

1 CORINTHIANS 11.17-34

The Lord's Supper

Intro: You will recall that Paul had already brought up the Lord's Supper in his discussion of eating meat sacrificed to idols (10.16-17). In that passage we learned that it is impossible for a Christian to share or commune with an idol and Christ, showing that our partaking of the Lord's Supper is a matter of our communing with Him, and by extension each other. Paul now returns to the matter of the Lord's Supper, this time to correct its abuse in the Corinthian assembly. You will note that the assembly is clearly in view in this passage as Paul speaks of their "coming together" or "meeting together" 5 times in this chapter (vss. 17,18,19,33,34).

VSS. 17-22, THE WRONG PRACTICE

1. Paul does not describe exactly what was going on in the Corinthian assemblies, thus we can only speculate on exactly what the Corinthians were doing. Some assume that 1st Century churches regularly partook of the Lord's Supper as part of a larger meal. If that is the case, we know nothing of it from the Scriptures. Others believe that the Corinthians met in the homes of the wealthy and sat in different rooms, according to social standing. That may be the case, but we are not told so. We do not know if the Corinthians met in a home, a public space, or an upper room (like those in Troas, Acts 20).
2. However, there are some clues in this passage as to what was going on.
 - » Divisions were apparent in their assemblies (vss. 18-19). Their divisiveness was first brought up in 1.11-13 and was the source of many troubles in Corinth.
 - » They were divided along socioeconomic lines (vss. 21-22). The Corinthians had turned the Lord's Supper into a common meal, and partook of it in such a way that

the poor had nothing to eat. Some believe that the wealthy brought lavish provisions to the assembly and either did not share with poorer members, or ate them before the poor arrived. (Sunday was a regular work day in Greek society, thus Christians among the lower classes would often be compelled to work the day before assembling with the saints).

3. Paul's reaction:
 - » Could not praise them (vss. 17,22).
 - » Rebuked them because they had so perverted its intent, that it could no longer be said that they ate the Lord's Supper (vs. 20).
 - » Accused them of doing more harm than good in their assemblies (vs. 17).

VSS. 23-26, THE RIGHT PRACTICE

1. Note: it is believed by many that 1 Corinthians was written before the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written, thus Paul provides the earliest record of Jesus' words.
2. You will also note that Paul now begins speaking of the authorized practice. Everything he has said before (vss. 17-22) has been wrong.
3. It is interesting to note that Paul mentions that Jesus instituted the Supper "in the night in which He was betrayed," (vs. 23). "that feast of love that was to bring such strength and consolation to Christians was instituted at the very time when human malignancy was engaged in betraying the Saviour to his enemies." (Leon Morris) This may have some bearing on what Paul has to say in vss. 27-32.
4. The importance of the Lord's Supper is conveyed in vss. 24-26.
 - » It reminds us that His body was given for us (vs. 24).
 - » It reminds us that the new covenant is

made possible by His blood (vs. 25).

- » Thus, the Supper is a memorial of what He did, a call to remember the greatness of what He did in allowing us to “share” in Him (10.16-17)
 - » We are to proclaim His death “until He comes,” (vs. 26). “Christ’s death is not itself the End, but the beginning of the End... They have not yet arrived (4:8); at this meal they are to be reminded that there is yet a future for themselves, as well as for all the people of God.” (Gordon Fee)
5. Note on transubstantiation and consubstantiation. The Catholic church and other denominations teach that when blessed, the bread literally becomes the body of Christ. There are a host of problems with this view (did Jesus eat his own flesh?), but you will note that Paul still calls it “bread” when we eat it (vss.26-27).
 4. Thus they should “examine” themselves, not to see if they are sinless (that’s not what Paul means by unworthy), but to see if they are taking the Supper in remembrance and appreciation of the Lord’s sacrifice, that they are judging the body correctly.
 5. They had not been doing so, as was seen in their divisive practices mentioned in vss. 17-22. Thus, many of them were “weak and sick, and a number sleep,” (vs. 30). Their weakened spiritual condition could be tied with a failure to appreciate the Lord’s sacrifice and to remember it in the correct fashion!
 6. Vss. 31-32 represent something of a final appeal: if they would start judging rightly, they need not fear God’s judgment (vs. 31). They were being judged now (Paul’s words to them were a judgment), but if they would accept the discipline they could escape the condemnation that the world will receive (vs. 32)

VSS. 27-32, CALL TO PROPERLY DISCERN

1. Having reminded the Corinthians of the true nature of the Lord’s Supper, Paul now urges them to examine their current practice. Does it fit with the nature of what the Lord instituted?
2. Key to this passage is the idea of judging. They are told to “examine” themselves” in vs. 28, warned of God’s “judgment” in vs. 29 and urged to “judge” themselves and the body of Christ in vss. 29, 31.
3. All of this “judging” was necessary so that they would not partake of the supper “in an unworthy manner,” (vs. 27). “The adverb ἀναξίως (anaxiōs, unworthily) refers to doing something that does not square with the character or nature of something... Paul’s logic is this: The Lord’s Supper proclaims the Lord’s death. Those whose behavior at the Lord’s Supper does not conform to what that death entails effectively shift sides. They leave the Lord’s side and align themselves with the rulers of this present age who crucified the Lord (1 Cor. 2:8; cf. Heb. 6:5). This explains how they make themselves so vulnerable to God’s judgment.” (David Garland)

VSS. 33-34, APPLICATION TO THE CORINTHIAN SITUATION

1. Wait for one another (vs. 33). They had turned the Supper into a meal where factionalism reigned, where the wealthy were fed and the poor went without. This is a call to return to the original purpose of the Supper, to wait for one another so that as a church they could share in the Supper, remembering the Lord’s body and blood.
2. Eat at home (vs. 34). Their turning the Lord’s Supper into a common meal had disastrous consequences! Paul was not forbidding Christians from eating together, but it had no place in the assembly. Eat at home so that the nature of the true Supper was not changed.
3. Note: some advocate partaking of the Lord’s Supper as part of a larger meal. I fail to see how one could read Paul’s words in this passage and conclude that the Supper was part of a larger meal. Paul mentions only two aspects of the Lord’s Supper: the bread and the cup (vss. 24-26; 10.16-17). Anything else is to be left at home!