
From malpractice To practice – a viewing and doing the Lord’s Supper 1Corinthians 11:17-34

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Introduction *Gathering together as a church* is about telling the truth of Christ with our relationships.

We don’t gather together merely because we have common interests or enjoy each other’s personalities or amass greater resources. We gather together in a certain way to say a certain thing about Jesus. This is what I believe the apostle Paul was getting at when he said,

*“Because there is one bread,
we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread”.*

(1Corinthians 10:17)

In light of that truth, think about what we as a church would be saying if we were in conflict with one another, if we would rather not be around each other, if we didn’t give preference to each other, if we did not have mutual concern for one another. What would our “body language” say about Jesus if this were happening?

To have divisions in the body not only hurt relationships and slow up ministries. Divisions in the body say something that simply is not true about the Christ. The body (the church) is one because Christ is one. We are to “preserve the unity in the bond of peace”. We don’t create the oneness. We safeguard it. We defend it. We protect it. We enjoy it.

Gathering together as a church is about telling the truth of Christ with our relationships.

This is what Paul was doing in 1Cor.11 when he taught on the Lord’s Supper. This morning, we aim to do just that. We first will explore together what the Lord’s Supper is about. We will walk through this passage to discover the truth about gathering together to celebrate the Christ of the Table. We then will transition into involving ourselves in the Lord’s Supper. This morning, we not only want education over but also participation in the Lord’s Supper.

Please take out your Bibles and turn with me to 1Corinthians 11:17-34. [pray]

In the passage under consideration this morning (v 17-34) Paul takes up a second abuse of Christian worship (1st abuse cf. v 2-16). We can see this in v 18 as “divisions among you” at the Lord’s Supper. These divisions largely ran along socio-economic lines (cf. v 22). That is, in Corinth the church had some members who were well to do. They were rich. They owned houses and lands. They had more control over their daily schedules. They could be thought of as the “haves”.

The second group could be viewed as the “have nots”. They did not have much money. They did not have their own homes. They worked long hours yet received little money.

How did this class distinction play out in the first century church? What attitudes were expressed that Paul energetically exposed? What may be some indications that we as a church are not viewing the new community rightly? What would be signs that you have isolated yourself from the body of Christ and are not enjoying God’s riches found in Christ? What blessings can we expect when we as a church are viewing and doing the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner?

Malpractice

v 17-22

To bring glory to Christ and grace to us notice first the malpractice of the Lord’s Supper as you listen to me read v17-22.

The Problem

The problem can be plainly seen as we notice the context of and the conduct in the Lord’s Supper.

The context > Dinner

The context in which we find the Corinthian problem seems to be a common meal the church would regularly have together. This practice would have reflected the Passover meal of the O.T. Jews (cf. Ex.12; Dt.16). It also, according to v.25, reflected the Last Supper that Jesus hosted just prior to his death.

Though the N.T. specifically talks only about three suppers (Last Supper, Lord’s Supper and the Wedding Supper), we see people eating at banquets, dinners, feasts, and meals all over the Bible. The early church was known for “devoting themselves to...the breaking of bread” and were characterized as being “together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts...” (cf. Acts 2:42,46; see also Acts 6).

With the above observation coupled with this passage that talks about coming together and eating, it is reasonable to assume that the context in which we find the problem is a dinner.

The conduct > Discrimination

With the context being a dinner we now look at the conduct that is the problem. We find discrimination at the Lord’s Supper.

Throughout this paragraph you see two groups; the rich and the poor (v22). The rich are characterized as indulging in food and wine. They apparently got to the meal prior to the poor and did not wait for them to arrive. Rather, they began to eat and drink the finest portions of the meal. When the poor arrived imagine what they saw. Not merely that the rich had devoured all the good stuff. But they could easily see how they were viewed by these so-called brothers in Christ. The poor were humiliated. The rich made distinctions among themselves. There was a discrimination that manifested this “division” among them.

How could this be! Remember how we began the message. Jesus Christ died on the Cross to create a new family in which there is no distinction between rich and poor, slave and free, Greek and Jew, male and female (12:13). In Christ, this new creation known as God's family are One! This type of sinful conduct "despise[d] the Church of God and humiliate[d] those who had nothing".

