

Understanding the Lord's Table

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Introduction:

1. 1 Corinthians 11 contains the most extensive doctrinal passage on the ordinance of the Lord's Supper in the Bible.
2. Background: "In the early days of the church, Christians celebrated the "agape," or love feast along with the Lord's Supper. The love feast was something like a common meal, shared in a spirit of love and fellowship. At the end of the love feast, the Christians often had the remembrance of the Lord with the bread and wine." (William Macdonald) Jude makes reference to these love feasts as "feasts of charity" (Vs. 12) "Since Christ ate the Passover dinner with His disciples before He instituted the ordinance, the early church continued that practice by eating an evening meal, often referred to as a love feast." (Gromacki)
3. Paul had to correct the Corinthian carnality that had manifested itself at the observance of this feast. When the people of God are walking in carnality, they tend to manifest their carnality in every area of their Christian lives.
4. We will consider the Apostle Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper under 3 divisions:

Observe firstly,

I. Paul's Admonition concerning the Lord's Table (Vs. 17-22)

Paul rebukes...

A. The Divisions within the Assembly (Vs. 17-19)

1. Paul's personal condemnation of the divisions (Vs. 17)
 - a. "I praise you not" = this stands in contrast to the word of commendation in Vs. 2. Paul's godly displeasure as a church leader is expressed against the carnal conduct of the believers.
 - b. "ye come together...for the worse" = rather than their church gatherings being a blessing to their spiritual lives, they were actually damaging. What a sad state of affairs when the gatherings of a local church are actually damaging rather than helping the believers!
2. Paul's pointed characterization of the divisions (Vs. 18-19)
 - a. Schisms (Vs. 18)
 - i. "I hear" = the problem had been reported to Paul and he considered it to be reliable
 - ii. 'divisions' = comes from Greek word 'schisma' (σχίσμα) from which our word 'schism' is derived.

- iii. Webster: “In a general sense, division or separation; but appropriately, a division or separation in a church or denomination of Christians, occasioned by diversity of opinions; breach of unity among people of the same religious faith. In Scripture, the word seems to denote a **breach of charity, rather than a difference of doctrine.**”
 - iv. Christ uses the same word to describe the rending of a garment (‘rent’ Matt. 9:16). It is used in the Gospel of John to describe the division of the people in response to the truth taught by Christ (John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19) See also 1 Cor. 1:10 & 12:25
 - v. Note: Let us not confuse spiritual separation over truth (Jude 1:3-4) and carnal separation over pride and selfishness.
- b. Sects (Vs. Vs. 19)
- i. ‘heresies’ = translated 5 times in N.T. as ‘sect’. It is used to describe the Pharisees and Sadducees (Acts 5:17 & 15:5). “A heresy means a choice that forms a party or union, usually in reference to a false teacher that causes divisions.” (J. Koura) “The root word emphasizes the concept of choice.” (Gromacki)
 - ii. Heresies, says Phillips, refers to “self-willed opinion which opposes truth and which leads to division and to the formation of sects.” Heresies are often doctrinal but are not confined to doctrine as we often use the word today. Like the Corinthian example, they can simply be parties, factions or unions that develop in the church over carnality. “The problem here was social snobbery.” (Phillips)
 - iii. “How tragic to ‘come together’ outwardly as one, yet to be internally rent.” (J. Hunter)
 - iv. ‘approved’ = a word often used of the testing of metals. Church problems have one blessing in this respect, they tend to reveal those who are spiritual as opposed to carnal in the assembly. “The ‘approved’ are those who resist such divisive action, condemn it, and seek actively to retain the unity of the assembly.” (J. Hunter)

B. The Disorder within the Assembly (Vs. 20-22)

The disorder was a manifestation of the divisions.

1. What they were NOT doing (Vs. 20) Paul makes it crystal clear that their observance of the ordinance had morphed into something that was unscriptural and therefore unrecognized and unapproved of by God.

2. What they WERE doing (Vs. 21-22)
 - a. They were acting selfishly, not considering the needs of others around them (Vs. 21)
 - b. They were acting flippantly, despising the church of God by their attitudes and actions (Vs. 22)

Observe secondly,

II. Paul's Instruction concerning the Lord's Table (Vs. 23-26)

He reminds them of what they had previously taught and in so doing, sets out systematic instructions on how the Lord's table is to be observed. Paul instructs them concerning...

A. The Setting in which the Supper was Instituted (Vs. 23)

1. "I received of the Lord" = Paul was not present when the Lord's Supper was instituted but received the teaching concerning it from the Lord through direct revelation.
2. "the same night in which he was betrayed" = reminds us of the historical setting, the sacred and solemn occasion when the observance of the Lord's Supper was commenced by our Saviour Himself. This was the most solemn night of our Lord's earthly life. The shadow of the cross hung over the upper room that night.

