation to one another.

that ye come not together unto condemnation.--Each of the exhortations ends with a warning about condemnation. The exhortation about the memorial warns of condemnation resulting from a failure to examine oneself and others. This exhortation warns of condemnation resulting from a selfish approach to the common meal.

And the rest will I set in order when I come.--This was not the only issue that needed attention. But it is the one that the Holy Spirit has chosen to preserve in Scripture for our guidance.

23-26, Narrative of the Breaking of Bread

Having identified the problem, he now moves to correct it by recalling the history of the memorial. “Your conduct at your common meal, which you call the Lord's Supper, is disgraceful. Let's remember what kind of a meal the Lord did command us to celebrate.”

Note how every reference to the bread is matched with one to the cup; every mention of eating is balanced with one of drinking.

23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you,--Paul is not simply repeating what he has heard from the disciples. He is claiming that the Lord independently revealed to him the importance of the breaking of bread. Recall his insistence on the independence of his gospel:

Gal 1:11 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.
12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The “deliver-receive” language is how he emphasizes that something is part of this special revelation:

1 Cor 15:3 For I **delivered** unto you first of all that which I also **received**, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

Here, in fact, he makes explicit that he received this teaching “from the Lord.” At several points, his wording of the event differs from that of Matthew and Mark, who agree closely with one another. Luke does echo Paul's version, and given Paul's claim here, it would appear that Luke has taken up the version that he had often heard Paul repeat.

This note emphasizes to us the importance of what Paul is about to convey. Different apostles had different experiences with the Lord; compare Peter, James, and John with Thomas. But one experience they all shared: the last supper. And the Lord personally assured that though Paul was not there, he understood the urgency of commemorating that event.

23-24, The Bread

That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed—Paul guides our minds back to the eve of the crucifixion. Recall the reference in 10:21 to the communion as “the Lord's table,” which in Mal 1:7, 12 designates the sacrificial altar. All of our Lord's life is worthy of our attention, but he specifically reminded Paul, in a personal revelation, of the surpassing importance of this one night and

Meetings in the Early Church

the memorial elements.

the Lord Jesus ... took bread: 24 And when he had given thanks,--Matthew and Mark simply say that he “blessed” the bread. Paul, and Luke following him, remind us that he gave thanks.

How remarkable that he could thank the Father for the bread, considering the symbolism that he is about to articulate. So devoted was he to doing the Father's will that he was thankful even for the most painful of assignments. Paul's reference to the betrayal makes the Lord's thanksgiving even more poignant. This was a time of deep sadness for him, and yet he gives thanks.

Here is an example for every believer. When those around us betray us, when life brings us sadness, we should focus our attention on the Lord, and give thanks. We have an example of this in Sarah Edwards, wife of Jonathan Edwards. In her first letter to her daughter after the sudden death of her husband, she wrote,

O my very Dear Child, What shall I say. A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may all kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths. The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives and he has my heart.

Following our Lord's example, we should all seek to set our affection so firmly on God that we can give him thanks, regardless of our worldly circumstances.

he brake it, and said, Take, eat:--It was not unusual in the OT for worshipers to eat a sacrifice. They ate the passover lamb (12:7), and the peace offering:

Lev 7:15-16 And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten the same day that it is offered; he shall not leave any of it until the morning. 16 But if the sacrifice of his offering be a vow, or a voluntary offering, it shall be eaten the same day that he offereth his sacrifice: and on the morrow also the remainder of it shall be eaten:

The sacrifice is offered to God. When the offerer eats of it, he is participating in a meal with God. The one who brings a peace offering is bringing a gift to God to show his worship and thankfulness. Those who eat of that sacrifice are participating in that worship and thankfulness.

Recall the institution of the covenant at Sinai:

Exo 24:9-11 Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: 10 And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. 11 And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, **and did eat and drink.**

this is my body,--Here the Lord is offering his body to the Father. He may have in mind the LXX of Ps 40:6,

Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not; but a body hast thou prepared me: whole-burnt-offering and *sacrifice* for sin thou didst not require.

The OT repeatedly emphasizes that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). The Lord's entire life was marked by obedience to the Father:

Matt 26:39 nevertheless **not as I will, but as thou wilt.**

Meetings in the Early Church

John 4:34 My meat is to **do the will of him that sent me**, and to finish his work.

John 5:30 **I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father** which hath sent me.

John 6:38 For I came down from heaven, **not to do mine own will, but the will of him** that sent me.

