

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Part 1

Title: The Lord's Table

Truth: Communion is a very serious part of Christian worship, and God judges those who do not partake properly.

Date/Location: Sunday November 15, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

The Corinthian church had several problems. Even in their corporate worship services, they needed to give attention to some things.

I. Some Basics about the Lord's Table

- A. It is an *ordinance*. What is an ordinance? It is a religious service or ritual commanded by Jesus for the church that displays a saving truth of the gospel in a tangible way. The church has two such ordinances: water baptism and the Lord's Table.
- B. What happens in the Lord's Table ordinance? The bread and grape juice ("new wine") are shared. These are the "main course." Prior to sharing these items, we usually sing hymns related to the Lord's death for us and speak about some subject connected to the topic. Then we pray before taking each element to give thanks. After we usually sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God. In the early church, they often had a "agape meal" or love feast before the Table. This became abused, as we see in this section of Scripture, and later its use was discouraged to avoid excesses.
- C. The church must come together to share this ordinance. Despite the "examine *himself*" idea in the chapter, the ordinance is not a private religious ceremony. It is for the "gathered church." The gathering part is mentioned in v. 17, 18, 20, 33, and 34, as well as demonstrated by the example of the Lord and disciples at the Last Supper. They were to eat at home to satisfy their hunger; and then gather for the ordinance. It is for the church as a body.
- D. The ordinance was shared regularly in the early church. I had a question this week about how often it should be observed. The short answer is that the Lord's words, and Paul's words, leave the reader with the impression that it should be observed frequently. But we do not have a prescription on exactly *how* frequently. It could be weekly, monthly, quarterly, or at some other less structured interval. Note that "as often as" in verses 25-26 just means "every time" or "whenever." It does not demand weekly celebration. We have settled on a monthly frequency to avoid the service becoming "common" and losing its significance, but not

to be so infrequent that we decline in spiritual condition between the commemorations of the Lord's death.

- E. The Communion is an opportunity for reflection about one's own life with the Lord Jesus. It is a time when confession can be made. It is also an opportunity to check that your relationship with fellow believers is on sound footing. Not treating the Table with reverence is a grave error.
- F. The Lord's Table is designed as a memorial service to call to mind again the great work of Christ Jesus on our behalf in dying for our sins and rising again. It was this act which sealed our forgiveness and justification.
- G. I said in the definition that an ordinance is something commanded by Christ for the church. Where is this command in the Bible? Christians universally agree that the words of Jesus at the institution at the table constitute that command: "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19). The command is repeated by the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 11:24-25.
- H. The definition also said that the ordinance displays a saving truth of the gospel. Water baptism shows in a tangible way how the new believer has become united to Christ in His death and resurrection, dying to sin and rising to new life. In communion, the **bread** represents the body of Christ Who was killed for us. The **juice** symbolizes the blood of Christ which was poured out in death for us. **Eating and drinking** it shows that we have acknowledged this work and have come to believe in it for ourselves. Notice that eating and drinking at the Lord's table does not save anyone. Instead, doing so pictures that you have already repented of sin and believed in Christ.

In other words, by believing in Christ, we become partakers of the life-giving benefits of his death for sinners. Jesus said, "he who **believes in Me** has **everlasting life**" (John 6:47). Jesus pictured this as eating and drinking of Himself later in that same chapter, where he said, "Whoever **eats My flesh** and **drinks My blood** has **eternal life**, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54). Notice the parallelism between belief and eat/drink and between "Me" (Jesus) and "My flesh" and "My blood." The Lord's Table rite is a picture that we have already done that very thing.

- I. For those who were ignorant of with the meaning of the symbols, the service was sometimes thought to be cannibalism. This charge was easy to raise against the Catholic view of the Communion, which teaches that the elements are not merely symbols, but embody the actual, real presence of Christ which is eaten. That is not our understanding. But:

“CAECILIUS THE PAGAN: You Christians are the worst breed ever to affect the world. You deserve every punishment you can get! Nobody likes you. It would be better if you and your Jesus had never been born. We hear that you are all cannibals--you eat the flesh of your children in your sacred meetings.

“OCTAVIUS the Christian: That story is probably based on reports that we share together a meal of the body and blood of Christ. That we do. But it is not human flesh we eat. It is bread and wine we consecrate to commemorate our Lord's death.”¹

- J. Why is the Lord's Supper or Lord's Table service called by that name? The first time it was done was at the Last Supper, directed by our Lord, thus “the Lord's Table.” See 1 Cor. 10:21. Why is it called *Communion*?² This word means “fellowship”—a manifestation of the partnership that we Christians share together in the life Christ shares with us.
- K. The Lord's supper is meant to be taken by all church members in good standing: man or woman, young or old, all imperfect. It is meant for self-examining members, not flippant members. If a church member is living in unrepentant sin, he or she is not welcome to participate. Disallowing the “laity” from participating is not Biblical. Both the bread and juice are to be given to all participants. “Withholding the cup” is not Biblical.
- L. The Lord's Table is to be protected by the church. The church which is responsible for the correct practice of the Table. Therefore, communion is not “wide open” to anyone who may wish to participate. It is open to those who have been baptized (or are about to be), those who are members in good standing, those not being “disciplined” because of unrepentant sin. If you are unsure whether you should participate, either do not, or ask your pastor.

