

"When We Come Together ..."

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

The Lord's Supper, as we'll see, was designed to foster Christian unity, yet it not only divided the Corinthians but many churches. Early Roman Catholicism taught that the bread and wine literally, though invisibly, turn into Christ's body and blood. While Protestant Reformers sharply broke with many Catholic practices, Luther taught that Christ's body and blood were "really present in, with and under the wine" was also unbiblical. Other Reformers swung the pendulum too far, seeing nothing but the memorializing aspect of the Lord's Supper.

The divisiveness has not stopped. Almost every denomination has its traditions on communion: who may participate, who may distribute the elements, what form of food and drink is used, and so on. There is very little in Scripture that insists that the Lord's Supper must be celebrated a certain way or who must officiate or distribute the bread and wine or what particular words must be spoken. No specific frequency of celebration is ever commanded. Weekly, monthly, quarterly? Must it be unleavened bread or bread at all? Must it be wine or just red juice? Is a common cup commanded or can we use individual cups?

Early in the church's history, the inclusion of the Lord's Supper was part of a full meal yet that was never commanded. We see that here in 1 Cor. 11. What does it mean to eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner? While the Lord seems to give us lots of leeway as to how we practice communion, He does expect us at the very least to show Jesus when we come together. And this is the main point Paul wants to emphasize here in 1 Cor. 11:17-34. What's supposed to happen when we come together for the Lord's Supper?

Communion is Meant to Illustrate our Unity **(11:17-22)**

Paul begins this section by telling them he has to rebuke them about how their times of fellowship add to their divisiveness when they should be promoting unity. Early in the church's practice, communion was part of a weekly meal that was called an agape [love] feast, hosted by someone in the church who had a larger home. These were opportunities for the poorer people in the church to get extra food or a better meal than they would get during the week.

While the gospel is for everyone and faith in Christ levels the playing field on people's value [because both rich and poor are sinners and need saving], salvation is an ongoing work of God to make us more like Christ, yet we often struggle with letting Jesus have full control of our lives. And one of these struggles was in the social pecking order. The wealthier people hung around with the wealthier people. And these divisions were still evident in the Corinthian church.

¹⁷ 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!

What an awful thing to say about believers; *'your meetings do more harm than good'*. Every time we come together we come as 'Christians' Christ-ones and that means our life and our gatherings should be

About the Lord, not us (vv.17-19)

Yet do we not make our meetings about us when we inwardly (or outwardly grumble) that things weren't done the way we like them done according to our preferences? This is one of the main points about 1 Corinthians; the church was divided over personal preferences, not united around Jesus. At their communion meals, it was very evident because wealthier people were not waiting for the poorer people to be done work to join them in celebrating a meal and communion together to show Christian unity.

Some things don't change. We make our coming together about us when we want things done our way, even though there is often no biblical warrant for our preference. It's just that, our preference. So how do we change? If we come to church thinking about our own preferences that means we're always thinking about our own preferences instead of thinking about what honours Jesus. Did we not just read in Ch. 10 *"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"*? 'Whatever we do. We're always doing something. So I should always be trying to think about what honours Jesus all the time. Did we think that way before coming today? Did we pray that we would personally honour Jesus today?

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!

It's not the Lord's supper because the Lord isn't being honoured since the Lord's body [the church] are dishonouring one another. Paul was encouraging those who have more that if you're hungry and can't wait for others to come then eat something before you come. You can afford to while some can't. Think about others and not just yourselves. Honour the Lord. Isn't communion all about remembering what Jesus sacrificed for us? Shouldn't every time we come together be a display of our sacrificial commitment to one another as an example of Christ? All our gatherings should be

It's about how Jesus' community functions (vv.20-22)

Paul said when you selfishly eat before the others can come you humiliate them by leaving them with what's left over. The whole point was to eat together showing your oneness in Christ; rich and poor, slave and free, men and women, kids and adults. When we are too impatient or just don't care Paul says you 'despise' the body of Christ. It means to look down on. You've just created division. What can I do today when I come together with other Christians to show they are valued? It's always about others and honouring Jesus. If we do that we'll find we experience more joy out of serving and we grumble less because our preferences aren't met. We may even realize they don't matter as much as I thought since they are not rooted in Scripture.

Now Paul gives the basic teachings on communion. What's communion about?

Communion Reminds About Christ's Work **(11:23-26)**

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.

