Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Celebration of the Lord's Supper Part 1
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:17-22
Code: 1846

INTRODUCTION

First Corinthians 11:17-34 is an important part of the New Testament because it deals with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, also referred to as the Lord's Table or Communion. That celebration along with baptism are the two significant ordinances within Protestant Christianity. The reason the church attaches so much significance to them is that they were both instituted and commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, I feel so strongly about a Christian's obedience to those two practices that I think a Christian should question his own commitment if he does not observe them. Sometimes we struggle to know exactly what God's will is on a certain issue, but these ordinances are clearly commanded as a vital part of Christian experience. They should not be taken lightly, and certainly shouldn't be ignored.

A. The Historical Context

1. The deliverance from slavery

On the night before His death, our Lord Jesus Christ gathered with His disciples in the upper room to eat the Passover meal. Every year the Jewish people met together to celebrate the Passover, which was a special meal designed by God to commemorate the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. After Israel had been in bondage in Egypt for over 400 years, God would deliver them from Egypt and bring them to the land of Canaan, which was to be their own land, having been promised by God to their forefathers. He brought upon Egypt a series of plagues designed to free the nation from Pharaoh's clutches. It was only after the last plague--the death of the firstborn throughout the entire land of Egypt--that Pharaoh finally agreed to let the Israelites leave. The children of Israel protected themselves from the angel of death who took the lives of the firstborn by taking the blood of a slain lamb and applying it to the doorposts and lintels of their houses. Then they were to eat the roasted lamb along with some unleavened bread and bitter herbs as the Passover meal.

Whenever an Israelite participated in the annual Passover feast, he would remember that God delivered his nation out of bondage in Egypt. The Passover celebrated today still remembers that great historic deliverance, but tragically misses the greater deliverance that it foreshadowed--the cross of Christ.

2. The deliverance from sin

a) Instituted by Christ

Jesus took that ancient feast and transformed it into a meal with new meaning when He instructed His disciples to drink of the cup and eat of the bread in remembrance of His death on their behalf. Therefore, Calvary has superseded the exodus from Egypt as the greatest redemptive event in history. Christians don't recall the blood on the doorpost and the lintel, but the blood shed at the cross. The Lord's Supper is a memorial that Christ Himself instituted. He became the ultimate fulfillment of deliverance from sin and death when He died on the cross and shed His blood.

Mark 14:22-25 records the account of the Passover meal known as Last Supper of our Lord: "As they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave to them; and they all drank of it. And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament [or, covenant], which is shed for many. Verily I say unto you, I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until the day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God. " That incident is also recorded in Matthew 26:26-29 and Luke 22:17-20, alluded to in John 13:12-30, and commented on by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-34.

b) Observed by the church

(1) The fellowship described

The Lord's Supper became the normal celebration of the early church. Upon hearing Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost, says many of the people in Jerusalem "were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them [who had already believed in Christ] about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:41-42). The early church was involved in four basic activities: teaching the revelation the apostles had received from God, ministering to believers, observing the Lord's Supper, and praying.

During the Jewish celebrations of Passover and Pentecost, many pilgrims would come to Jerusalem and live with other Jewish families. Many of those pilgrims were saved through Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost and chose to remain in the city. The Christian residents of the city therefore had to take care of the converted pilgrims who had no livelihood. For that reason it was necessary for the early church to share and sell their possessions for the benefit of those pilgrims (Acts 2:44-45). In the same way the needs of slaves who had been saved were also met. The sharing of possessions and meals became a unique expression of community in the early church.

The breaking of bread became synonymous with a fellowship meal. The early church incorporated the Communion established by Jesus onto the end of their fellowship meals. Eventually that combination of a fellowship meal and Communion became known as a "love feast" (Gk. ,agap[ma]e; Jude 12).

The early church attached Communion to a common meal not only because the Lord Jesus had done so, but because the Jewish people had always associated the Passover with a meal. The Gentiles likewise included a potluck meal (Gk. , eranos) with their religious festivals. So the early church followed that Jewish and Gentile cultural patterns in combining a meal with the Lord's Supper.