John 17:4 I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished **the work which thou gavest me to do**.

The culmination of his work for the Father, the final assignment, was to give eternal life to the people that the Father had given to him:

John 10:27-29 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: 28 And **I give unto them eternal life**; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand. 29 **My Father, which gave them me**, is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of my Father's hand.

So the sacrifice that he is offering to the Father is his loving obedience, culminating in being “obedient unto death, the death of the cross” (Phil 2:8).

which is broken for you:--His obedience is for us. He invites us to eat of that sacrifice. As we do, his obedience becomes ours. The worship he offered to the Father in his obedience, we now offer. The righteous lives that we owe God, that we could never execute in the flesh, he has lived for us, and now he imputes to us that righteousness.

this do in remembrance of me.--Paul emphasizes the command to remember. Matthew and Mark do not mention it at all. Luke mentions it only with regard to the bread. Paul tells us that the Lord repeated the command with the cup. This is not surprising: if the instructions for the memorial were part of the distinctive revelation that the Lord gave him after his salvation, he will certainly feel a need to emphasize it to those he teaches.

When the Corinthians “come together in the church,” their conduct is “not for the better, but for the worse.” Paul's corrective is to remind them of the purpose for which they are supposed to gather. A common meal is ok, but optional. What is commanded is that they remember the Lord's sacrifice.

25-26, The Cup

25 After the same manner also—That is, giving thanks.

he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood:--The old testament, or covenant, was the agreement God concluded with Israel on Mt. Sinai, summed up in the Ten Commandments. The historical books of the OT are a systematic record of how Israel disobeyed each of those commandments², culminating in the Babylonian captivity. At the time of that judgment, when the nation's failure had become abundantly clear, God raised up two prophets to explain to the people what was happening: Jeremiah (who ministered among the remnant in the land of Israel) and Ezekiel (who went to Babylon with the second wave of exiles). Both of them promised that God would establish a new covenant to replace the old one that Israel had broken. Note the two key provisions of

² D.N. Freedman's book *The Nine Commandments* makes this interpretation explicit.

Meetings in the Early Church

this covenant, reflected in both prophecies:

1. Forgiveness of their sin.
2. An inner enabling to obey God's law (associated by Ezekiel with the gift of the Holy Spirit).

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, **I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts;** and will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for **I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.**

Ezekiel 36:25-27 **Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean:** from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. 26 A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. 27 **And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes,** and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

Heb 9:15-22 emphasizes that a covenant must be ratified with the shedding of blood:

16 For where a testament *is*, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. ... 18 Whereupon neither the first *testament* was dedicated without blood.

Here our Lord is teaching that the time has come for the promised new covenant to be inaugurated, and he is offering his blood as the required sacrifice.

If his body was a peace offering, emphasizing his life of obedience, his blood is a sin offering, providing the purging from sin promised by the prophets. The bread reminds us of his righteousness imputed to us; the blood, of our sin imputed to him. OT saints always had to offer the sin offering first, to gain access to God so that they could offer peace offerings, but our Lord reverses the order.

this do ye, as oft as ye drink it,--Under the Old Covenant, people could eat the flesh of the sacrifice, but were forbidden to drink its blood, or indeed any blood:

Lev 17:11-12 For the life of the flesh *is* in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it *is* the blood *that* maketh an atonement for the soul. 12 Therefore I said unto the children of Israel, No soul of you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger that sojourneth among you eat blood.

Now the people can drink the blood as well as eat the flesh. Our participation in the sacrifice is complete.

in remembrance of me.--Again, Paul emphasizes the focus of their meeting: to remember the Lord.

26, The Purpose

Some have suggested that the phrase “remembrance of me” should be understood, not of our remembering the Lord's sacrifice, but of reminding him of his promise to return. The last clause of this section guards against such a misunderstanding:

26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.--Through the bread and cup, we “shew,” or proclaim, the Lord's death.

“Show” καταγγελλω occurs 17x in the NT, in 10 of which it is translated “preach.” It describes what Barnabas and Saul did in the synagogues in Acts 13:5, where they used the customary teaching period in the Jewish service to announce the coming of the Messiah. In Col 1:28, it is a summary term that includes warning and teaching as two specific modes:

Whom we **preach**, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:

The verb emphasizes public proclamation, and includes testimony to unbelievers as well as instruction to the believers. 1 Cor 14:23-25 anticipates that unbelievers might be in their meetings. The emblems of the breaking of bread would not only remind the believers of the Lord's sacrifice, but also serve as a picture sermon to them.

