

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Lord's Table I Corinthians 11:17-34

Why do Christians go through the ritual of eating bread and drinking wine? Why do they call it the Lord's Table? Why does everyone get so serious and even somber when this ritual is observed? First Corinthians 11:17-34 will give us the answer to these questions.

Starting in chapter eleven, Paul deals with problems of public worship in the local church at Corinth. The three errors in their public worship were 1) Women failing to have their heads covered when praying and prophesying; 2) A perverting of the Lord's Table; and 3) A misuse and abuse of tongues in the assembly.

I Corinthians 11:17-34 deals with the problem of the proper procedure for the Lord's Table. This ritual was instituted by our Lord in the Upper Room during the Jewish Passover Supper (Luke 22:14-20). Jesus Christ set forth the Lord's Table as an ordinance or sacrament until He comes again.

Within twenty years of its institution the Corinthians turned the Lord's Table into a disorderly feast. At this time the Apostles were still living. We need not wonder about the corruption of the Lord's Table after two thousand years.

The Christian's only criterion for setting forth the meaning and procedure of the Lord's Table is the Bible which is the sole authority for faith and practice. This is the only sacrament on which our Lord gave specific instruction. It must, therefore, be important.

THE PERVERSION OF THE LORD'S TABLE 11:17-22

In the following directives I have no praise for you. Paul could not praise the Corinthians for their observance of the Lord's Table. He actually censures them severely.

For your meetings do more harm than good. Their public worship was so conducted that evil rather than good resulted. Instead of the Lord's Table being supremely an act of edification, it was having a disruptive effect.

I hear that when you come together as a church. This tells us that the church is a local body of Christians not a church building. The church is never referred to as a building in the New Testament. When the local church came together, they observed the Lord's Table. At first it was daily. As the church matured, they seemed to observe it weekly on the Lord's Day.

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight (Acts 20:7).

There are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. Paul continually heard of the divisions in Corinth among God's people. This division was due to sin and he rebukes them for their party spirit. He was a wise man and did not accept every story he heard. He realized that there was some exaggeration, but he also realized that there was some truth in what he was told.

No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. The word "differences" means to choose a viewpoint or side. This is not separation from the church, but dissensions within it. There were cliques, not sects, parties separated from each other by alienation of feelings, and also some differences of opinion over secondary doctrine. There were cliques of the rich, the poor, the Jewish converts, the Gentile converts, those who had spectacular spiritual gifts and those who exalted their particular leader.

Everybody in the local church does not have the same training, background, upbringing, theology or whatever, so there will be different points of view. That is normal and healthy, for it allows for the truth to be manifested. People should be allowed to express their feelings and thinking so they can be corrected or approved in love.

In His providence, God permitted cliques in the Corinthian church for a purpose, but He does not desire them. The purpose was that those who were biblically correct might stand the test and be approved. Internal strife causes God's people to go to the Bible to find out what it teaches on the subject.

Paul says God has a wise purpose in permitting factions in the church. By disorders, God puts His people to a test. It is a great consolation to know that dissensions, whether in the church or in the state, are not fortuitous, but are ordered by the providence of God and are designed as storms for the purpose of purifying God's people.

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat. It was the custom in those days to have a love feast or fellowship supper before observing the Lord's Table. At the love feast people would bring food and all would share it. Originally it was a meal of unity the poor got to eat the fancy food of the rich and this assured the poor of a good meal. These love

feasts soon became a corrupting factor to the observance of the Lord's Table. These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves (Jude 12). Due to drunkenness and selfishness, the Agape (love feast) was put after the Eucharist (thanksgiving) in the worship service of the local church, but this did not stop the perversion. Then the Agape was moved to Saturday night and this brought more revelry. So the Agape was abandoned altogether.

This supper was not just for social reasons but it had a spiritual emphasis. Perhaps it was originally patterned after the Passover Feast. Whatever, the Lord's Table was designed to show unity and was a time of great joy, but the Corinthians were a far cry from a unified group.

