

I Corinthians 11:17-34 A Call to Obedience - The Lord's Supper

Introduction

Some years ago in England there was a profoundly sad event - the death of a young child. However, the nature of the death was the reason for the national attention. The date was the child's birthday aged one or two. The parents had decided that the child was too young for a party and put the child to bed on that evening, having invited adult friends to celebrate the occasion downstairs. It was a winter's evening and all the guests had heavy winter coats - that were laid down on a bed - the child's bed. Somehow I've forgotten the details but the medical report of the cause of death I believe suggested that the child had been smothered by the coats. The point of that celebration had been missed and would indelibly be fixed on the minds of every adult at that event - not least the grieving parents. The apostle Paul in writing about public worship in Corinth in general and in this passage the Lord's Supper in particular suggests that they too had been missing the point of the celebration.

1. The Perversion of the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:17-22)

17In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18In 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. 19No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22Don'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! (a) **The Context** When we think of the Lord's Supper we naturally focus on verses 23 to 26 of I Corinthians 11 as these are the words of institution used in the Early Church yet Scripture verses always are embedded in a context, which in this case is verses seventeen to thirty-four, passages preceding and following the familiar words. The apostle has three aspects to his teaching on this subject beginning with the context in which Communion was observed in Corinth, the liturgical form of the observance of the rite, followed by guidance concerning preparation before receiving the bread and the wine. When a regular pattern of worship took shape in the Early Church it appears that the morning service was the most likely one to invite unchurched people to find out about the faith –services held 5:30 /6:00am! Prior to the start of the working day with the congregation also gathering for a 'Jacob's join' fellowship meal concluded by a service that had as its climax the observance of communion at the end of the day.

The Lord's Supper was instituted in the context of a Passover meal. The host blessed the first cup of unfermented red wine, followed by bitter herbs dipped in a fruit sauce of which all partook. Then there was a talk on the meaning of Passover followed by the singing of Psalms 113 and 114. Next the second cup of wine was drunk after which unleavened bread passed round. The main dish of the meal contained the roasted sacrificial lamb. The third cup was passed after prayer prior to the singing of Psalms 115-118. The fourth cup of wine celebrating the coming kingdom of the Messiah was drunk immediately before leaving. It is usually suggested that the Lord interpreted the unleavened bread and the third cup of wine with reference to himself, but that the fourth cup was not drunk according to Matthew 26:29-30. The early Christians celebrated communion in their house churches, usually in a home that could accommodate the whole congregation of less than one hundred people. The average size of a church congregation in Western Europe and North America possibly was very similar to the Early Church in having 60-70 people. It tended to be a weekly event on a Sunday late pm / early evening at the end of the working day (Acts 20:7-12 at Troas), and in the context of a

communal meal (agape meal), that may have been the only meal of the day for the poorest members, many of whom would have been slaves. This was a special time of fellowship and care for the most vulnerable members of the church in particular. (b) **Communion at Corinth** What description does Paul give of their agape meal / communion services? (vs17-22) *20When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22Don'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!* Corinth was a city like Edinburgh until relatively recently with a very wealthy elite few and a majority of poorer people. There was little social interaction between the two. Meetings at church had become a scandal. Some members of Chloe's family (I Corinthians 1:11) were so alarmed that they travelled to Turkey from Greece to tell Paul what was going on. He had also been visited by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (I Corinthians 16:17) men of high Christian integrity who may also have confirmed the difficulties that the church was experiencing. The other problems listed in the first letter to the Church at Corinth were bad enough but to behave as they did at the agape meal and communion was as bad as anything Paul had ever come across. The wealthy minority who provided all the food and drinks, as the slaves and very poor would have had nothing to bring, were eating to excess and getting drunk having started before the arrival of the poorest members who may have eaten nothing that day and to add to their misery got almost nothing at church as well. What kind of witness was that? Paul has already stated what is happening in communion in I Cor.10:16: *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a **participation** [fellowship /sharing] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a **participation** in the body of Christ?* How true was this of Corinth church? It was the exact opposite! In fact in I Corinthians 12:19 Paul expresses serious reservations about whether some of the most serious offenders have ever truly trusted the Lord as their Saviour at all, if there is no evidence of Christ-like character in the way they treat other people. What were the future implications for the church if their behaviour continued? Quite bluntly Paul says if you cannot behave in a Christian manner then you had better stop the pretence of such folly. I have never heard of such behaviour taking place in any church in recent centuries, but the principle behind Paul's words of the non negotiable commitment of followers of Jesus to show love and respect to one another is a 'given' whatever the culture and context of the life of a local church.