The elements are a picture of his sacrifice for us. We are constantly to have the hope of his return before us, but he needs no reminding to come back. By contrast, Israel's repeated failing under the old covenant was described as “forgetting” the Lord's gracious acts. Ps 106 makes a particular point of this:

7 Our fathers understood not thy wonders in Egypt; they **remembered not** the multitude of thy mercies;

13 They soon **forgot** his works;

21 They **forgot** God their saviour, which had done great things in Egypt;

Under the Old Covenant, Israel forgot the great work of deliverance that God wrought in bringing them out of Egypt. In ratifying the New Covenant, our Lord provides a memorial so that we will not forget, but remember him.

This instruction corrects another misunderstanding, that the purpose of Christian assembly is not primarily worship, but edification. Edification is of course one purpose of our gathering, as we saw from Eph 4. But a prominent part of our gathering is to be the Lord's Table, whose purpose is to remember his sacrificial work for us. Such a memory ought always to stir us to the deepest worship and gratitude to the Lord. In fact, it is out of love and worship for him that we are motivated to build up one another:

1 John 4:10-11 Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

27-32, Exhortations regarding the Breaking of Bread

Now we turn to the first set of exhortations, which concern the memorial that he has just described. Note “this bread” in v. 27—not the bread of their “Lord's Supper,” but the memorial of vv. 23-24.

The main point of this exhortation can be seen in the repetition of the adverb “unworthily” in vv. 27, 29. This is a majority text reading; newer translations follow the minority of mss in omitting the adverb in v. 29, but Paul's sense is much clearer if we retain it.

Let's consider first the meaning of unworthy participation, then the specific warnings here, and finally the concluding warning of judgment, which corresponds to the close of the final exhortation in v. 34.

Unworthy Participation

Certainly, their selfish conduct at the common meal would render their participation unworthy. But it would be a mistake to limit Paul's meaning to this. Consider three lines of evidence.

Food Offered to Idols

Chapters 8 and 10 show that the Corinthians were being tempted to participate in feasts around food offered to idols. In 10:21, he has warned them of the inconsistency of participating in both idolatry and the memorial:

Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils.

Certainly his warnings about unworthiness include this kind of violation.

Rules for the Passover

More generally, the memorial grows out of the passover, a parallel that Paul makes explicit in this epistle:

5:7 For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:

And it was a characteristic of the passover that participation was controlled. The OT notes two things that could disqualify a person:

First, a person had to be circumcised, a member of the covenant community.

Exo12:48 And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof.

Second, ritual defilement would make one ineligible, but such a person could celebrate it a month late:

Numbers 9:10-11 If any man of you or of your posterity shall be unclean by reason of a dead body, ... yet he shall keep the passover unto the LORD. 11 The fourteenth day of the **second month** [instead of the usual first month] at even they shall keep it, *and* eat it with unleavened bread and bitter *herbs*.

Meetings in the Early Church

The same two requirements apply to the Lord's Table.

We'd all agree that it would be inappropriate for someone who is not born again, not a partaker of the new covenant, to partake of the Lord's Table. The order in Acts 2 is that the people first “gladly received his word,” then “were baptized,” and then entered into church life.

Even those who are under the covenant cannot enjoy communion with God if they are tolerating sin in their own lives.

Psa 66:18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear *me*:

Matt 5:23-24 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; 24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

John 9:31 Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.

In fact, the two conditions are closely related. Under the terms of the new covenant, God promises to produce holiness of life in his people:

Ezek 36:27, 27 **And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes,** and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

True salvation results in a changed life. Lack of holiness may reflect lack of salvation.

2 Cor 13:5 Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.

So the parallel between the passover and the memorial elements, a parallel that Paul makes explicit in this very epistle, would suggest that participation should be restricted.

Chapter 5

In fact, the reference to the Passover in 5:7 is part of a broader discussion that concludes with an exhortation against unworthy participation.

- The problem, 1
- Their faulty response, 2
- Paul's conclusion, 3-5
- Motivation, 6-8: the passover
- Generalization, 9-13

Note the conclusion in v. 11, and the emphasis on not eating with such a person:

But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no **not to eat**.