For as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. It appears the rich would go ahead and selfishly eat before many of the slaves could arrive. There was no spirit of fellowship among them. Slaves had no days off, worked very long hours and Christian meetings were held in the evening.

One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Often the poor did not have enough to eat because of the selfish rich. For most, these suppers were just satisfying physical hunger but meeting no spiritual need. Also, many came to the Lord's Table "stone drunk" or became intoxicated while there. They were abusing the love feast. They treated this religious meal as if it were a licentious entertainment. Incidentally, this proves that the early Christians used real wine in communion. Yet, they abused their liberty and fell into sin. It is not necessary, however, to use real wine in communion. Any fruit of the vine will do since it is only a symbol.

Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Paul says what they were doing was a perversion of the Lord's Table because they made it an ordinary meal designed to satisfy only their hunger. They had their homes for ordinary meals. Paul is not saying it is wrong to have potluck (covered dish) dinners in the church or that it is wrong to drink wine, but if that is all these folks came together for, to party, they could do that at home. If they were going to be indifferent, selfish and uncaring about their brethren and make the Lord's Table a common meal, they might as well stay home.

Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? By their attitudes and actions they were bringing shame and disgrace upon the church. The contempt of the rich for the poor was abominable and brought shame on the poor. When the rich and powerful show contempt to the poor, uneducated, those of a different race and color in the church, this brings disgrace to the church and to the name of Jesus.

What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! Paul would not tolerate sin among God's people and he often rebuked them for it.

If the Lord's Supper is a meal of unity, it is not the Lord's Supper if we partake of it in disunity and factions. We are kidding ourselves when we think that we can have differences and hatreds and jealousies and competitions with other members in the body and then partake of the Lord's Supper as some sort of tradition that makes everything okay (Knofel Staton, First Corinthians).

THE PURPOSE OF THE LORD'S TABLE 11:23-25

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you. This is the earliest written account of the Lord's Table because the Gospels were not written before First Corinthians. It appears that Paul received the meaning of the Lord's Table directly from Christ Himself through special revelation (Gal. 1:12; 2:2). He received it and passed it down as a tradition.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; The bread is merely a symbol which represents Christ's body which was the perfect sacrifice for sins. The word "bread" could be translated "loaf," indicating that the bread of the communion came from one loaf (Matt. 12:26 cf. I Cor. 10:16, 17). The one loaf speaks of unity.

There are many arguments to show the bread is but a symbol and not the actual body of Christ as the Roman Catholics believe (transubstantiation). If the bread were actually the body of Christ, then there were two bodies of Christ in the Upper Room that night -- one in which He lived and the one He held in His hand.

Notice this does not say, "Which is broken for you" as the King James Version says. The word "broken" is not in the better manuscripts and the Apostle John tells us that no part of Jesus' body was broken. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." (John 19:36). The giving of His body speaks of grace in willingly going to the Cross for sinners. And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you (Luke 22:19).

The bread not only reminds us of Christ's sinless body which was given for us in grace, it also reminds us that we live spiritually because of the body of Christ which rose from the dead. Each time we pass the bread among ourselves and partake of it, we are reminding ourselves that Jesus Christ is our life. He is the only one by whom we live. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

Do this in remembrance of me. The Lord's Table is a time to remember the person of Jesus Christ and His glorious and efficacious work upon the Cross for us. Everything in the observing of the Lord's Table should be done so as to cause the believer to remember Christ.

This is a command so we must observe the Lord's Table. It is a command in the present tense in the Greek so we are to do it over and over again. The early Christians seemed to have thought the Lord's Table commemorated Christ's resurrection as well as His death, seeing they selected the first day of the week for this memorial (Acts 20:7).

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." At His death, Christ officially enacted the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34. This covenant is for Israel, but the Church, as spiritual Israel, partakes of the benefits of salvation. The wine is a symbol to remind us of the precious blood of Jesus which was shed for our sins.

