

# **THE LORD'S SUPPER**

## **Who should come to the table and who should not**

### **I. Introduction**

While the New Testament contains several passages that speak of the Lord's Supper, 1 Cor. 11:17-34 is the only one where the subject is dealt with didactically, that is, where specific instructions are given.

There has been no shortage of bad teaching over the years on what these verses mean and on how participants are to approach the communion table. A Christian woman reported to me that she abstained from communion for eight years because she didn't feel worthy. This was a result of faulty teaching she had received in her church.

The material presented here was first delivered in a five-part series in 2001 (those tapes are still available). The objective is to summarize those teachings and provide a clear explanation of 1 Cor. 11:17-34. Space will not allow for a detailed exegesis of each sentence of each verse. While that would be useful, it is not required to understand Paul's teaching in this passage. For further study we would recommend Gordon Fee's commentary on 1 Corinthians. His research on the historical background of the city of Corinth and the particular issues in its church are especially helpful.

Simply put, the goal of this material is to resolve any confusion about who should go the table and who should not.

#### **1 Cor. 11:17-34**

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. [18] In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. [19] No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. [20] When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, [21] for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. [22] Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

[23] For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, 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." [26] For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

[27] Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. [28] A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. [29] For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. [30] That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. [31] But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. [32] When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

[33] So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. [34] If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

## **II. Understanding the Corinthian Situation**

### **A. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT**

1. When we examine all the information we have about the practice of the Lord's Supper in the early church, we see that it was originally eaten in conjunction with a larger meal. This is the only way to explain verses 20, 21, and 34. Other passages in the New Testament that support this include Matt. 26:26, Acts 2:42-46, Acts 20:7, and Jude 12. It was not merely a little wafer and an oversized thimble. Rather, it was a full meal that included bread and wine.

The 1 Corinthians 11 passage alone informs us that whatever was served could satisfy one's hunger. In fact, it could actually satisfy too much. Thus, the rebukes about drunkenness and gluttony.

2. We also know that the early church met in homes. Those with big enough homes to accommodate everyone were the wealthier members.

3. Also, from the information we have about the customs of that day, we know that the person who offered his home for these meetings and meals would most likely be the one responsible for providing the meal as well (though this may not have been the case with every meal). Perhaps the host of the home church didn't provide all the food, but he would have most likely provided the main dish. At the very least, this expense would have been shared among those members who had the means to provide.

4. Archeology has shown us that the dining room in such homes would scarcely accommodate many guests. Even the wealthy would have had limited space. The majority of the church members, therefore, would eat in the courtyard, which would still seat only about 30 to 50 guests on average. A modern image comes to mind of tables and chairs being set up on the back porch, in the garage, the driveway, the pole barn, and so forth.

5. Finally, and significantly, the city of Corinth itself was a class-conscious society. The rich socialized with the rich and the poor with the poor. No one thought anything about it. Therefore, it would have been natural for the host to invite those of his own class into the dining room while those of lower status ate outside. It was the "proper" and customary way to do things in a city that was much more Roman than Jewish.

In summary, homes and meals were provided by the wealthy. Homes were limited in space. The wealthy ate with the wealthy inside, while the others ate separately outside, or waited until the wealthy were finished. These facts help us understand Paul's rebuke and his instructions.

### **B. IDENTIFYING THE OFFENSE**

Basically, there is one abuse here at Corinth, but it moves in two directions: horizontally and vertically. It is horizontal in the sense that it humiliated others in the church, namely the poor. The offense was also vertical because it showed contempt toward Christ's death, as will be explained later.

In verse 22, Paul condemns the Corinthians for observing the Lord's Supper in a manner that despised God's church and humiliated the poor. Because they were sinning against each other, they were also sinning against the One who had joined them together. They were showing contempt for that which was the basis for their unity, namely, the death of their Savior.

Paul complains in verse 21, “Each one goes ahead with his own meal.” The words “his own meal” emphasize that this was not what it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be a community meal, all sharing equally together. Instead, because of this division between the “haves” and “have nots,” some remained hungry, while others helped themselves.

The Lord’s Supper was intended to be a simple common meal in which everyone shared equally for the purpose of remembering and proclaiming the Lord’s death. This is why Paul says in verse 20, “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat.” In other words, they had ruined it to the point that it wasn’t even the Lord’s Supper at all. They put the emphasis on eating and not on remembering.

It is important to realize that Paul does not rebuke the wealthy for being wealthy, nor does he try to eliminate the social distinctions. Instead, he forbids them from bringing those distinctions to the common meal of the believers where Christ has made them all one, signified by their all eating “one loaf.”

In the previous chapter, Paul emphasized that this is one meal. One loaf. One cup. It was not, and is not now, supposed to be “one’s own meal.”