This prohibition does not refer to ordinary meals. Indeed, in ch. 7 he commands believers married to unbelievers to stay with them, and that would require eating together. His focus here is on a distinct set

Meetings in the Early Church

of meetings of the church, “when you are gathered together” (v. 4, where he uses the more specific word *συνάγω* in place of the generic *συνερχομαι* that he uses in ch. 11, 14).

So the point of “unworthily” is that the breaking of bread is not an open cafeteria. Those who partake must be qualified, just as were those who partook of the passover from which the memorial is derived. If the parallel of the passover is any guide, worthy participation requires that we be a member of the covenant community, and not defiled by sin.

27-29, Two Kinds of Unworthiness

Paul describes two ways of partaking unworthily, and then summarizes the motive for avoiding this sin.

27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and [or] drink *this* cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of *that* bread, and drink of *that* cup.--The first way to partake unworthily is to fail to examine oneself. If I know that I am not a believer, or if I am living in unconfessed sin, I should deal with that problem before coming to the table. To partake while living in sin would be the ultimate hypocrisy, commemorating the Lord's offering of his body and blood to purchase our salvation while living in a way that shows we despise that salvation and thus the price paid for it.

Because of this risk, we are to examine ourselves. Cf. 2 Cor 13:5,

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove [*δοκιμαζω*, here “examine”] your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

What should we do if our self-examination comes up short? 1 John 1:9 promises,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If only we acknowledge our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive:

- just because he has already borne the penalty we deserved;
- faithful because he loves us, and will not withhold forgiveness from us.

Note the continuing absolute balance between bread and cup, between eating and drinking.

29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.--The second form of unworthy participation is failure to “discern the Lord's body.” What does this mean?

As a young Christian, I thought this was an exhortation to pay close attention to the symbolism inherent in the bread. It certainly is important to reflect on the meaning of the bread—but it is equally important to think about the meaning of the cup. And given the consistent pairing that Paul has followed of bread and cup, eating and drinking, if he meant here that we should be attentive to the symbolism, he surely would have mentioned both.

If “the Lord's body” doesn't mean the bread, what does it mean? A chapter earlier, in discussing the Lord's table, he wrote,

1 Cor 10:16-17 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of

Meetings in the Early Church

Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? 17 **For we being many are one bread, and one body:** for we are all partakers of that one bread.

Our participation at the table is supposed to demonstrate our unity as the body of Christ, the metaphor that we saw in Eph 4. Paul will develop this metaphor in much more detail in the next chapter (12:27): “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” As Paul thinks ahead over the flow of his letter, the ideas of the next section seep in to the previous one, a common transitional phenomenon.

So “the Lord's body” is a reference to the church. What, then, does it mean to “discern” that body?

The verb means to make a distinction, to differentiate. It reappears in the first instance of the word “judge” in v. 31. They are to show discernment concerning those with whom they break bread, distinguishing those who truly are believers from those who are not. v. 27 teaches that it is unworthy to bring one's own sin to the table. Here we learn that it is also unworthy to dine with those whose lives are not consistent with their profession of faith.

Some folk object, “But the Lord taught us not to judge others,” Matt 7:1. But he also said (Matt 7:5),

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

We are to judge others—after we have judged ourselves. In close parallel, Paul instructs us first to examine ourselves, then to judge the body. See also Jude 22 for instruction on our responsibility to exercise this sort of discernment (διακρίνω again, as here).

Just as the confession of 1 John 1:9 provides a solution to the first unworthiness, James 5:16 shows the role of confession in dealing with the second form of unworthiness.

It is fascinating that in a book dealing with the problem of division in the church, Paul exhorts closer attention to discipline. Many people think that we should not call attention to sin because it would lead to division. Paul seems to think that just the opposite is the case. True unity is only possible among those who are truly born again. When people's lives are inconsistent with their testimony, either their lives must change, or they must be excluded from the assembly. Otherwise the assembly becomes a “mixed multitude” with no hope of real spiritual oneness.

30-32, Warning of Judgment

30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.--Because of their failure to discern the body, God has brought judgment on some members of the group. He will not allow a true believer to persist in sin. He will bring chastisement (Heb 12), which can culminate in illness or even physical death if the one being chastened is stubborn and does not repent.

Paul goes on to expand this principle by outlining three successive levels of judgment. The purpose of each level is to protect us from the next one. It may be easier to understand these if we consider them in reverse order.

32 ... that we should not be condemned with the world.--Two references are possible.

