

Honoring the Body of Christ at the Lord's Table

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

It's no secret that churches disagree about the theology of the Lord's Table and how it should be practiced.

- For starters, there is the issue of what exactly "happens" when we eat the bread and drink the cup. Views range from transubstantiation (bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ) to consubstantiation (where Christ is "in and around" the elements) to a simple memorial view (where the church is simply remembering what Christ accomplished on the cross).
- There is the issue of what type of bread to use and whether you use actual wine or something else.
- There is the issue of how often to practice the Lord's Table - whether weekly, or monthly, or quarterly, or less often.
- There is the issue of how the elements are distributed – whether you come forward or wait for the elements to be distributed where you are sitting.
- Churches have disagreed over just who is authorized and qualified to administer the elements - whether it has to be ordained clergy or not.

What is ironic is that the passage that most fully addresses the actual practice of the Lord's Table in the local church doesn't address these issues. As a matter of fact, the issues that I have mentioned are largely ignored by the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 11 - where Paul discusses how the Corinthians should practice the Lord's Table - the primary issue he wanted them to consider was their unity. The lack of unity within the church at Corinth made their practice of the Lord's Table a sham.

What we are going to see is that ***we cannot honor Christ at the Lord's Table unless we honor the "body of Christ" (the church).*** People who say they value the body and blood of Jesus Christ at the Lord's Table should also value the church - the body of Christ for which He died.

1 Corinthians is a case study in disunity. Their disunity surfaced in a most pronounced way when they celebrated the Lord's Table. Since we don't celebrate the Lord's Table the way the Corinthians did, any disunity we might have would surface differently. Nevertheless, as we'll see, the Lord's Table does provide a built-in opportunity for us to evaluate our relationships within the church and whether or not we are being diligent to preserve our unity.

"Divisions" at the Lord's Table. (v. 17-22) Verse 17 sets the tone for the whole passage:

17 But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.

Whereas Paul had earlier praised them for the way they held to the traditions he had delivered to them (v. 2), here he explicitly tells them that he ***does not*** praise them. As a matter of fact, he

says that they were worse off - not better off - when they came together as a church. Paul explains why in verse 18:

18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.

In other words, Paul says, "I wasn't shocked when I heard that there were divisions within the Corinthian church." We get our word *schism* from the term Paul uses for divisions (*sci,smata*). Back in chapter 1 Paul had lamented the divisions that existed among them. Paul had been informed that the Corinthians had aligned themselves around specific teachers (Cephas, Apollos, Paul) instead of solely around Jesus Christ.

Paul says a rather surprising thing in verse 19. He says that "factions" are actually *necessary* in some churches - that they serve a valuable function.

19 For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

Paul was convinced that factions were necessary in Corinth in order to expose who is actually "approved by God" – who had God's approval. The idea is that conflict and division surface the true character of people. It's better, of course, not to have divisions. But when there is disunity, it is good for factions to surface so that they can be confronted and corrected. That's exactly what Paul does in the rest of the chapter.

In verses 20ff Paul lays out his grievances concerning their practice of the Lord's Supper:

20 Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, 21 for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

Paul said in verse 20, that even though they called it "the Lord's Supper," their practice had become so distorted that it could no longer legitimately be called "eating the Lord's Supper." The first century church practiced what was called the *agape* or the "love feast" held in someone's home. Much like a modern pot-luck dinner, people brought food to be shared. Sharing a meal together signified fellowship and an acceptance of each other. Sharing a meal probably flowed out of the fact that the first Lord's Supper was at a Passover meal the night when Jesus was betrayed. But the way they were conducting themselves violated the spirit and the intent of the Lord's Supper.

At the heart of their malpractice of the Lord's Supper was a selfish disregard for others in the church. Verse 21 indicates that some people would take in such quantities of food and drink that they were stuffed and drunk while others went hungry. Paul's comment in verse 22 is that they should have stayed home if their objective was merely to eat and drink.

22 What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.

Paul seems to be directing his comments primarily to those who were "well off" financially in the church at Corinth; he says in verse 22, "Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing?" Some have suggested the scenario in which the more wealthy Christians were able to show up at the meal first with lots of food; poorer Christians who had little control over their work schedules showed up later. The rich would get full and drunk while the poor showed up to find that all the food was gone. This scenario is consistent with Paul's instruction at the end of the chapter (verses 33-34):

33 So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. 34 If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment.

By waiting for one another and eating *together*, they were to demonstrate their unity and equality within the body of Christ. By their current practice, however, they "despise[d] the church of God" and "shame[d] those who have nothing"! As we'll see, it is no small thing to despise the church for which Jesus shed His blood.

We don't practice the "love feast" the way the first century church did; our disunity would show up in a different way. So, we'll need to consider whether or not we violate the spirit of the Lord's Supper by our attitudes and actions toward each other (i.e., disunity) apart from the Table.