By going first and eating the privileged portions (in front of the less fortunate) the rich were despising the church by humiliating those who were their brothers and one with them in Christ. In this, the gospel itself was being despised— a gospel that proclaims that all who are in Christ are brothers and sisters of equal standing.

When the church meets, as one body in Christ, to eat from one loaf and give a visible witness to our unity, it is specifically to proclaim Christ’s death and remember what he did for us. Therefore, its significance is not in the food itself, but that which the food symbolizes.

When we show equal concern for each other in a way that befuddles the world, we proclaim Christ’s death, because it is Christ’s death that has made us one. Nothing but Christ’s death can explain our bond of love. When we don’t act like a community of love, we proclaim the opposite message: that Christ’s death means nothing, accomplished nothing, and is worth nothing, because, by our worldly behavior, all can see that it changed nothing.

Because Christ loves us, we love him. And because we love him, we love those he loves. We love each other. The infinite love enjoyed within in the Trinity from eternity past is now a love that we literally participate in. It is this love that unites us, and this love works in us because of Christ’s death. Had Jesus not died, there would be no reason for us to come together in such a spirit of oneness.

So when we live and move in that love, we testify to the remarkable quality of Christ’s death to bring people together in an unexplainable bond. The Corinthians had failed to do this. By humiliating the poor and despising God’s church, they committed the offense of failing to proclaim Christ’s death.

### **C. AN UNWORTHY MANNER: THE FALLACY OF PERSONAL WORTHINESS**

Almost everyone has had the experience of not feeling worthy to take communion. Maybe you have lost your temper with a family member on the way to church. Maybe you hadn’t prayed or studied the Bible much throughout the week. Maybe you gave in to some old temptations. Then Sunday rolls around and you read in 1 Cor. 11:28 that one should examine himself before participating in the Lord’s Supper. Should you take communion or not?

Paul's command in verse 28, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks the cup," has caused many Christians to refrain from partaking of the Lord's Supper. There is a sense that one must pass a personal spiritual inventory test.

We go on to read about eating and drinking judgment on oneself and even getting sick and perhaps dying. Therefore, Christians are often told to sit still for a moment and do some quiet introspection and analyze their walk with God to determine whether they are worthy to go to the table or not.

Verse 27 warns against eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner." This also has led some to think that Paul is referring to one's personal worthiness. The King James Version (which many of us grew up with) seems to suggest this by using the word "unworthily." However, Paul cannot possibly be referring to one's personal worthiness because, in fact, none of us is worthy. Rather, we are all equally unworthy. And that is the beautiful irony of this. This is a table that symbolizes God's grace: what he did for us in spite of our unworthiness.

In verse 26, Paul says that the Lord's Supper is a proclamation about Jesus and his death. It is not a proclamation of anything to do with me, my walk with God, my worthiness to partake, or my self-examination. None of that. It is a statement about Him.

Let's look more closely at a phrase that is often misunderstood and misapplied. Verse 27 reads, "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord." Unfortunately, the KJV and NLT both use the adverb "unworthily." But this is not the best word and it is even somewhat misleading. It is not the *person* who partakes of the Lord's Supper who is unworthy. Instead, it is the manner. It is the way in which the person partakes that is unworthy.

In fact, everyone is equally worthy (rather, equally *un*worthy). Even the rich who despised and humiliated the poor are no more unworthy than the poor they despised. Again, the Lord's Supper is not a proclamation about me, but about Jesus.

The question here is simply this: Does the manner in which the Lord's Supper is observed result in a remembering and proclaiming of the Lord's death, or not? If there is disunity or division then it is not.

#### **D. SINNING AGAINST THE BODY AND BLOOD**

How then does one become guilty of "sinning against the body and blood of the Lord"? We should first note that the expression "body and blood of the Lord" is simply a reference to the death of Jesus. Paul is not trying to give any unusual or special significance to the bread and wine as though there is something especially sacred or mystical about them. They are simply symbols that represent Christ's body and blood. His concern is how the participants "remember" Christ through the bread and wine, not the bread and wine itself.

In the preceding verses, Paul quotes Jesus' expressions "body" and "blood," given in reference to his death in establishing the new covenant. So Paul simply hooks into Christ's own language as he tries to convey just how serious their sin is. The sin is a sin against Christ himself, for it is a corruption of how his death is to be proclaimed.

The words "sinning against" are not in the original language and have been added by some translators to make it read more smoothly. Fortunately, some translations, like the New American Standard and the King James do not add these words, and they simply read: "...whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of

the Lord.” The key word here is “guilty.” In the Greek, that word is actually a technical legal term used to express liability. It literally means, “will have to answer for.”