First, all of Scripture warns us that a day is coming when God will judge the world and pour out his anger on those who have not obeyed him. The word “condemn” κατακρίνω can be used to describe

Meetings in the Early Church

God's judgment (Mark 16:16 “he that believeth not shall be damned”; 2 Pet 2:6 God “condemned [Sodom and Gomorrah] with an overthrow.” Yet this meaning would be strange here. What delivers us from God's final judgment is not the rebukes of our brethren, but the blood of Christ.

The word is much more often used of how people criticize or judge other people. Cf.

Matt 12:41 The men of Nineveh shall rise in the judgment with this generation, and shall **condemn** it:

Heb 11:7 By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he **condemned** the world

Let it never be said of the people of God that they are no better than the world. Recall the qualification of the overseer, that he must “have a good report of them which are without” (1 Tim 3:7), a good reputation among unbelievers.

The Lord takes steps to prevent such an insult:

32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord--To avoid the spectacle of believers' living like the world, the Lord chastens his people. This discipline, which is described extensively in Heb 12, may take the form of sickness or even death, as in v. 30.

31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged--. We can deliver one another from this by helping each other become aware of sin and deal with it. “Judge” is the same word rendered “discern” in v. 29. The Lord's table is where we acknowledge one another as members of the body of Christ, and if any member is out of line, we should be dealing with that problem. By doing so, we help our brothers and sisters avoid God's chastisement, which otherwise must come to avoid scandal in the eyes of the world.

In the context of this series of judgments, the action of judging ourselves, of discerning the body, is not vindictive. Its purpose is not to elevate ourselves above others, but rather to help one another, to protect one another from more severe judgment. The frame of mind here is that seen in other passages:

Eccl 4:9-10 Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. 10 For if they fall, **the one will lift up his fellow**: but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up.

Matt 7:5 Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to **cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye**.

Gal 6:1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, **restore such an one** in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Heb 12:11-13 Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. 12 Wherefore **lift up the hands which hang down**, and the feeble knees; 13 And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. (*v. 12 is a quote from Isa 35:3, which makes clear that it describes encouragement of others.*)

We are responsible for one another's spiritual lives. By discerning the body we help one another escape

divine chastisement.

1 Cor 14:26-40

Our analysis of Eph 4 shows that every member of the body has something to contribute to the others. There's no reason that this ministry work has to be confined to “meetings of the church” Much of it will be in the ebb and flow of daily life. But one passage does outline guidelines for multiple participation when the church is gathered together: 1 Cor 14:26-40.

Just as the focus of 11:17-34 was on fellowship and breaking of bread, so the focus here is on prayer and teaching, thus completing the four activities of Acts 2 and Heb 10.

This passage that it is not the only picture of NT meetings that we have. In particular, Acts 19:8-10 envisions a rather more centralized kind of meeting:

8 And [Paul] went into the synagogue [in Ephesus], and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God. 9 But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. 10 And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

Let's set the passage in context. See the outline on Cyber-Chapel (<http://www.cyber-chapel.org/sermons/1cor/notes/1CorOutline.pdf>).

- The encompassing section is ch. 12-14. This section is one of several in the book that respond to questions or statements that the Corinthians had raised to Paul in an earlier letter (compare 12:1 “now concerning spiritual things” with 7:1 “now concerning the things whereof you wrote unto me”).
- The topic of this particular question was spiritual gifts.
- There are three main components, arranged chiastically.
 - The center, ch. 13, is Paul's great chapter on love.
 - On either side are chapters about spiritual gifts, in the context of two different metaphors for the believers:
 - Ch. 12 describes them as a body.
 - Ch. 14 describes them as an assembly, *εκκλησια*. Though this term is conventionally translated “church,” it was in use long before Pentecost, to denote Greek legislative assemblies, and is the standard term (both dominant and devoted) used in the LXX to translate

קהל (ישראל)

The passage consists of a description of their meeting, followed by a series of commands. Compare the structure of 11:17-34, which consists of two descriptions, each associated with a command paragraph.

26, Description and Summary Principle

26 How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation.--These focus on the teaching and prayer activities of Acts 2:42, compared with the emphasis in ch. 11 on breaking of bread and fellowship.

- The **psalms** are largely addressed to the Lord, either as supplications for help or as praise for his past salvation. When we sing them (and many hymns as well), we are praying.
- **Doctrine** is the identical word used in Acts 2:42.
- 14:14-17 focus on prayer in describing the use of **tongues**. To judge by 12:10, **interpretation** here refers to the interpretation of what has been spoken in a tongue.
- A **revelation** would be the delivery of a message from God.