II. The Problem in Corinth Regarding the Lord's Table, 11:17-22

- A. The church members had done well keeping many of the apostolic instructions that Paul had taught them. This is hard to believe given the numerous problems that the apostle addressed in this letter. It must be that they were not wrong on everything! But the way they carried the

¹ <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/why-early-christians-were-despised-11629610.html>

² We do not call it the *Eucharist*. This serves to distinguish our understanding of the ordinance from those who practice a similar worship service in the Catholic and Lutheran churches. Nor do we call it a *sacrament*, which to many denotes a mystical or magical quality of the ritual that conveys some supernatural power or grace.

Lord's Table was not at all praiseworthy. They were coming together for the worse instead of what the Table was intended to be—for the better.

B. Divisions (v. 18-19). In chapters 1–4 we learned of the divisions within the church. These divisions were not only about factions surrounding the preferred gospel minister (Paul, Apollos, Peter, Christ), but we now learn there were divides between those who had and those who did not have (v. 22). In other words, wealthy and poor Christians were in two different factions. The rich were somehow ignoring the poor, not loving them and showing them no kindness.

There does not seem to be much advantage to factions, but the apostle points out one in verse 19. The one advantage is that it allows those who are approved—who pass the test, who are true to Christ—to be recognized. Such factions separate the chaff from the wheat. This is like persecution—in itself is it not savory, but it can purify the church and show who is real and who is pretend.

C. Your own supper (20-21). The form of worship done in Corinth was not close enough to the real Lord's Table to be called by that name. It was a different thing how they were doing it. They were gathering in a large home to have a religious service, but they were having some kind of large meal. Some were partaking but not waiting the others to join them. At minimum, this would be very rude. Even worse, there were some who were not "let in" to the inner circle of participants, so they were left hungry. Others were indulging so that they were drunk. There probably was a segregation of poor participants (perhaps lower class, servants, or slaves) from the more wealthy believers. They were thus showing disdain for a sizable portion of the church population.

D. Paul was incredulous (unable to believe it, v. 22). Didn't they have their own homes to have their meals on their own? Did they really despise the church family? Did they put to shame those who have nothing? Imagine you are one of the poor folks in the church—how would you feel if the "in" crowd kept you at arm's length and did not let you eat with them? Some of them were becoming drunk on the wine and stuffing themselves, while you went hungry. What kind of church is that? There is nothing praiseworthy in it. In fact, it is so bad that the apostle Paul tells them that some are in danger of losing their lives because of God's judgment. This was more than a personal sin that you neglected to confess; and it is more than a little offense or tiff between two members of the church. This was a major division in the body that was an offense to God!

III. The Institution of the Lord's Table, 11:23-26

This is one of the most-read portions of the Bible. Monthly we refer to it in our communion service. It summarizes how the Lord instituted the Table and explains the theological meaning of it.

- A. The apostle Paul did not observe the inaugural Lord's Table himself. He was not a follower of Christ when that event occurred. He received the information directly from Jesus during his early post-conversion years in which he was being trained for Christian ministry. Paul had previously reported exactly what he had learned to the Corinthian church. Now he was doing it again to review for them.
- B. The narration is simple. See Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-20. The Lord took each element, gave thanks, and distributed it to the disciples for them each to partake.
- C. About the meaning of the elements, of the bread, Jesus said, "this is My body" by which He obviously meant it is a symbol of his body that was reclined at the meal before the disciples' very eyes. It was about to be "broken" in death for them because of sin. The cup represented the blood of Christ which was the life of Christ poured out in that death. On that blood, a promise called the New Covenant is based. After each element, He said "do this in remembrance of Me." So the meaning of the Table is clear, despite all the arguments about it over the centuries. It is a remembrance, a memorial service. It is not a mystical, magical, sacramental, or otherwise supernatural thing. It is eminently natural and makes use of the human senses and mind. It demonstrates our participation in Christ and helps us remember our connection to Him.
- D. Paul then adds that whenever the church partakes of the ordinance, what they are doing is making known the truth of how Jesus died for sinners. We are announcing the gospel and making the statement that we are partakers of it. We continue to do this until the Lord returns. At that time, the Lord will again enjoy the fruit of the vine in the Kingdom of the God of Heaven (Matt. 26:29).

Conclusion

Implications of the Lord's Table. First, the service is beneficial for your own spiritual life because it "schedules in" an opportunity for you to think about what the Lord has done for us and how your conduct and thought patterns match up with it. Being absent from it for months is not good for your spiritual life. Second, it is also beneficial for the church corporately because it reminds us that we are on the same team, in the

same family, sharing together in common the life of Jesus because of His death. Third, it is a symbol of the entire gospel. To any watchers, we tell the whole story of Christ's life, substitutionary death, resurrection, defeat of Satan, ascension, return, kingdom, and glory after suffering.

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