His past work of paying for our sins (vv.23-24)

Jesus Himself at the last Passover meal with His disciples used the unleavened Passover bread to talk about His body being broken on the cross not just Israel's rescue from Egypt. And He used the cup of thanksgiving as a symbol of the New Covenant with God's people, not the covenant only with Israel. Blood was always shed when a covenant was made. The blood of the covenant echoes back to Ex. 24:1-8 when Moses called on the people to enter into a covenant with God. Sacrifices were made and blood was sprinkled.

⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it as the people listened; and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" ⁸ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

But Jesus was pointing beyond that to Jer. 31:31,

³¹ "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. ³³ "For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord: "I will put My law within them and write it on their heart, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ They will not teach again, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their wrongdoing, and their sin I will no longer remember."

Jesus initiated the New Covenant at the cross and now we who believe in Him have His Spirit dwelling inside us who speaks God's Word to our hearts prompting us to obey His Words until He returns and establishes His rule when all Israel and Gentiles will have the Spirit dwelling in them. Communion is more than remembering what Jesus already did because what He started He will finish so communion reminds us also of

Jesus' ongoing work of saving sinners (vv.25-26)

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.

Taking communion is in itself an ongoing witness and a reminder that we believe Jesus' substitutionary death alone pays for our sins and faith in Him gives us eternal life now and secures our future in Him. And we keep doing it by faith believing He is coming back. It's a reminder that we are saved and a reminder to share the message of salvation because the gospel still works. Jesus is still saving lives.

Paul reminds the Corinthians communion is about Jesus and how Jesus has changed us and needs to change more people. But if we're living selfishly, not caring enough about other people in the body of Christ, that sends a mixed message. If Jesus saved me, He's conforming to be like Himself. To live less for self and more for Him. Paul emphasizes our need to be like Christ in the rest of his instructions about communion.

Communion is an Opportunity to Check our Selfish Tendencies **(11:27-34)**

These serious verses regarding communion need to be understood within the context.

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.

A few translations state, 'whoever eats or drinks unworthily' while most state 'whoever eats or drinks in an unworthy manner.' The latter is correct translation especially within the context. Paul is not saying 'if any of us are worthy of taking communion' because really, none of us are. What he is aiming at here is the unworthy manner [selfishly ignoring their fellow brothers/sisters needs] in which people were taking communion. If the whole point of taking communion is to show we are one in Christ and trying to live sacrificially like Christ, then to act selfishly and separate yourself from those less fortunate than you who can't get there earlier, is offensive and not like Christ would have you live. Paul's applicational command in v.33 "*When you come together wait for one another and eat at home if you're hungry before coming together*" clearly point us in this direction. The focus is on the body of believers that you are guilty of sinning against, which in itself is a sin against the Lord Jesus Himself.

But we don't do communion this way, so what's the application for us? We can broaden the application by examining our own hearts when we come to communion and ask

Whose needs have I ignored in the body? (vv.27-29, 33-34)

Did we hear a prayer request for someone and forget or even ignore praying for them? Did we make any effort to reach out to anyone this week in the church family, particularly if the Spirit of God brought them to our mind or if we knew someone hurting could have used a visit or a phone call? Did we purposefully not attend a church gathering simply because we couldn't be bothered and were more interested in doing our own thing or because we intentionally were avoiding someone? We know our hearts and so does God.

Paul was confronting deliberate selfish tendencies toward one group of believers who were aware yet avoided and ignored other believers. This is what hurts the body of Christ and hurts the heart of Jesus. God takes this so seriously that Paul says this:

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.

Paul somehow knew God had disciplined some of these believers with sickness and death because they selfishly ignored other believers' needs. Heb. 12:5-11 tells us how God can discipline His own children when we refuse to change our selfish tendencies. We're still saved because we're not condemned with the world but God may bring difficulties into our lives to direct us back to Himself. How do we know if we are going through that? I don't know but if we're truly honest and examine our own hearts perhaps the question should really be

Why am I not being disciplined? (vv.30-32)

We certainly at times are deserving of His discipline yet we often are not disciplined. Why not?

Ps. 103:8 The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;

¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

The prophet Ezra, when confessing the sins of the Israelites who deliberately disobeyed God by marrying not Jewish wives, prayed this to God

¹³ "What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this.

That's the kind of God we have, slow to anger, abounding in love. He punishes us less than our sins deserve. We have a shepherd Saviour who welcomes us with open arms, reaching out to us in love to walk with Him.

Rev. 3:19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. ²⁰ Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Let's come to the communion table knowing there is grace and mercy waiting for us from our great High Priest, Jesus Christ.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net