Remembering Jesus' body and blood at the Lord's Table. (vv. 23-26) Paul explains why their malpractice of the Lord's Table was such a grievous sin:

23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

The bread was to remind them that Jesus had given His body for them. The cup was to remind them that Jesus' blood had inaugurated a new covenant for the people of God. At the heart of the old covenant were the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone. In the new covenant, God promised to write His law on the human heart. Obedience would not flow from a heart indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And so, as they partook of the Lord's Supper, they were supposed to remember this new relationship they had with God and just how much it cost Him to bring it about. Such a celebration of the Lord's Table is a "proclamation of the Lord's death"; the church continues this proclamation until He comes and we can celebrate the great marriage feast of the Lamb with Him in heaven.

Consequences of Dishonoring "the body of Christ" at the Lord's Table. (vv. 27-34) After reminding them of Jesus' own instructions about the Lord's Table, Paul warns them about the consequences of their own practices.

27 Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

The adverb translated "in an unworthy manner" (NASB) is used only here in the New Testament. The point was that there is a worthy and an unworthy way to eat the bread and drink the cup. The Corinthians were clearly partaking in an unworthy manner. In order to avoid such malpractice of the Lord's Table, Paul writes in verse 28:

28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

It is certainly appropriate to examine ourselves to see if there is ***anything*** in our lives that displeases the Lord. When we partake of the Lord's Table, we are saying, "I have accepted Jesus' sacrifice for my sin. I belong to Him. Since He died for me, I should live for Him." We examine ourselves to see whether our lives line up with that proclamation. In the context of 1 Corinthians 11, however, perhaps Paul's primary focus involves examining ourselves concerning our relationships within the body of Christ. In verse 29 Paul writes:

29 For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly.

Some translations read, ". . . if he does not judge the body ***of the Lord*** rightly." The different translations are based on different Greek manuscripts. The question is whether they were misjudging the ***physical body of Christ*** which was sacrificed for them or whether they were misjudging the ***church*** as the "body of Christ." Here in 1 Corinthians 11, the two go hand in hand: because they didn't hold the sacrifice of the body of Christ in highest regard, they didn't hold other believers in highest regard. Jesus sacrificed Himself ***for the Church*** (Ephesians 5:25-26). They failed to honor both the sacrifice of the body of Christ ***and*** the Church as the body of Christ. In this way they invited the judgment of God at the Lord's Table.

[Back in 10:17 Paul made the point that the one loaf of bread that was used at the Lord's table signified that there is only one Church, one "body of Christ." Eating and drinking unworthily makes a mockery of this reality.]

Paul gets more specific in verse 30:

30 For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

Scripture is very consistent in teaching that sometimes sickness (and even death) is the consequence of sin. It isn't *always* - as the example of Job proves (his sores were clearly not God's judgment). But it is sometimes. Paul was convinced that *many* of the Corinthians were sick and some even died as a result of their malpractice of the Lord's Table. This is a sobering truth that should make us very cautious about the way we approach the Lord's Table. We're not talking about being paranoid about living a perfect life or about getting all the details "right," but rather a warning against arrogance towards others in the body of Christ (ultimately arrogance toward God). If you examine yourself and conclude that through your attitudes, words, or actions, you have "despised the Church of God" or "shamed those who have less than you" it would be better not to partake of the Lord's Supper than to partake in an unworthy manner.

Jesus taught in Matthew 5 that if you are at the altar and there "remember that your brother has something against you," you should first go and be reconciled; then you are ready to go back and worship God. This principle applies to the Lord's Table. If you have offended people and have not pursued reconciliation, it is better to not partake than invite the judgment of God. If you have belittled or slandered others in the church, it is better not to partake than invite the judgment of God. If you have looked down on others because they don't live up to your standards or expectations, it is better to get your heart right before partaking of the Lord's Table.

Reconciliation is not always easy; not everyone will do the hard work of forgiveness and restoration. Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."

The principle in verse 31 is that we should judge ourselves so that God doesn't have to:

31 But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged.

But even if God does judge/discipline us, it is for our good, not to destroy us:

32 But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.

God disciplines us in order to train us in His ways. He isn't condemning us. Even if He has to get our attention through some sort of trial or suffering, we can be assured that His intentions toward us are always benevolent. We know from Hebrews 12:5 that God's discipline is an expression of His love, not His anger. Because He is committed to our spiritual maturity, God disciplines us consistently and effectively. Paul summarizes his exhortation to them in verses 33-34:

33 So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. 34 If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment. And the remaining matters I shall arrange when I come.

We have considered a passage in which addressed the Corinthians' disunity. We should each examine ourselves and ask, "Am I contributing to disunity in this church in any way – through what I think or say or do?" This type of examination should happen on an ongoing basis, but the Lord's Table provides a built-in reminder of the importance of honoring the body of Christ.

But we can't miss the larger context: the goal of the church isn't merely to "not fight" or to avoid a "church split." Our goal is to have the type of relationships with each other that causes people to say (as they did of the early church), "My how they loved each other!" We are called to take the message of Jesus around the world, making disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded. We can never do this without deep, deep unity and love for each other.