2. **The Preparation for the Lord's Supper** (vs27-34)

27Therefore, 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. 28A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. 33So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. 34If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions. Paul here indicates to us that it is to our spiritual profit to prepare to come to worship services, especially when coming to the Lord's Table. (a) **How can I or we do that?** (i) Pray for People taking part in the services I would want to encourage you to pray for the people taking part in our worship services, not just for me or whoever is preaching, though I would desire that, but for all who are taking part in some aspect of Christian ministry at a worship service. To start to do that will ensure you recognise just how many people offer their gifts and time as an offering of worship to the Lord. From the people serving as stewards, or in catering, sound and music ministries, or working as Sunday School and Bible class teachers, together with the range of people who

may lead some part of a service. We all have some weeks that are great together with others that are lousy! Health issues, financial pressures or work and family issues can influence how we feel in coming to a worship service, but to pray that God will grant strength and wisdom and His peace and power that He might be glorified through our offerings to Him. (ii) Pray for people attending church that Sunday, especially for those who are seeking that they may come to know Jesus, and for those present who are already believers that we might learn or be reminded of something that can help us grow in our faith or encourage us to stand firm in our faith, or help them in whatever challenges they are experiencing at the present time. God is a living God and we need to expect that He will speak to people as we sing His praises, hear His Word preached and share fellowship together. (iii) Pray for yourself as you come to church that God may minister into your life what He wants you to hear. It may be a word of encouragement, or a word of rebuke; a word of challenge or a word commending patience, or of some actions to take or words to speak to another person; It may be confirmation of guidance from God, or step along the way on an issue about which God has been speaking to you, a conviction over the need to repent of some sin or a call to get involved in a form of ministry in the church; a call to mission overseas. James 4:2 says: *You have not because you do not ask God.* Have you been missing out on blessings God has for you, simply because you have not asked Him? It would be helpful to have a time of prayer before church at home to help you focus your thoughts on the Lord as we come to worship and praise Him, though it is also very profitable to do the same at church prior to the start of the service. However we do face pressures upon us. Parents with children or elderly relatives to care for may have a real battle with time pressures. Others of us may have so much to get done before 11am that we are too busy to pray? Making time for ourselves alone with the Lord is a self-discipline no one drifts into it by accident. For people with more time on their hands reading a few pages or a chapter of a devotional Christian book can lift your thoughts to the Lord. As an undergraduate student I remember profiting greatly from reading a chapter of one of the many A.W. Tozer books prior to going to church. There is no set way, but the more we invest in worshipping the Lord the more we will benefit from it. (b) **What does Paul suggest here?** (v28) In this specific context it is about coming to the Lord's Table but the principle is applicable to other parts of worship services as well. 28 *A man [Greek **person**] ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.* Paul speaks here of self examination. Is there some sin I need to confess to the Lord in thought word or deed? If nothing specific comes to mind then a general silent prayer of confession of sin. In Psalm 24:4 David speaks about how we should enter God's presence in worship. He refers to the person *who has clean hands and a pure heart.* Right with God but also right with other people in our conduct; The early Christian manual for worship, The Didache (c.100AD) in its guidelines on attendance at the Lord's Supper stated: 'Let none who have a quarrel with his fellow join in your meeting until they are reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled'. This teaching is based on Jesus' words in Matthew 5:23-24: *Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift* –these words of Jesus were a general principle not simply restricted to the Lord's Table. The key issue is our attitude of heart as we come to His table as His invited guests. (c) **What are the Consequences of failing to act?** (vs 27, 29-34) 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* 29*For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.* 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.* Before I comment on the consequences here of wrongful participation. (i) What does Paul mean by an unworthy manner or unworthily (v27)? These are words spoken to **Christians**. This passage is not a criticism of someone who in good faith took communion when offered it in the past prior to coming to Christ. These words are

