

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

The Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17–34

The Corinthian church had many problems which developed out of one major fault, that of moving away from Pauline doctrine. They were divided because they were listening to other doctrine and other men who taught different doctrine. This division led to quarrels and disputes from within the church. It also resulted in them living carnally. Their spiritual condition was why Paul could only feed them milk and not the meat of the word (1 Corinthians 3:2).

Their poor spiritual condition was evident in their celebration of what Paul called the Lord's Supper. Paul actually used it in the negative saying that what they were celebrating was not the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20). When the Lord ate the Passover meal with His Disciples, they came together in unity. When the Corinthians came together to eat, their disunity was evident since some would overindulge while others went hungry. Paul describes what happened at the Lord's Supper the eve of His death in order to compare it how the Corinthians were celebrating it.

It's interesting that people will fill up their lives with rites, rituals, and ceremonies to give them a feeling of spirituality. Religious activities are often used to cover up a spiritual void. Going through the actions prescribed by the "church" often give people the feeling of closeness to God when in fact they are quite distant from Him. It seems that the Corinthian Church was using the Lord's Supper as a way of giving them the feeling of being religious while covering up their true spiritual condition. One reason they may have begun doing the Lord's Supper is because there were many Jews in the congregation who would have known about the events surrounding Jesus' death. They were perhaps loosely celebrating Passover and including the mandate Jesus gave to His Disciples to remember His death through the cup and bread. Paul tells them what happened at the Lord's Supper in the context of unity, not was an ordinance for the church to follow.

Eating unworthily (verses 27–29)

The last lesson explained that eating unworthily was about the manner in which they were eating, not about an individual's rightness with God or man. In their celebrating the Passover, some overindulged and others were left wanting. When they did this, they were guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, meaning they were guilty of making a mockery of the unity demonstrated at the original Lord's Supper. If they had decided to do what the Lord did at the last supper, then they had better do it with the right attitude.

When they ignored the needs of each other and selfishly overindulged, leaving little for others, they were inadvertently showing the weaker Christian how the Lord's Supper was to be observed. The weaker brother would then be drawn into following their bad example. As verse 29 says, they were not discerning the Lord's body, meaning they were not thinking about the needs of the individual members of the church, the Body of Christ.

When they ate in the manner that they were eating, they were bringing damnation upon themselves. Some interpret this as eternal damnation, but since works have nothing to do with our salvation, there must be another explanation. Paul had just told them that they needed to examine themselves, and that they will be judged by what they do. The damnation is about them being judged negatively for their actions. They were to compare their actions with Scripture and make the proper changes. If they had studied God's word, they would know that what they were doing was displeasing to the Lord. Unfortunately, they were far from properly understanding and applying God's word to their lives because they were carnal Christians. If they knew God's word, they would understand that their actions made them guilty of dividing the body instead of coming together as one. They were bringing damnation (judgment) upon themselves because of their actions.

Weak, sick, dead (verses 28–32)

Their actions led to some natural consequences. According to verse 30, people within the congregation were becoming weak and sick, and some even had died. Many see this as a direct judgment from God, or at least divine discipline for not treating the Lord's Supper as a holy event. Some, especially charismatics, see this as God's judgment on those who did not recognize that Jesus died so we could be healed. Others think physical healing can be obtained by partaking of the bread and cup so that those who failed to participate in the Lord's Supper would not get healed.

However, this section is actually about making a mockery of the Lord's Supper by eating in a manner that brought shame in how they did it. While some were overindulging in eating and drinking, others were left with nothing to eat and drink. The physical body will suffer whether by eating too much, or lacking proper food. Their absence of concern for each other certainly did not stop with eating and drinking, but spilled over in all areas of their lives. Those who needed support from the congregation were not having their needs met, which led to people within the congregation becoming weakened and sickly, some even dying because of inattention from the assembly. These things were natural consequences of their actions.

Because of these conditions in the church, Paul emphasized that they need to examine themselves so that others outside of the congregation would not be able to condemn them for their actions. Instead of being condemned by the world, we are to be judged and chastened by God and His word. When God chastised Israel, He did so having already laid out the consequences for their behavior. If they obeyed the Law, then God would bless them. If they willfully disobeyed God, then God would punish them in the prescribed manner (Leviticus 26). Likewise, we are chastised according to the word of God in this dispensation. When we read the Bible, rightly divided, we are given an understanding of what God expects from us. When we live a life that is not pleasing to Him, we know it because He already told us what He expects. God's word will judge us and then chastise us for doing things that are against His will. This is why we need to carefully apply only Scripture that is written directly to us. We cannot know what God wants us to do if we read Scripture that is meant for Israel in a different dispensation. To be chastened is to be trained or corrected. All people in all dispensations are chastened by the Lord, but not in the same manner. Paul trains us in living the Grace life. We don't need to obey the Law and worry about famine, pestilence, or having an enemy nation overtake us if we fail to do what God says in His word.

Paul's conclusion

Paul wraps up this section by admonishing them to always be on the lookout for ways to edify each other. To edify is to build up. When we edify another person, we are helping them to grow spiritually. Paul speaks of edification 11 times in his writings to the Corinthians. He only uses the word edify (or forms of the word) six times in his other books. This is a sure indication that the Corinthians were lacking in brotherly love. Paul held himself out as an example of what it means to edify others. Everything he did, he did for the edification of the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12:19). Likewise, the whole church body exists in order to edify one another (Ephesians 4:16). When we fail to edify one another, the whole assembly will be weakened. Like the Corinthians, the church that fails to build up one another will be spiritually weak and carnally minded.

If there was any time that the Corinthians church should have demonstrated edification and unity, it would have been while celebrating the Lord's Supper. Since they had decided to celebrate the death of Jesus Christ by doing what Christ told the Disciples to do as a remembrance, then it needed to be done in the spirit of unity as they came together as one body to remember Jesus' death. In this case, they can begin edifying the body simply by waiting for others to be served before serving themselves.

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