B. The Sequence in which the Supper is to be Observed (Vs. 24-25)

1. The First Step – the bread
 - a. The broken bread symbolizes the body of Christ that was broken for us.
 - b. The unleavened bread speaks of Christ's sinless body (See Ex. 12:8)
 - c. Prayer of thanksgiving to proceed the partaking of the bread
2. The Second Step – the cup
 - a. The cup symbolizes the blood of Christ shed for us
 - b. The unleavened wine speaks of Christ's sinless blood. Christ called it the "fruit of the vine" (Matt. 26:29; Mk. 14:23)
 - c. Prayer of thanksgiving to proceed the drinking of the cup. Note the words "after the same manner". Matt. 26:27 also confirms that thanksgiving to proceed the drinking of the cup.
 - d. The cup reminds us of the establishment of the New Covenant through the blood of Christ (Compare Jer. 31:31 & Heb. 9:16-28)

C. The Significance of the Supper that is to be Remembered (Vs. 26)

1. "for as often" = no set rule in relation to frequency but regularity implied and also seen in example of early church in Acts where it was observed daily (Acts 2:41-42) and weekly (Acts 20:7).
2. "ye do shew the Lord's death" = same Greek word translated 'preach' 10 times in the N.T. Also 'declare' (2 times) and 'teach'. The word means to announce, declare, proclaim publicly.

3. When the church observes the Lord's Supper together, it proclaims in a very visual way the truth of the Lord's death. By participating we proclaim it to each other and even to lost observers.
4. "till he come" = our thoughts at the Lord's Table should include thoughts of our Lord's coming. We observe the ordinance in obedience and anticipation of our Lord's return.

Observe thirdly,

III. Paul's Caution Concerning the Lord's Table (Vs. 27-34)

A. Warned to Examine (Vs. 27-29; 31)

1. The wrong approach to the ordinance (Vs. 27 & 29)
 - a. 'wherefore' = for which reason. On the basis of what has just been said (I.E. the sacredness and solemnity of the feast), they are to approach the Lord's Table with reverence.
 - b. 'unworthily' = in an unworthy manner; lightly or flippantly. Gromacki writes, "the lack of worth does not refer to the person himself, but rather to the **manner** or attitude in which he eats. All are unworthy, including believers. Late in his life, Paul still saw himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). But an unworthy saint can partake in a worthy **manner**." In the context of the Corinthian problem, eating and drinking unworthily would be coming to the table with unresolved conflicts within the church or a careless and flippant attitude.
 - c. 'damnation' = judgment. Not eternal punishment but severe chastening from the Lord (Vs. 32)
2. The right approach to the ordinance (Vs. 28, 31)
 - a. 'examine' = to test, prove, scrutinize. Word used of the testing of metals. We are to prepare our hearts before the Lord before we participate in the ordinance. When we judge ourselves, it means we do not need to be judged by God (Vs. 31)
 - b. Illustration: Years ago, Dr. Allan Redpath was staying in a home where there were two boys. One night the family went off to the service, leaving the boys home alone on their promise to be good. When they arrived back strange silence reigned over the house. They called the boys but there was no answer. They went into the living room and there on the table was a pile of broken pieces and a note. The note read, "Dear Mom and Dad, we broke your vase. We are very sorry. We have put ourselves to bed without supper. (signed) Jimmy and Joe." The boys received no further punishment because they had judged themselves.

- c. “and so let him eat...and drink” = the purpose of the self-examination is not so that you might abstain from the Table but that you might participate (preparation followed by participation).

B. Warned by Examples (Vs. 30)

1. Paul gives specific examples of the Lord’s chastening hand within the Corinthian church itself on account of their misuse of the Lord’s Table.
2. Many were weak and sickly
3. Many had died
4. Challenge: To come to the Lord’s Table with the wrong attitude and mindset is a serious matter in the eyes of God. To come to the Table whilst harboring a spirit of division with others in the assembly is a serious matter. To come to the Table with a flippant and careless attitude, not giving proper consideration to the sacredness of the occasion is a serious matter.

C. Warned by Exhortation (Vs. 33-34)

1. Exhorted to wait for one another (Vs. 33). The practice of waiting to drink the cup together is founded on this verse.
2. Exhorted to change their practice (Vs. 34)

Conclusion: May we approach the table this evening being able to say with a clear conscience, “nothing between my soul and the Saviour.”