addressed to believers in the Lord Jesus. What does it say to us as Christians? First of all we are required to come with reverence to receive the bread and wine. The elements are still only bread and wine, nothing magical happens to them. However, it is what these natural elements represent in symbolic form as we receive them by faith as visible tokens of our Lord's sacrificial love for us. Secondly we have a time of quiet at the start of communion in order to allow each of us to pray and prepare our hearts **in order that** we may partake of the bread and wine. None of us are good enough to be invited on merit. However Jesus was good enough and just as God accepted His sacrifice for us on the cross, in like manner He welcomes us to His table as His honoured guests. (ii) What are the Consequences of failing to do what God says? (vs 29-30)? *29For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep.* Paul says that some of the Corinthian Church are unwell as a result of their sin and in the most serious cases God has shortened the earthly life of some believers there for the same reason so that they will stop bringing shame and dishonour to His name. Many of us are familiar in the Old Testament with God's judgement on Israelites who sinned. In Leviticus 10:1-7 Nadab and Abihu decided to experiment with the offerings in God's presence – were they 'carrying on' /having a laugh or wilfully disobedient? God alone knows, but Leviticus 10:2 records: *fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them and they died before the Lord.* In II Samuel 6:7 Uzzah lost his life for touching the Ark of the Covenant, something forbidden to those who were not set apart for that ministry. I Chronicles chapters 13 and 15 explain what happened and why. Wilful disobedience by God's people can have serious consequences. It was not just an Old Testament matter. In Acts 5:1-11 in the Early Church Ananias and Sapphira were struck down dead for lying to God and the local church in Jerusalem. No wonder Acts 5:11 states: *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these things.* In terms of the principle Hebrews 12:5-12 points out that God disciplines His children when we do wrong. Imagine you are shopping in Dundee and a child deliberately damages a display in the shop –is it your responsibility to discipline that child? Only if you are their parent? If we are not His children then He will not take this action in our lives, but we may face the eternal consequences of being outside His love and grace. However there is a purpose in His disciplining of us, just as there should be when a good parent disciplines a child for inappropriate behaviour. Hebrews 12:10-11 records: *10Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* God wants the very best for you and for me and will do what it takes to stop us completely messing up our lives, but if a believer is insistent on living a life away from the Lord then He will not force us to be good, but we will miss out on the blessings He has planned for us.

3. **The Purpose of the Lord's Supper** (vs23-26)

23For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25In 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." 26For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. There are seven purposes for the Lord's Supper that I will mention only briefly. (a) **Thanksgiving** Episcopalians call Communion 'The Eucharist', that is the Greek word for thanksgiving, giving thanks to God with a grateful heart for what the Lord has done for us on the cross. We must always have the element of thankfulness in our prayers as we come to His table. (b) **Fellowship** Communion is not a solitary act rather it is a sacred communal gathering of a local church sometimes with other Christians also joining in this act of worship. I

Corinthians 10:16 draws attention to this aspect of the observance of the Lord's Supper. The same word in Greek also means 'communion', 'participation' and union in Christ. It is a family celebration. The Bible knows nothing of 'solo' Christianity outside a community of faith in a local church. (c) **Memorial** Jesus said: *do this in remembrance of Me*. This was a parallel to the reminder God gave to the Jewish people concerning their festival of Passover in Exodus 12:14: *This day shall be to you as a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations* (NKJV). There are many things we need to remember in our lives but this act of Jesus 2,000 years ago tops the list of essential items! (d) **Obedience** *do this* what we are doing today is not simply a regular and good habit like cleaning our teeth or observing the Highway Code when driving –it is a command of the King of Kings we are required to obey. The Bible does not specify how often each year a local congregation should hold communion services or the form they should take –only that we do it with a reasonable degree of regularity –which in most Scottish Baptist congregations is most Sundays. (e) **Evangelistic** When we reflect how much it mattered to God to ensure you and I can have salvation then it must matter to us. This in turn reminds us of our need to share the good news of Jesus with other people. Are you praying for named people in your private prayers to come to Christ? I hope so –God may chose to use you as the human instrument used to answer your prayer in terms of whom He chooses to witness to them and sometimes lead them to faith in Christ. Might that be you even this week? (f) **Eschatological** (this word refers to the end of the world when Jesus returns) we hold communion services for a limited period of time: *until He comes*. Each week it is once more, but also once less until the return of Jesus. In heaven we will be with Jesus Himself no more need there for symbols to remind us of Him –then we will see Him in all His resplendent glory. (g) **God's Purpose** *before he [she] eats* (v28). God does not put this passage in the Scriptures to keep us from His table, on the contrary He wants us to benefit more from it by recognising more and more its wonderful significance for us as His children. May we each be able with great joy to come now to His table for His glorious name's sake Amen.