

1 Corinthians 11:17-34
The Lord's Supper (part 1)

Introduction

At the church at Corinth there was misbehaviour at the Lord's Table. Hence Paul teaches the meaning of the table, and how people should behave. There are warnings about what had happened at Corinth because of the bad behaviour. Today we are going to look at The Lord's Supper through this teaching in 1 Corinthians, and the meaning of the ordinance. Then next week, the significance of the ordinances (both Baptism and the Lord's Supper), and what blessings we may expect to receive.

The context of Paul's teaching

We regard the Lord's Supper as a most solemn occasion. Dignity and reverence are needed. We remember the Lord's death, and its meaning. But things were far from that at Corinth. The communion service was preceded by a love feast or agape meal (Love feasts were linked with the Lord's Table for some centuries until forbidden in 692AD (Council of Trullen [writing unclear].) The practice has continued in Christian history at various times since. It is a good idea – helps church fellowship.

But at Corinth it was not a real love feast. The whole thing was a mockery, and it caused divisions and quarrels. A few brought their own delicacies and gorged themselves, without sharing. The majority were poor, and could only provide scanty fare – probably coarse bread, cheese and sour wine. One group got more and more drunk as the meal went on, while the others looked on with jealousy and increasing bitterness. This was a mockery of the love feast. And it produced entirely the wrong spirit and frame of mind to partake of the Lord's Supper which followed. It was not the right atmosphere to consider the sufferings of the Lord, and their meaning. Therefore Paul tells them that if they are hungry, and can't wait for others, they are better to eat their meal at home, rather than despise and cause havoc in church (1 Corinthians 11:22,34).

Paul's reinforces this by reminding them of the meaning of the Lord's Supper, and the need to approach in a right attitude.

The Lord's Supper

We are going to consider the important phrases of the passage.

- (a) Source of information. **I have received from the Lord** (1 Corinthians 11:23). Whether directly by revelation or via apostles is not important. The thing is it was from the Lord. Not dreamed up by man. The Lord designed this and attendance is required by the Lord. Come at His command and invitation. Sadly, in many churches, people attend the main service, but there is a mass exodus before the Lord's Table. Here is a requirement of the Lord. There is no higher authority. Church officers and church meeting did not think this up.

Like baptism, it is the Lord's will and requirement. We cannot trifle with the commandments of the Son of God.

- (b) The two symbols which are used. **The Lord Jesus took bread... he took the cup** (1 Corinthians 11:23,25). The Lord is anxious we remember the most important thing He ever did for us, and all the blessings which flow to us. By eating the bread and drinking the wine we show we personally have benefited from His death. He is not only the Saviour of the world, He is my personal Saviour. The bread represents His body, His life given in death. He took the penalty of death in my place. Because Christ has died, I can enter a covenant with God, which lasts forever. By this agreement or settlement, He forgives my sins. He is my God; I am His. He changes my heart and life. The bread and wine make more vivid and real the truths of the Gospel. They are a visual aid. God has clothed His promises in visible signs. The truth not only enters our ears, but also is set before our eyes. The symbols appeal to the senses as well as the mind. They set forth the truth of the Gospel and confirm it to us. Gives assurance of forgiveness of guilt. The ordinances of Baptism and Lord's Supper leave us in no doubt that Christ's death for our sins is the most important thing. Great preacher of the Gospel.
- (c) **This is my body** (1 Corinthians 11:24). The meaning of "is" has caused enormous debate over centuries. One of the causes of Protestant Reformation was the Roman Catholic Church's belief in transubstantiation. At Mass, the words of the priest (not minister) at the altar (not table) change the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ, and therefore the symbols are to be worshipped and adored. Christ's sacrifice is offered again. Calvary is repeated. These masses help to shorten time spent by souls in Purgatory. The Reformers emphatically denied Christ's sacrifice could be offered again. He died once for all, and it was complete. We remember that once for all sacrifice 2000 years ago. The body and blood of Christ are not present at the Lord's Supper, only symbols. A minister presides, and we have a table, not an altar. There is no such place as Purgatory any way. Bread remains bread; wine remains wine. Spiritually present but not physically. "This is..." means "This represents..."; just as the verb "to be" is applied in "I am the Door". The truth is there is no word in Aramaic for "represents", which is why Jesus says, "This is...".
- (d) Purpose of the death of Christ. **Which is for you** (1 Corinthians 11:24) Not just historical facts of Christ's death, but the purpose – for your benefit. That your sins are forgiven and you are saved. That you enter into God's covenant, and belong to the people of God. Eating and drinking the elements indicates that we acknowledge that it was for us. We personally trust Christ. We are God's people. Pledged to be His and walk with Him. It is an act of confession to all around us and to God Himself.
- (e) For how long is feast to be kept? **Until He comes** (1 Corinthians 11:26). Perpetual ordinance. Not for first century only. Words of explanation make it relevant to all believers everywhere. The Gospel message is offered to all men, and so is this remembrance service. C.f. baptism is a command linked with Gospel being preached to all nations (Matthew 28:19). Christ's perpetual presence will be with His disciples till end of age. Therefore they have to keep this ordinance till the end of age and Christ's return. Then we will see Him as He is, and have direct fellowship with our living Lord. Then, and only then,