We are New Covenant (not Old Covenant) believers and Christ died for each one of His people. The New Covenant spotlights unity, not factions; peace, not hostility and reconciliation with brothers and sisters, not alienation.

It is during the Lord's Supper that we should thank God for allowing his Son to die on the cross for us. And we ought to meditate upon the cross. But also during the Lord's Supper, we ought to be aware of the people sitting in front of us, around us, and behind us. We ought to thank God that we are united to them in Christ. During the Lord's Supper, we should bring to God names of people who have special needs and wants and are hurting. During the Lord's Supper, we need to cleanse our minds of any divisions, alienation, or lack of forgiveness that separates us from any of God's children (Stanton, First Corinthians).

There was probably a common cup to indicate that all Christians are one in Christ (I Cor. 10:16). One cup is not necessary nor is it necessary to have real wine. The symbol is the important issue.

THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL BY THE LORD'S TABLE 11:26

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. The Lord's Table was designed to be a proclamation of the death of Christ to the unsaved to be observed until He returns. It is an unwritten sermon to the lost concerning the death of Christ for sinners. Therefore, it is a means of evangelism.

At the second coming of Christ, the Lord's Table will end for the commemoration of One who is absent will cease when that One returns. There is no need for symbols of the body when the body itself appears. Then instead of drinking in memory of Him, He will drink with us in His kingdom. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

THE PROCEDURE FOR OBSERVING THE LORD'S TABLE 11:27-32

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner. In context this refers to the Corinthians who were partaking of the Lord's Table unworthily. There was party strife, selfishness, drunkenness, divisions, alienation and a lot of lack of forgiveness. Paul is speaking about taking the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner. The Corinthians had made a common meal out of it with great sin. To partake unworthily is to fail to realize the significance of the elements.

Paul does not say a person must be worthy to partake; this would exclude all Christians because all are sinners. There are many conscientious and sincere people who feel they are unworthy because they have a great consciousness of sin. He does not say one has to live a flawless and perfect life for no one can do that. Even with all the help the Holy Spirit gives us, there are times of failure, weakness, frustration, confusion and sometimes deliberate sin. To come to the Table "unworthily" is to come with a wrong state of mind. The Corinthians were coming to the Table of the Lord with a flippant, selfish, divisive and frivolous behavior.

Every Christian feels unworthy when he comes to the Lord's Table. But the believer has found acceptance in the Worthy One, and in Christ he is worthy to approach the Table of the Lord.

There are many ways a Christian can come to the Lord's Table unworthily today. During the time of the communion we may be thinking about everything but Christ. We may be occupied with the business of the week, recalling the latest joke, thinking about the Sunday afternoon meal, anxious to get home to the football game, or looking to see what the lady in the pew in front of us is wearing. We partake unworthily if we are not thinking of the Savior and His work but are simply going through a ritualistic service with no reality. Perhaps one can partake unworthily if he has come to the Lord's Table without preparing for it, without searching his own heart for secret sins and confessing

them to the Lord. The Lord's Table is a serious thing and our thoughts and attention should be riveted on the person of Jesus Christ.

Will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. To partake unworthily is to be guilty of a sin which concerns the body and blood of the Lord.

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. This means a person is to examine himself with a view to being approved in order to partake. Every Christian should test himself to show that he is properly in line for observance of the Lord's Supper. Before taking part in such a service, the very least that a Christian can do is to conduct a rigorous self-examination. Failure to do so will result in communicating "unworthily." No matter what he sees in himself of that which is evil and unholy, if he judges himself before God and confesses his own unholiness, he is in a state of soul where he is free to participate in this sacred service. Examination seems to imply the confession of any known sin in the life.

When we examine ourselves and see things that are wrong, we should say, "Lord, I'm sorry; I have sinned. Please forgive me. I must not act this way because it displeases You."