Paul is reporting on what they do, not giving a command. But their instincts were sound: those who come to appear before the Lord come not as spectators, but to worship the Lord and to edify one another. Each of these requires that we come prepared.

- There should be no question that in edifying one another, we must be prepared to say something.
- As we saw in our study of the Lord's Table, worship is also part of our focus. We have the example of Israel of old, which was commanded to appear before the Lord three times in the year, at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Each time, the standard was, "None shall appear before me empty" (Exod 23:15; Deut 16:16). They were to bring their gifts. When Israel's priests were consecrated to their ministry, the verb (in Exod 29:9 and often) is literally "fill their hands," give them something to offer to the Lord. Worship is not a spectator sport.

Let all things be done unto edifying.--Here is the overwhelming principle for the conduct of the church. Our objective, according to Eph 4, is to bring the church as the body of Christ to the full measure of his stature. Whatever is done must contribute to this end.

This and subsequent references (27 "by course," 31 "one by one," 33 "not confusion but peace," 40 "decently and in order") suggest that the Corinthians' meetings were rather chaotic, and Paul is seeking to bring some order and structure to them.

27, Tongues

27 If any man speak in an unknown tongue,--According to 14:21, which quotes Isa 28:11-12, the ability to speak in languages that one has not naturally learned was given by God to confound the Jews who had rejected the Messiah's offer of rest. There are no such Jews today, and thus the gift, if active, is very different from what the NT describes. But it was definitely active in Paul's day, and he gives three clear regulations concerning it, regulations that are widely disregarded among those who do think that the gift is active today.

let it be by two, or at the most by three,--The number of people engaging in this activity is limited. Note the "at most." He has already insisted on the superiority of prophecy to tongues (14:5), and he

Meetings in the Early Church

wants them to allot their time accordingly. No such limitation is placed on the prophets.

and that by course;--He forbids everyone speaking at once. They must take turns.

and let one interpret.--As earlier (v. 13), he insists that tongues must be interpreted (v. 13). Otherwise it is of no use to anyone else in the church.

28 But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.--Meaningless speech, because it edifies nobody, has no place in the meeting. "Let all things be done unto edifying."

The speaker is presumed to be in control of his speech. He cannot plead, "The Lord gave me this and I have to present it." If it is not helpful, he is expected to restrain himself.

No one in our meeting has claimed the gift of tongues. But there is a principle here for other forms of speech as well. If what you say is not understandable, it would be better not said. The reasoning behind Paul's words forbids not only uninterpreted languages, but also mumbling, and stringing phrases together without giving thought to what they mean. Language is one of God's greatest gifts to us, and we must not abuse it in our gatherings.

29-33a, Prophecy

29 Let the prophets—Recall from Eph 4:11-12 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers) that the function of the prophetic gift in the first century largely overlapped with that of the later pastor-teacher, one who ministers the word of God to the assembly.

speak two or three,--A few brothers are each to present something meaningful. He envisions two or three, not ten or twenty, but there is no "at most" as in the case of tongues.

and let the other judge.--Better, "the others." The word is plural, and represents all of the other prophets who are present.

"Judge" διακρίνω is the word "discern" that we encountered in 11:29. In this case, the discernment is not between believer and unbeliever, but between what is true and what is not. Those who minister publicly deserve our respect and attention, but not our unqualified agreement. Luke commends the nobility of the Bereans, who (Acts 17:11) "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

- It is the duty of those who hear to hear with discernment, and to ask for clarification or correction if what is taught appears not to be correct.
- It is the duty of those who teach to encourage others to review what they say and to welcome this feedback.

30 If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace.--There is to be opportunity for others to share the insight that God has given them. It is entirely appropriate for there to be multiple brothers capable of ministering to the body. The common practice of paying the clergy makes this impractical in conventional churches, but once we submit to the principle of Acts 20 that elders should be self-supporting, there is no reason that many brothers cannot participate, as long as they truly have something to say. But note the qualification, "If any thing be revealed." There is to be

Meetings in the Early Church

no talking for the sake of talking. One must have a clear message from the Lord.

