



Motive and Manner

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1st Corinthians 11:17-22

We are all familiar with seeing people do the right things with the wrong motives. We have watched others do what is right and recognized those actions be at odds with their character. We have questioned their motives. We assess how they do what they do. We look for a reason behind their actions. When we are honest, we find room for questioning our own motives behind some of the things we ourselves have done. Deep down we understand that it is not enough to do the right things. We must also do them the right way and for the right reasons.

We look around at our legal, political, and economic structures and can readily point to actions which are completely legal, yet are morally and ethically wrong. Our television shows are full of examples of individuals using good laws for nefarious reasons. We can readily see how legality and justice do not always walk hand in hand. Unfortunately, we may find that even within our own lives as believers that we become caught up in some of the same kinds of distortions of what is right and wrong.

Such was Paul's assessment of the believers in Corinth. Here in chapter 11, we find a text so often quoted in our services at communion time. We hear Paul's words to a church that was abusing the Christian celebration of Jesus as the new Passover, but we perhaps miss the fact that Paul is addressing abuses in the manner and motives behind their celebration. Why do we gather to celebrate, and do our gatherings reflect lives truly surrendered to Christ Jesus?

The issues at Corinth were deeply immersed in social conflict. As we have been walking through First Corinthians, we have seen all manner of excuses for factions within the body of believers. It was in their gathering to observe this celebration at the Lord's table, however, that the factions and divisions seem to have been taken to new heights. They were officially gathering together to celebrate Christ, but in effect they were gathering to celebrate their social distinctions according to the customs in the larger society.

In Corinth it was common for a host to invite people to a party and serve them according to their social standing. The more intimate guests received better fare and choice wines, while others were given a second class fare and those lower down the social ladder even a third quality of food. The host might provide excellent fare for himself, with increasing inferiority of provision for his guests, some who would have to eat standing in a foyer while he gorged himself in the style of Roman excess. What was ostensibly a feast became a celebration of social distinction, a declaration of varying classes and worth from the greatest to the lowest of those invited to attend.

From Paul's comments here in this passage, the same kind of thing was going on among believers gathering to celebrate the Christian Passover meal. They were going through the motions of celebrating Christ Jesus, while in effect they were celebrating themselves, their position, their standing, their sense of self-importance, their social and economic distinctions.

The rich within the body would gather first, bringing their own provisions and beginning their celebrations of rich foods and wine before the lower classes and slaves were freed from their duties to arrive. While some were arriving to celebrate Christ, others had been feasting and were drunken with their ample provisions. Some arrived with little or nothing to eat, while others had gorged themselves and were unwilling to share from their ample resources.

They were gathering for a feast, but they were not gathering as a body. They were not gathering in fellowship; they were not gathering to celebrate and promote the priorities and principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Rather, they were allowing the social customs of the day to influence their actions in unhealthy ways. They had not stopped to think through the implications of the gospel on their actions and attitudes. They had missed the fact that their celebration was an abomination to Christ Jesus.

Paul is clear in calling them out. He reminds them that eating and feasting is no the issue. He calls them to consider whether they did not have the freedom to feast in their own homes. When they came together they were supposed to focus on celebrating Christ Jesus, and that would demand a wholly different manner of participation. It would require them to act according to very different parameters from those they say in play in the society all around them.

When they came together, they were not thinking of one another. When they came together, they were not considering the aims of Christ Jesus in calling all into fellowship and new life with God. When they came together, they did not stop to consider how their actions affected others. They did not concern themselves with one another's needs, nor with how they might use the resources God had entrusted them for the welfare of the body as a whole.

They were too comfortable in their social roles. Well, some of them were. This is one instance in which Paul addresses very specifically those within the church who were economically advantaged. At the same time, however, the principles Paul uses apply equally across the board. Why are you gathering together? Is it really to celebrate Christ Jesus, or is that just the official reason? What are your motives and how are you carrying out your celebrations?

The Jewish Passover was a celebration of freedom to be shared among the entire nation. Those who were hungry were invited into another's celebration as a matter of course. It was expected, for it was a celebration of freedom from slavery and bondage. Christians were to use a similar celebration in light of what Jesus had accomplished through the cross and resurrection. All were to be invited into the celebration of life, liberty, and new opportunity of full access to God.

It was not enough to go through the motions of the celebration. It was not enough to gather on the appointed day and feast according to Jesus' command to celebrate the feast. If one did not celebrate in accord with the purposes of God, one was celebrating something other than what God was calling the body to celebrate.

Our celebrations have changed over the centuries. The format of our gatherings has shifted. We have become much more formalized in our coming together in the name of Christ Jesus. We print bulletins, we rehearse music for our gatherings, we prepare sermons, organize budgets, develop ministry plans, and so many other organizational and institutional details that would have been completely foreign to Paul and this First Century church.

None of that is at issue, however. The specific structure we use for our celebrations may adapt and change over centuries and cultures. What needs to remain defined, however, is the reason for our gatherings. We must come in order to celebrate Christ Jesus. Our purposes and objectives must hold Christ Jesus in proper perspective.

Why we gather is so much more important than the specific forms of our gatherings. The manner and attitudes behind our gatherings are central. We need to question our motives and attitudes. Do we truly gather to celebrate Christ Jesus, or is there some other motive behind our actions?

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