we shall not need to see symbols which represent Him and His death, because we shall see Him. Just as the Jewish Passover looked back to Red Sea and forward to coming Messiah, so at the Lord's Table we look back to the Cross and forward to the coming of the Lord.

In summary, the Communion service has the authority of the Lord Himself. He is most concerned that we remember above all His death for our sins. It is not just an historical fact, but also for our benefit. And we are to keep it until He comes a second time.

Importance of coming to the Lord's Table in proper manner

In view of the abyss in Corinth's disgraceful behaviour, Paul makes a plea for proper attitude and manner. Communion is not just another service. To eat and drink unworthily, as the Corinthians did, is to be guilty of Christ's body and blood (1 Corinthians 11:27). It demonstrates the same attitude as those who crucified Christ. As a result, the church is chastised. Ill health in church, and even the death of some in the Corinthian church, was because of this wrong attitude to the solemn service of communion. This is indeed severe and extraordinary chastening. Not all sickness is because of sin, but some is allowed because of sin.

Hence the need to behave properly. In their case, Paul advises them to eat at home to satisfy their hunger. Then when they come to the love feast, to wait for one another. There must be no disgraceful scramble. Need to examine self at the Table (1 Corinthians 11:28). δοκιμάζω is the same Greek word used to test metals. So, on coming to the Table, need to examine self. Confess before the Lord any sin. Ask for forgiveness. Come with clear conscience to the Table, or else we make a mockery of it. **For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself** (1 Corinthians 11:29). To eat and drink unworthily does not result in damnation, but it does lead to judgement or condemnation, i.e. not being consigned to eternal perdition. It is a temporal, and not eternal, punishment.

Therefore need to be right with God and with others. It is a church ordinance, for **when you come together** (phrase used five times). There must be no unforsaken sin in the life. Nothing between me and God, or between me and someone else, as far as I can help it. "You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbours and are resolved to lead a new life... draw near with faith and take this sacrament to your comfort and growth in grace." Therefore if there is unconfessed and unforsaken sin, we need to be right with God, else attendance at the Lord's Table is an empty ritual and mockery before God.

Of course perfection is not required. Else who could come? But penitence and faith. Think of the men who were around the table when Christ first instituted the sacrament. They loved Christ, but they were weak in faith. They had little knowledge. Indeed, soon after, one denied, another betrayed, the rest forsook and fled. Yet still they were invited to the Lord's Table even though the Lord knew all about what they were about to do because of the weakness of their faith.

Need to prepare selves for the Table. How many of us actually do that? Is it possible in ten minutes tacked onto the end of the main service? There is such a thing as formalism – even evangelical formalism - and it is valueless.

Conclusion

The Lord's Table is not just another service. It is not the endless repetition of an out-worn ceremony. It is the Lord's provision for His church. Our attitude to it and response to it is a pretty accurate barometer of our spiritual life. It brings us right to the heart of our faith. Puts Christ, His atonement and Second Coming absolutely central. Challenges those who participate and those who watch about the true attitude to Christ.