(2) The frequency delineated

I'm convinced that the early church celebrated the Lord's Table on a daily basis (cf. Acts 2:46). In fact, it is not unlikely that they may have had Communion with every meal they ate. It was common in those days for fellowship to revolve around a table as people ate together. The host simply sat down, took a piece of bread, broke it, and that act initiated the meal.

Later in the life of the church the frequency of sharing a meal with Communion had been reduced to a weekly pattern (Acts 20:7). When the church met together on the first day of the week, they would have a fellowship meal and Communion, followed by a sermon. The love feast, however, gradually faded away since it was a practice of the culture and not something instituted by our Lord or the apostles.

Since the Bible doesn't specify the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper or other particulars, it would be acceptable to observe it after any meal whether in the home or the church. The important point is that you obey what the Lord says and exercise the wonderful privilege of commemorating the death and anticipating the return of Christ.

B. The Literary Context

One of the abuses that had arisen in the church at Corinth involved the Lord's Supper. The Corinthians in fact contributed to the death of the love feast. They had obliterated its meaning. In fact, they had selfishly turned it into a drunken and gluttonous exercise that resembled the idolatrous feasts they once participated in. Their practice was so offensive to God that He disciplined some of the Corinthians with illness and death (1 Cor. 11:29-30).

Christianity had broken down socio-economic barriers, yet within twenty years of Jesus' ascension, the Corinthians were starting to put them up again. The well-to-do were supposed to bring the food to the love feast and share it with the poor. But the rich would arrive early and eat all their food in their

exclusive groups before the poor showed up, who ended up going home hungry. In 1 Corinthians 11:33-34 Paul admonishes the Corinthians who were guilty of that: "My brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another. And if any man hunger, let him eat at home, that ye come not together unto judgment. " They had missed the purpose of the love feast, which was to share with others. Such an abuse of Christian love and unity made participation in the Lord's Table that followed a mockery. Their selfish and divisive actions were irreconcilable with the grace and unity made available through the cross (Eph. 2:4-16) and the impartiality of God's love (Acts 10:34).

In chapter 11 Paul seeks to correct the Corinthians' abuses of the love feast and the Lord's Table. Although he had just praised them in verse 2, Paul begins the section on the Lord's Table with a rebuke in verse 17: "Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together, not for the better but for the worse. " The Greek word translated "declare" is parangell[ma]o, which means "to command authoritatively. " Paul was telling them they would have been better off if they had stayed home rather meet. Their worship, instead of being helpful and edifying, was in fact destructive.

It is sad to say, but that condemnation is probably as applicable to many churches today because either the people don't hear or apply the truth, or because they wrangle over personal preferences or trivial theological issues. When a church gets to the place where its meetings are for the worse, it's in real trouble.

In the Corinthian assembly, the worst thing they could do for their spiritual growth was to get together. That's incredible in light of Hebrews 10:24-25: "Let us consider one other to provoke unto love and to good words, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. " The only provoking the Corinthians did was to anger and selfishness. They had degraded the love feast and irreverently slapped the Lord's Supper on the end of it.

LESSON

I. THE PERVERSION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (vv. 18-22)

A. The Report About the Divisions (v. 18)

"First of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it. "

The Greek word translated "church" (ekkl[ma]esia) is never used in the New Testament to refer to a building, but to an assembly of people. The Corinthian assembly of believers was characterized by divisions (Gk. , schismata). That word refers to a difference of opinion. It is used in John 7:43 and John 9:16 of divisions that arose among the people over whether Jesus was sent from God or not.

Paul had heard more than once that there were differences of opinion among the Corinthians when they assembled. Instead of fellowshiping in a spirit of unity, they argued. They had already split the church on theological grounds over which leader to follow (1 Cor. 1:10-12). Now we learn of a social line of separation that had been drawn between rich and poor. That's why Paul said, "I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10).

What causes a church to fight like that and split into factions? Paul gives us a clue in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2: "I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. . . . Ye are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal?" Carnality is pursuing the desires of the sinful flesh rather than being led by the Spirit to fulfill God's will.

Paul had heard reports of the spirit of divisiveness, which pervaded the Corinthian assembly like a raging forest fire. He may have thought they were somewhat exaggerated so he mentioned that he couldn't fully believe them in verse 18.