31 For ye may all prophesy one by one,--This corresponds to the “by course” imposed on the one who speaks in tongues in v. 27. When one speaks, the others are to listen. Paul does not envision a gathering where many conversations are going on concurrently. There is nothing wrong with such open fellowship, but it does not satisfy the requirements for the church gathered together.

that all may learn, and all may be comforted.--Paul takes us back to the overarching rule of v. 26, “Let all things be done unto edifying.” This has two components, echoed in 1 Tim 6:2 (“these things teach and exhort”): addressing the mind and the heart. The two go together, and we should be cautious about either teaching that does not exhort, or exhortation that is not based on teaching.

32 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.--As in the case of speaking in tongues, the one speaking cannot plead, “You have to let me talk, the Spirit compels me.” The privilege of speaking brings with it the responsibility of doing so in an orderly way that edifies the church.

33 For God is not *the author of confusion, but of peace,*--Paul continues to urge the church away from a chaotic babel toward an orderly, peaceful meeting in which one person speaks at a time in a way that relates to what has gone before.

33-35, Women

As in all churches of the saints,--This phrase is probably to be associated with the following exhortation, rather than the preceding statement. Elsewhere, Paul often associates his exhortations with a reminder that he is not singling them out, but that his instructions are universal. For example,

4:17 For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, **as I teach every where in every church.**

7:17 But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I **in all churches.**

11:16 But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, **neither the churches of God.**

This emphasis is consistent with his declaration in 1:1-2 that he is writing not only to the Corinthians, but also to “all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.”

34 Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak;--Paul's instruction here has led to much consternation among so-called Christian feminists, but his language is simple and unambiguous. Spoken roles when the church gathers are restricted to the brothers. He makes the same point in 1 Tim 2:8-12,

8 I will therefore that men [males] pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. 9 In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; 10 But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. 11 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. 12 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the

Meetings in the Early Church

man, but to be in silence.

but *they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.*--The most likely reference is Gen 3:16, “thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home:--He not only forbids them to teach (as in 1 Tim 2:12), but even to ask questions! Some will say, “What about unmarried women?” In the biblical example, they are under their fathers (Num 30:3-13). In our day, we often see women abroad in society, under neither husband nor father. No Christian woman should aspire to such a situation, but if it arises, it would seem appropriate for her to submit herself to the elders of the church. Paul makes his point inescapably clear with his conclusion:

for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

36-40, Conclusion to ch. 12-14

These verses conclude the entire section starting in ch. 12, not just the description of the church meeting. See the outline of 1 Cor for their chiasmic correspondence to 12:1-3. They contain four specific instructions:

36 What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? 37 If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.--Paul is conscious that he is a channel for revelation, and he insists that his readers (and us as well) accept his teaching, not just as one among other opinions, but as divinely authoritative.

38 But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.--How should the church treat someone who does not recognize Paul's authority in this matter? They should recognize his ignorant state. Paul does not invoke a stronger penalty, demonstrating his counsel to Timothy,

2 Tim 2:24-25 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, 25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

Leadership in the church is by example (1 Pet 5:3) and service (Matt 20:28), not by dominating power or assertion of authority.

39 Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.--Compare 14:5,

I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater *is* he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying.

40 Let all things be done decently and in order.--The church meeting is not to be haphazard or ad hoc. “Decently” refers to respectability, the opposite of “shame” in v. 35; “in order” indicates that there should be some sense of structure about their gathering.

Paul's exhortations here describe the conduct of the church “when you come together” (v. 26), which is also the setting described in 11:17-18. There, he focused on breaking of bread and fellowship; here, on prayer and teaching. But there is no indication that these were separate occasions. We have one detailed

Meetings in the Early Church

narrative of an early church meeting, in Acts 20:7-11. There in a single gathering we observe (in this order) teaching, breaking of bread, and fellowship, and it's hardly likely that they managed to avoid prayer in the course of these other activities.

This poses an interesting and important question for us as we consider how we should meet. There has been considerable interest in including a common meal in our activities, as a form of fellowship. If we were to do this “in church,” it would fall under the instructions of this chapter: only men would speak, and only one at a time. Yet this would seem to hinder much of what is valuable in fellowship—the free and wide-ranging sharing of concerns among many members of the body, including both brothers and sisters. I suspect that the needs of fellowship would be better served, not by bringing a meal into our formal gathering, but by recognizing that not everything in Acts 2:42 has to be part of a formal meeting.