So, this sentence could actually read something like, “Therefore, whoever participates in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner will share in the liability of Christ’s death.” In other words, when one displays such great disrespect as this, he places himself under the same liability as those responsible for that death in the first place. He is no better off than Judas who betrayed Jesus, nor Pilate who sentenced Him, nor those who conspired against Him. He who participates in an unworthy manner has shown the same contempt for Christ.

Coming to the table with disunity and divisions is not only a sin against those in the church but is also a sin against the head of that church, Jesus. As Paul said earlier to the Corinthians in 8:12, if you sin against your brother, you sin against Christ.

So here is a question every person and every church must ask: Is the significance of our Savior’s death exalted, or ignored? And not just at the table, but in everything the church does? To repeat, when we don’t act like a community of love, we proclaim that Christ’s death means nothing, accomplished nothing, and is worth nothing, because truly, it changed nothing.

#### **E. EXAMINING ONESELF**

Paul adds in verse 28, “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” These words are not intended to be understood as a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the table. It is, rather, a call to repentance, a call to unity, a call to remember that we, the church, are one body in Christ. It is a call to renounce those things that would impede and hinder such unity or, more specifically, anything that would injure a true proclamation of what has been accomplished in Christ’s death.

Our behavior is not to contradict the very gospel we proclaim. Before we participate in the Lord’s Supper, we should check our attitudes toward the church body itself, and consider how we treat others, and see if we are showing equal concern to each other.

We must then accept the challenge to repent of anything that would injure the unity of the body, be it unforgiveness, or pride, or selfishness, or prejudice, or arrogance, or gossip, or backbiting.

This table reminds me that Christ has extended grace to me. Do I, likewise, extend grace to others? If not, then I am to do so. Importantly, if the self-examination reveals sin, the solution is repentance, not abstaining from the Lord’s Supper. Paul does not tell them, “Stay away from the table.”

#### **F. RECOGNIZING THE BODY**

Paul warns in verse 29, “For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.” The key to avoiding the confusion that has long surrounded this verse is answering the question: What body? Is Paul referring to the physical flesh of Jesus or the church body of believers?

First, consider the context of the passage. Paul’s consistent concern is the body of believers, not simply in 11:17-34 but throughout the chapter and, indeed, the entire letter.

In addition, the prepositional phrase “of the Lord” found in the NIV, is not in the original language. It should simply read, “the body.” It should be noted that each time Paul uses the expression “the body,” that expression by itself, without the phrase “of the Lord” and without any reference to the

blood (as is the case here), he always has the church body of believers in mind, not Christ's physical flesh.

### **G. JUDGMENT**

The essence of verse 29 is basically this: "For anyone who participates in the Lord's supper, not being mindful of the intended unity of the church, eats and drinks judgment on himself."

"Not being mindful" means failing to recognize the significance of this unity. It is failing to honor each other in genuine fellowship, not appreciating what Christ did to secure this unity.

The section begins with Paul scolding the Corinthians in verse 22 for despising the church. Now, in verse 29 he tells them what to do about it: discern the church. In fact, on the heels of this passage, in the next chapter, Paul spends considerable effort driving home this very point, that the church is the body of Christ.

In verse 30, we see that the judgment Paul warns of in verse 29 has already begun in their midst. Paul steps into a prophetic role and, by the Spirit, observes a divine cause for some of the illnesses and deaths among them.

We must be careful about trying to impose a universal application here. The text does not teach that anyone, anywhere, at any time, who partakes of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner will get sick and might even die (though nor should we assume such judgment cannot occur). Paul is simply commenting on their situation. He is providing an explanation for them.

Paul also offers the solution in verse 31: "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment." If the Corinthians had been judging (i.e., examining) themselves they would have honored the intent of the Lord's Supper by proclaiming Christ's death through their love for each other. Then such judgments would not have fallen upon them. But the judgments that did come were for their good, not to punish them with God's wrath but to wake them up, as Paul explains in the next verse.

The remedy is quite plain and simple: Wait for each other. And if you are hungry, eat at home first. Once again, it is not, "Don't go to the table." *Do* go to the table, but do so rightly (i.e., in a worthy manner). The expression "wait for each other" is a bit difficult to translate, and could very well mean "welcome each other" or even "receive each other." Either of those possibilities would fit the context. The bottom line is this: They are to have equal concern for each other (an important subject to which Paul devotes much of the next chapter).

### **III. Conclusion**

Who should come to the table? Simply stated, all believers. How should they come? In a worthy manner, that is, recognizing that Christ's death means something, for it has changed our lives, especially in the way we relate to others.

– *Wendell Brane*