B. The Reason for the Divisions (v. 19)

"There must be also heresies among you, that they who are approved may be made manifest among you. "

Is Paul saying that the church has to have heresy? Yes, but not in the sense of false teaching. The English word heresy comes from a Greek root that speaks of a group choosing and holding to an opinion. It's translated often in the Gospels as "sect. " It is used in a neutral sense in Acts 26:5 of the sect of the Pharisees. It's used in a negative sense in Galatians 5:20 where it refers to one of the works of the flesh--a self-centered factious clique.

Paul states that differences of opinions in the church are necessary by using the Greek word dei ("there must be" or "it is necessary"). That commonly-used word often indicates something that is necessary because of the will of God. It was used in Luke 9:22 to convey that Jesus must suffer, die, and rise again. Heresies are necessary because God uses them in accomplishing His will: when problems and factions arise, "they who are approved (Gk. , dokimoi) are tested and found to be good. The Greek word for "approved" is used of metals that are refined by fire.

In a sense, evil is necessary to manifest good. You don't know who the peacemakers are in your church until you need someone to make peace. Adversity and contention cause the qualities of leadership, godliness, and being led by the Spirit to become visible in the lives of believers. Trouble

has a way of manifesting personality and spirituality. The "approved" are those who hang in there and give evidence of walking in the Spirit in the midst of a difficult situation.

First Thessalonians 2:4 tells us that Christians are tested or approved of God. They are the ones Christ entrusts His ministry to. Likewise, it is to such tested believers that church leaders should entrust its ministries to. Leaders can identify those who are approved by how they respond to difficulty and disagreements within the body of Christ. I believe one reason some people become ineffective in their ministries is that they fail to stand the test of divinely-designed struggles. Consequently they never reach the place where God will entrust the ministry of the gospel to them. Only those who pass the test of enduring temptation will be rewarded. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he is tried [dokimos], he shall receive the crown of life. " The approved Christian is one who goes through temptation and comes out victorious. He is the wheat among the tares (cf. , Matt. 13:38). First John 2:19 tells us that unbelievers in the church can be identified when they depart from the faith: "They went out from us . . . that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. "

A church going through the process of purification will experience factions. Although factions may initially have the good result of enabling spiritually capable and responsible leaders to rise to the top, they become destructive if left unchallenged. That is why a factious person should be admonished twice and then put out of the church if he refuses to respond (Tit. 3:10). The purity of the church is at stake.

Just in case you think it would be a profitable ministry to develop leaders by creating problems, consider Luke 17:1-2, where Jesus says, "It is impossible but that offenses will come; but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea that he should offend. " Factions are going to happen--just don't be the one who causes them. The church is not to be a place where you stir up trouble.

C. The Rebuke Regarding the Divisions (vv. 20-22)

1. Invalid Communion (v. 20)

"When ye come together, therefore, into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. "

The factious Corinthian Christians had so corrupted the unity of fellowship that the love feast and Communion had become a mockery. The phrase "this is not to eat" could better be translated as "it is impossible to eat. " They may have thought they were observing the Lord's Supper by breaking some bread, passing a cup, and saying some of Jesus' words, but those actions didn't make up for the spirit in which they conducted Communion. Their divisive and selfish hearts produced a superficial ceremony only.

2. Insensitive consumption (v. 21)

"In eating everyone taketh before the other his own supper; and one is hungry, and another is drunk. "

Everyone knows that you don't come to a potluck and sit in a corner, eating your own food. But that's what the Corinthians were doing. The rich were gorging themselves and even getting drunk, while the poor had nothing to eat and remained hungry. They defeated the very purpose of the love feast and the Lord's Supper, which was to harmoniously meet the needs of the less fortunate and remember Christ's sacrifice that made them one. In place of the intended unity there was only selfish insensitivity to the needs of others. Clearly the Corinthians were not experiencing true communion with the Lord and among themselves by sharing the cup and the bread with one another (cf. , 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

3. Incontestable condemnation (v. 22)

"What? Have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? Or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. "

In frustration, as if he were groping for a reason for the Corinthians inappropriate behavior, Paul facetiously suggests that they didn't have houses to feed themselves in. Certainly the group of Corinthians Paul was condemning wasn't roaming the streets to find food and coming to the love feast so they could survive. If they wanted to selfishly indulge themselves, they could have done that at home.