This was awful conduct. This gathering together was not in the honor of Christ. It was selfish indulgence of the flesh. It was a despising of God and shaming His people. This was a malpractice of the Lord's Supper.

Its Practice

v 23-34

Well if v17-22 describe malpractice of the Supper, what does a practice of the Supper look like that honors Christ and honors His people?

The Pattern

v 23-26

In v23-26 Paul uses a circulating tradition inserted here to function as a pattern for what the Lord's Supper is to be.

Picking up the text in v23 listen as I read v23-26.

Passover

Having just heard Paul tell the church that he was not going to commend their practice, he now tells them why he will not praise them. (notice first word of v23 = explanatory). The reason is plain. V23-26 give the church the tradition to the institution of the Lord's Supper. As they lined up to the pattern of v23ff, it was patently plain that they were needing repentance.

This pattern first reflects the Passover meal instituted in Ex.12. This Jewish meal was led by the head of the house. He would say the blessing over the bread, break it and give it to those at his table. We see in v23-25 that Jesus functioned as the head of this household.

But not only was he functioning as the head of the household, he was interpreting the elements in a Christ-centered way. The bread is MY body. The wine is MY blood. Jesus was telling his people that he was the meal. He was the Passover lamb (5:7). That His death was a substitutionary death on behalf of His people.

Ponder

Now, as the church observes the Lord's Supper, she was to ponder Christ in the elements. Practicing the Lord's Supper in a Christ-honoring way means that we remember Him when we take the bread and the cup.

The concept "remembering" in the Bible does not simply carry the idea of mental recollection. Example: Do you remember the first president of the U.S.? Yes, it is George Washington. The Bible's use of the term "remember" connects the word to activity. In Neh.4:14, for example, we hear the leader exhorting the people to "Remember the LORD who is great and awesome and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes".

When we hear Jesus tell us as a Church to “do this in remembrance of Me”, we are to ponder the reality behind the elements and experience a renewed participation in Him. It is to see and savor Him in the bread and cup. It is to renew affections and actions corresponding to Jesus the Christ.

Proclamation

As the Church practices the Lord’s Supper in an honorable way, the church is involved in proclamation of the Christ until He comes.

This is why our “body language” is to tell the truth. As we repent of sin, as we reconcile our relationships, as we preserve and promote our oneness, we are saying the truth about Jesus. We are calling attention to His accomplished work on the Cross. We are calling attention to our need of Him daily. We are living other-centered lives that demonstrate mutual concern for one another. This calls attention to Jesus.

We are living parables of the gospel as we partake of the Lord’s Supper. Not only are the elements of the Supper representing the gospel, we who take the elements in a worthy manner are carrying out the drama of the gospel.

When believers look on and listen in they hear the gospel. When unbelievers are in the assembly looking on and listening in they hear the gospel. When angels and demons look on and listen in they hear the gospel. When God who is present at the meal looks in and listens on His heart finds pleasure for he sees and hears the gospel.

As we do this as often as we desire, we proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

The Partaking

v 27-34

This ends part one of the message. In it we looked at what not to do. We referred to this as malpractice of the Lord’s Supper. We also looked at what we are to do. We saw that this was the tradition handed down from Jesus through Paul to the church. This practice of the Lord’s Supper functions as a pattern by which to guide us in the Lord’s Supper.

Now, we transition from viewing the Lord’s Supper to doing the Lord’s Supper. V27-34 trace out two implications from Paul’s teaching. You can see this in v27 and the word “therefore”. And in v33 and the word “then”. Both these connecting words reflect how the listeners are to respond to the above teaching. We will use them to assist us as we this morning partake together of the Lord’s Supper.

Discernment (of each other)

The first implication is in response to v23-26. As we view the practice of the Lord’s Supper we as the church must discern the body as we eat – otherwise we are in grave danger of judgment.

Delight (in each other)

The second implication is in response to v17-22. As we view the malpractice of the Lord’s Supper, we are to do just the opposite. We are wait for (i.e. welcome/receive one another) at the meal so as not to incur the judgment of v30-32.

(The conclusion to this message was the actual partaking together of the Lord’s Supper)

Conclusion