

Corinthians

Lessons 21-22

The Lord's Supper, Part 1

The Lord's Supper is the most basic yet thorough confession of the Christian church in ritual form. When we take the wafer, which represents Christ's broken body, and the juice, which represents Christ's shed blood, we are confessing that Christ died for our sins. Not only so, we look forward to His return. The Lord's Supper is a unifying event where all Christians confess our commonality, the saving work of Jesus Christ. Even in this, the Corinthians were to be blamed. They were turning this sacred celebration into a disgraceful event. They were dividing based on social class and not discerning the mystical body of Christ, the church, which was right in front of them as they celebrated the literal body of Christ, which was not physically present.

Divisions on sociological grounds (11:17-22)

The church divided itself along social lines. The rich and the poor were clearly segregated in the church. Paul does not attempt to create a socialistic community or redistribute the wealth of the rich. His concern is not their individual status at all. His concern is with their communal lifestyle, "when ye come together in the church" (17, 18, 20). The Lord's Supper is an expression of unity, yet their observation of the Supper was an expression of division.

Cultic meals were common in antiquity, and it seems that the Lord's Supper was part of a larger meal (See Acts 2:42, 36; 20:7, 11; Jude 12), and this seems to be where the problem was (21). What exactly they were doing is not clear due to the grammar and the absence of detail. Even so, there was a marked individualism where "each one" did his own thing. The rich were eating sumptuously before the poor arrived ("taketh beforehand") and seemed to be eating their own, privileged portions ("one's own"). Here are the facts: some are "hungry" (21) and have nothing (22), and some are "drunken."

It is important to remember that the early church gathered in homes. Houses that would be large enough for such an assembly would have been the homes of the wealthier saints. This means that the wealthy homeowner would have been the host. (See Romans 16:23.) Archeological evidence suggests that the formal dining room in the first century in this part of the world would accommodate a maximum of 12 people. The outer courtyard or atrium could seat up to 50. In a class-conscious culture, it would have been natural for the rich to congregate with the host who also was wealthy. This would naturally lead to a division based on social status.

And so before they celebrated the Lord's Supper, they gathered to eat a meal, which became a source of division. "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" (22).

The Lord's Supper (11:23-26)

Paul recounts the institution of the Lord's Supper as he received it from the Lord. This a reference to Christ's appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road (cf. 15:8). Paul's account of the institution of the Lord's Supper is very similar to Luke's. Paul, therefore, may be Luke's source for this.

The intent of the Supper is to reflect on the sacrifice of Calvary while we wait with hope for the return of the Lord. It is a unifying confession by all the church. We celebrate the forgiveness of sins and the life received through Christ's sacrifice. The Supper points to the common reality of all believers and the basis for the Christian faith. It should be a time of unity, reflection, and anticipation.

The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the

by Rodney Shaw

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Lessons 21-22

The Lord's Supper (contd.)

Discerning the Lord's Body (27-32)

Paul's warnings to the Corinthians were sharp: "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (27). The ceremony is to proclaim life, yet if taken unworthily, it brings condemnation: "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (29).

The body of Christ here is the church (cf. 10:17). The problem is not a lack of discernment over Christ's physical body. Note that Paul does not say "body and blood," only "body." It is the church as the body of Christ that is not being discerned. And how was the body not being discerned? Through divisions. When there is a lack of unity and the prevalence of divisions, the body of Christ is being neglected. It does little good to come and confess the saving work of Christ by partaking of a wafer and drinking juice if we are at odds with a brother or sister.

The consequences for not discerning the Lord's body are dire: "*For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep*" (30). Again, we do not know the circumstances behind this statement. This verse may not suggest a one-to-one correlation, i.e., the one who does not discern the Lord's body dies. It could be that many were sick and dying without regard to their particular involvement in the Lord's Supper. The overall condition of divisions may have led to an unhealthy environment where all were subject to the consequences. Paul's solution for the lack of discernment was self-reflection. If we judge ourselves, we will not be judged (31-32).

Wait for one another

Paul's final admonition was for the Corinthians to be sensitive to one another. No one should begin the community festivities without the presence of the entire community. This harkens back to Paul's instructions concerning meat offered to idols and the operation of spiritual gifts where his main criterion was love and consideration for others. This being so, it seems that one of the underlying problems in Corinth was a lack of love. If our concern is primarily for our neighbor, it will be reflected in our behavior.

"Wherefore, 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 condemnation. And the rest will I set in order when I come" (33-34).