



Session 4 – 1Corinthians 11:17-34

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Overview

- ***The key problems that Paul wants to tackle***
 - *division* between the rich and not-so-rich (v.21)
 - *abuse* of the church (v.22)
- ***The four-part argument that Paul uses***
 - He rebukes them because the rich go ahead with their own private meal. (v.17-22)
 - He reminds them of the 'tradition' – Jesus' words of institution at the last supper – '*remembrance of me*' and '*proclaiming his death until he comes*'. (v.23-26)
 - He warns them that they must 'Discern the body' or judgement will come. (v.27-32)
 - He encourages them to 'Receive one another' at the meal. (v.33-34)

1. Verses 17-22 Abuse of the Lord's Supper

The normal practice in the early church was for Christians to come together for a meal (the *agape* or love-feast); during the course of this meal, they would share bread and wine in keeping with what Jesus did at the Last Supper.

In the culture in Corinth, meals were at held at the home of the rich; the host was the *patron*. The dining room would hold about 9-12 guests, and so the majority (30-50 guests) would eat in the entry courtyard. It was quite natural for the host to invite people of his own sociological class to eat in the dining room. "One's own supper" (v.21) refers to the eating of private meals by the wealthy.

It seems that, at Corinth, when people arrived for the meal, some got there earlier than others and started eating and drinking – sometimes to excess. It may be that they brought their own food (probably quite sumptuous) and ate it on their own rather than sharing it. Those who arrived later – almost certainly the church members who were poor or who were slaves and who could not get away from their work any sooner – found nothing left for them. The rich Christians, it seems, were guilty of a complete lack of consideration for their poorer brothers and sisters, and Paul refers sarcastically to these divisions in **v.19**.

SUMMARY *It was not the Lord's Supper that they celebrated; their concern lay elsewhere (v.21). They should stay at home to get their appetites satisfied (v.22). They were emphasising divisions, not fellowship.*

2. Verses 23-26 The true meaning of the Lord's Supper

The way they were abusing the Lord's Supper showed that the Corinthians had not grasped its significance. And so in this paragraph (written before the gospels were written) Paul reminds his readers of what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper.

Jesus is the absolute focus of the Lord's Supper.

- We remember him and, in particular, his death.
- We take hold of everything that has been made possible by the sacrifice of his body on the cross. Jesus said, "It is *for you*."
- We enjoy the new relationship between God and his people which is the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (**Jer 31:31-34**) and fulfilled through Jesus' death.
- We look forward to his return.

SUMMARY *'This paragraph teaches us about making the Supper real for ourselves. The Supper is a repeated reminder – and experience – of the effectiveness of Christ's death for us. But we also need to think in terms of needs of others – a new community of people has been created.'* (Fee)

3. Verses 27-34 The importance of the body at the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a communal meal. Everyone comes to it on an equal footing; everyone regardless of their wealth or social standing comes to it as a sinner in need of forgiveness and of all the benefits of Jesus' death.

Abuses of the Lord's Supper are

- a sin against the Lord whose Supper it is (**v.27**). The Corinthians were in danger of approaching the Supper with an attitude of over-familiarity – of not recognising the greatness of the things set before them.

- a sin against the body, the church (**v.29**). The Supper should be a focus of unity, as Paul pointed out in **10:17**, but in Corinth this was not so; the 'haves' who were arriving early failed to recognise the 'have nots' who were coming later as members of the body.

Those sins result in judgement (**v.30**); this judgement is God's discipline through which he seeks to correct his people (**v.32**). It was vital for the abuse of the meal to stop. A simple solution to the particular abuse in Corinth was that anyone who was hungry should eat at home before attending the gathering; then they could wait until everyone, including the poorest, had arrived.

SUMMARY 'The very Table that is God's reminder, and therefore his repeated gift, of grace, the Table where we affirm again who and whose we are, has been allowed to become a table of condemnation for the very people who most truly need the assurance of acceptance that this table affords – the sinful, the weak, the weary. One does not have to "get rid of the sin in one's life" in order to partake. Here, by faith, one may once again receive the assurance that "Christ receives sinners."' (Fee)

4. **Verses 33-34 Welcome one another at the Lord's Supper**

Everyone attending the meal should wait for each other, receive each other and welcome each other. Then they can eat together and celebrate the Lord's Supper together, rejoicing that they are all fellow-beneficiaries of Jesus' death.

'The final imperative is perhaps the most significant one: Receive/welcome one another. It is the Lord's Supper, after all, not ours. Our task – and joy – is to receive anew the benefits of his grace in the context of truly welcoming others, who are recipients of that same grace.' (Fee)

For homegroups

1. How does the behaviour of the Corinthians at the Lord's Supper contradict the reality of the cross?
2. 'When you meet together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat' (v.20). Why not? What is needed for such a meeting to qualify as 'the Lord's Supper'?
3. Put yourself in the shoes of one of the Christians who 'have nothing' (v.22). How would you feel when you attended the gathering?
4. What thoughts should be foremost in our minds when we receive Holy Communion?
5. How might we put v.28 into practice? How do we take the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner (v.27)?
6. In what ways is our service of Holy Communion a communal gathering, and in what ways is it about us as individuals meeting with the Lord?
7. Is there anything we could do in our Communion services to emphasise our unity as one body?