No person should ever sit down at the Lord's Table without properly examining himself. Just as you form a judgment on the significance of the body and blood, so one ought to form a judgment on himself. It is not enough to be "born again" to participate; the privilege to exercise that right depends upon one's fellowship with God through Christ. The Christian who is born again and in fellowship may participate in the Lord's Table.

When a person has examined himself and confessed the known sins, he most certainly may participate with freedom. Once confession is genuinely made, there is no need to flagellate oneself for that sin. It is done and over with and is under the blood.

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. This is not "damnation" as the King James Version translates

it. It means judgment or discipline. The Christian who partakes of the Lord's Table unworthily stands in line for God's discipline.

The Christian will bring discipline upon himself if he does not distinguish the Lord's Table from an ordinary meal, making it commonplace rather than a sacred, holy service. The Corinthians were disregarding the meaning of the symbols, thus disregarding the body of the Lord. The significance of the Lord's Table is to point the Christian to Jesus Christ and his work of the Cross for hell-deserving sinners.

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. God's discipline on these Corinthians for taking the Lord's Table unworthily was that some were physically weak, some had diseases and some were dead (had died because of the sin unto death). To partake of the Lord's Table is a serious business and has serious consequences for those who do not partake worthily.

Not all sickness and death is the result of partaking of the Table in an unworthy manner, but this is one of the reasons. If we are sick, this might be God's red flag to warn us. Perhaps you are being tripped up by some sin or reflecting the spirit of the world. God may use the Lord's Table to say to you, "Slow down; think through your actions."

But if we judged ourselves. Now Paul tells the Christian what happens when we do judge ourselves, confessing our known sins to the Lord. Coming to the Lord's Table means we should judge ourselves not others. Christianity is individual and personal and each believer stands or falls before his God.

We would not come under judgment. Here is wonderful, marvelous grace. The Christian may avoid the discipline of God by a careful examination of his sins and confessing them to the Lord. The believer may stop discipline by confession. Loss of physical health and spiritual rewards can be stopped by an honest judgment of self.

When we are Judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined. When discipline comes, it is from the hand of a loving Lord and always for the Christian's profit. God is far more concerned about our holiness of life than we are. He will discipline every child who truly belongs to Him. If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons (Heb. 12:8). No discipline means we are not God's children.

So that we will not be condemned with the world. God's loving but firm discipline of His children distinguishes them from the unsaved world. Remember, the Christian gets all the sorrow, all the trouble, all the tears he will ever have right here in this world. When he is chastened of the Lord and comes under the rod and is beaten for his naughtiness, it is in order that he should not be condemned with the world. When the believer gets to heaven, there will be no more discipline. Remember, God always disciplines in love and for our profit.

PREPARATION FOR THE LORD'S TABLE 11:33-34

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. Paul says that when Christians come to the love feast and observe the Lord's Table, they should wait for one another. There should be an attitude of oneness and fellowship. There should be a thoughtful, courteous spirit towards the brethren.

If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. If a person is just at the Lord's Table to feed his face, it is best to stay home. If he wants only fellowship and not the spiritual emphasis, let him not even come. Why? If he comes, he is inviting discipline on himself.

And when I come I will give further directions. There are probably other details about the Lord's Table which Paul did not deal with but undoubtedly he dealt with the major things in this passage.

Michael Green has a clever way of remembering the Lord's Table: look back (to Christ's death), look in (self-examination), look up (fellowship with Christ), look around (fellowship with each other), look forward (to Christ's return) and look outward (to proclaim God's word to others).

CONCLUSION

If a person who professes to be a Christian goes month after month living in sin, holding some grudge, feeding some prejudice, and nothing in the way of discipline ever happens, then it is very likely that person is no Christian at all. God will not allow His own people to be condemned with the world. That is why He brings divine discipline.

If you are not a Christian, receive Christ as your Savior and Lord. Then you will have forgiveness of sin and will not be condemned with the world. The only judgment a Christian can ever know is that which comes from the hand of a loving heavenly Father. Why? Because God has made the Christian part of the spiritual family of God by grace and through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.