It's a wonderful characteristic of our meetings that when they're over, they're not really over. People often linger, sometimes for an extended time, to share together and encourage one another. These times of fellowship are extremely valuable to us as a body. We should seek to encourage such times, perhaps using food as part of the process. But we should be clear that such gatherings, while they may be occasioned by a more formal meeting, are not subject to the constraints of 1 Cor 14.

Notes

Συνερχομαι vs. συναγω

Paul's distinctive verb in ch. 11 and 14 is *συνερχομαι*. This verb is used frequently in Acts to describe meetings, but mostly of unbelievers. Gatherings of believers in the NT are mostly described with another verb, *συναγω* (mostly in the passive) (though this verb is also used of unbelievers, Acts 4:5, 26, 27). This is the verb used in Matt 18:20 and Acts 20:7.

Paul uses *συναγω* even less than *συνερχομαι*, only once, and that in 1 Cor 5:4.

I can suggest two differences between the verbs, one syntactical, the other distributional.

Syntax: Transitive vs. Intransitive

συναγω is a transitive verb. It describes the action of one person gathering together a group of others. When it is used of the church, it is mostly used in the passive, without specifying the one doing the gathering (though see Acts 14:27 for Paul and Barnabas gathering the saints together).

συνερχομαι is intransitive. It describes something that people do on their own. They gather.

Thus one might make a distinction between voluntary, spontaneous gatherings (*συνερχομαι*) and others in which one is constrained by some norm (*συναγω*), but see Acts 22:30 for *συνερχομαι* being caused by an outside agent.

Distribution: OT vs. NT

The two verbs differ strikingly in their OT background, as seen in this table.

Meetings in the Early Church

	OT	NT
συναγω	282	59
συνερχομαι	20	30

Συναγω is a common LXX word. It translates קָהָל most commonly (133x), and the next most common (72x) is עֲבָדָה . By contrast, סִנְרַחֵם is uncommon in the LXX, with no clear Hebrew reflex.

This distinction would suggest that the use of συναγω suggests a parallel between the church and the congregation of Israel, which is not present with συνερχομαι . The Hebrew root קָהָל very commonly translates cognates of συναγω (e.g., συναγωγῆ 34x, whose most common translation, 134x, is קָהָל , and vice versa); its most common LXX translation is ἐκκλησία (70x; ἐξεκκλησιαζῶ 15x; ἐκκλησιαζῶ 5x).

ΟΥΚ ΕΣΤΙΝ + inf, 11:20

Only consider cases where the infinitive is the complement, no other predicate adjective or nominative
Heb 9:5, the cherubim and the mercy seat, $\text{οὐκ ἔστιν νῦν λέγειν κατὰ μέρος}$. “it is not possible to speak particularly”

Epistle of Jeremiah 1:9 $\text{οὐκ ἔστιν αἰσθέσθαι}$ “how then cannot men perceive”

Dan 3:33 (Prayer of Azariah 1:10) $\text{οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν ἀνοῖξαι τὸ στόμα}$ “we cannot open our mouth”

Jer 8:17 οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπαῖσαι “which cannot be charmed”

Isa 48:22; 57:21, $\text{οὐκ ἔστιν χαίρειν τοῖς ἀσεβέσιν}$ “it is impossible for the wicked to rejoice”

Isa 14:31 $\text{οὐκ ἔστιν τοῦ εἶναι}$ “it is impossible to live”

Sirach uses the construction frequently.

Conclusion: the construction marks something as impossible. “It is impossible to eat the Lord's Supper.”

Structure of 1 Corinthians

The major sections of the book are marked by one of two repeated headings:

- περὶ δε ... (“now concerning ...”), 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12
- $\text{... δε ὑμας ἀδελφοί}$ (“Now I X you, brethren,” where X is a verb of speaking), 1:10; 11:2; 15:1

On the basis of 7:1, we hypothesize that the “now concerning” sections address topics raised by the Corinthians in a previous correspondence, while the “now I say to you brethren” sections introduce topics that Paul is initiating. These topics are often based on things that Paul has heard indirectly about the church. References to this indirect information always comes in the second kind of section:

- 1:11 For **it hath been declared unto me** of you, my brethren, by them *which are of the house* of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.

Meetings in the Early Church

- 5:1 **It is reported commonly** *that there is* fornication among you,
- 11:18 when ye come together in the church, **I hear** that there be divisions among you;

The first of our texts about gathering together, in ch. 11, is in a section that Paul initiates, while the second is in a broader section (ch. 12-14) commenting on what the Corinthians have told Paul about their excitement over “spiritual things.”