Paul next suggests somewhat sarcastically that this group hated the church and would just as soon destroy it. It almost seemed as though the very thing Jesus had bought with His precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19) and was in the process of building (Matt. 16:18), the Corinthians were trying to destroy by sowing seeds of discord.

Finally he suggests that maybe they wanted to shame the poor. The church is one place--maybe the only place--where rich and poor can commune together in mutual love and respect. Jesus and the apostles taught that (cf. John 13:34-35; James 2:1-9; 1 Pet. 4:8-10; 1 John 3:16-18). Unity through ministry to those in need and those among diverse groups became the pattern for the new church as they shared all things in common.

Although he knew that the Corinthians had homes and did not intend to destroy the church or shame the poor, Paul tells them they are not deserving of any approval from him regarding their behavior at the love feast and the Lord's Table.

CONCLUSION

Barriers among classes of people in the ancient world were rigid. There were clear separations between free men and slaves, men and women, those who spoke Greek and the barbarians who didn't, the educated and the uneducated, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, Roman citizens and those who weren't, and the cultured and the uncultured. But the church came along and shattered all those barriers, as Ephesians 2:14 and Galatians 3:28 indicate. The Corinthians were trying to put back up the very walls that Christ's death had broken down.

First Corinthians 11:17-22 shows us that we have an obligation to come to the Lord's Table. And when we gather together we must be sensitive to the needs of other, being careful that we not do anything that might cause division among fellow believers. There is no place for racial, social, sexual, or economic separations between believers in the church.

We come together to worship God and to celebrate our unity. Let our worship be pure and our unity be real. Rather than being like that of the Corinthians, may our fellowship be like that of the Thessalonians of whom Paul said, "We gives thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father . . . . As touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you, for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another" (1 Thess. 1:2-3; 4:9).

Focusing on the Facts

1. What are the two significant ordinances within Protestant Christianity? Why does the church attach so much significance to them?

2. What was the Passover meal designed by God to commemorate?

3. What kind of deliverance did Christ bring about and how did He accomplish it?

4. Identify the four basic activities the early church participated in (Acts 2:41-42).

5. Why did many pilgrims visiting Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost choose to remain in the city? What was necessary for the Christian residents of the city to do (Acts 2:44-45)?

6. What did the combination of a fellowship meal with Communion become known as? Why was it not surprising for the early church to attach Communion to a meal?

7. How often did the early church begin celebrating the Lord's Table? What frequency did it later reduce to?

8. What had the Corinthian church turned the Lord's Supper into? What did God do as a result?

9. How had the Corinthian church rebuilt the barriers that Christianity had broken down?

10. What characterized the Corinthian assembly of believers? What social line of separation had they drawn?

11. What causes a church to split into factions?

12. Explain why heresies are necessary.

13. To whom does God entrust His ministry?

14. Who will be rewarded, according to James 1:12?

15. According to Titus 3:10, how should a person who causes factions be challenged? Why?

16. Were the Corinthian Christians actually observing the love feast and Communion? How were they defeating the purpose of those celebrations?

17. What became the pattern for ministry of the new church as they shared all things in common?

18. List the kinds of social barriers that existed in the ancient world. How were those barriers shattered? Support your answer with Scripture.

Pondering the Principles

1. Do you make a point of participating in Communion every time it is offered at your church? Have you @neglected that ordinance somewhat, or have you participated in the ceremony without focusing on the truth it is designed to highlight? Reread the different accounts of the Last Supper as well as the Paul's commentary on it (Matt. 26:26- 29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Are you remembering the Lord's death on your behalf and are you looking forward to His return? Consider building a tradition of observing the Lord's Supper as a family or as a Bible study.

2. Do you fellowship regularly with other believers? Is your fellowship characterized by accountability for one another and a mutual love and respect? The church is a unique place where diverse kinds of

people can rally around a common purpose--the worship of our Lord and Savior. Are you doing your part to build unity and harmony in your church? Are you being sensitive to the needs of believers around you? If your church doesn't already have a regular love feast, suggest that they have one with a view to meeting the needs of others and getting to know those you will be spending eternity with. Ask the Lord to deepen your love for one another so the testimony of your spirit of unity may be evident and attractive to the watching world (John 17:20-23).

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