



7. A Passion for the Table (1 Cor 11:17-33)

Have you ever played Chinese Whispers? As people pass a secret message down the line from person to person it slowly gets changed. Some people are much better at being able to remember the message. There are others that will change the message to give people a laugh!

I was reminded a few weeks ago of a First World War message. It's been going around for a few years so I don't know whether it's actually true or one of those great stories that go around. The story is told of a message that was sent by word of mouth: "Send reinforcements; we're going to advance". When it got back to HQ it has changed to "Send three and four pence, we're going to a dance"!

Unfortunately the same thing happens in churches too. Whatever might have been the thing that they are supposed to be doing, things get perverted. We've already observed how the Corinthians got things comprehensively wrong in various areas of their lives together as God's people. Today we are going to see where they got it wrong over the Lord's Supper.

We can only speculate what they were doing when they came together. What is clear is that they seem to have thought they were coming together as a church to celebrate what we would call Communion. But rather than being what it should have been, it had turned into a bit of a beanfeast for certain members of the church, but not for others.

What seems to have happened is that the richer people in the church were meeting and having a meal - which they thought was communion - let's read in 1 Corinthians 11: *20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?*

The implication of verse 20 is that they thought they were celebrating the Lord's Supper. For them it was just a meal they enjoyed and even got drunk in the process!. They were probably the richer folk in the church whilst the poorer people - the slaves and servants and ordinary working people were left out of the process whilst the wealthier classes lived it up! It was ridiculous. The Lord's Supper wasn't meant to fill their stomachs but to minister to all the church. Paul scathingly says: *22 Don'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!*

This sort of thing was supposed to be for all the people and not just for some to have their fill. Some commentators think that early Christians met for a meal of an evening (an agape) so that they could worship and in the bread and wine remember the Lord.

Don't forget that in the first century, bread and wine were the equivalent of tea and biscuits or for the younger ones, a burger and coke. They were the common food for ordinary people. In coming together as a church for a meal, they remembered in that meal what Jesus had done for them. There is a sense in which each time people had a meal and had bread and wine, they would have been reminded of the fellowship meal, the Lord's Supper which they had with their fellow believers.

Whatever was happening, the Lord's supper was not supposed to be a meal which was for some and excess and for others a humiliation. Before you think of how bad these people were, this state of affairs is something that could easily happen. When I was a teenager some men in my church asked some of us if we would like to come and pray with them to encourage us to pray out loud. It was great and really encouraged us. Soon other teenagers began to hear and wanted to come. Within a few months the group had grown to about 30. Unfortunately, most of the teens wanted fellowship, not prayer and came for the cake and chat. The whole nature of the thing changed and the leaders wisely decided to do other things with the youth. That was fine because it ended up in something else starting for youth fellowship and we were encouraged to use our new found confidence in prayer in the ministry of the church.

Not so in Corinth where the behaviour of some resulted in the difficulties Paul relates to us here. So what were the problems with their version of the Lord's Supper?

It was divisive

18 In 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.

They were already an divided church and this only served to make things worse. We've already seen that when some people in the church think that they are spiritually superior to other people, their presence in destructive in the church. It's true in whatever church you go to, of whatever denomination. Division often follows those that believe they are superior because of some special revelation or understanding they have. Remember, it is by grace that we've been saved, through faith. It's by grace we are who and what we are, not because we are superior. Remember that if you feel tempted to stand in judgement over others - and we are all prone to it.

But in this instance there was a particular destructiveness. Let's get to the next point.

It was disrespectful to people in the fellowship

20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don'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!

What was clear in Corinth was that their lack of regard or love for one another showed in the way that they were prepared to humiliate other members of the fellowship. As I've said before, this kind of problem does not generally occur in our fellowship. There is a welcoming and acceptance, but as I've already indicated, we can quickly let it slip. The evidence is that this letter was only written a few years after Paul had left them and he had spent some time with them initially which means that they had been correctly taught.

Let's beware that we do not move quickly away from what is good to something that dishonours one another and dishonours God. This is what was happening at Corinth.

It was disrespectful to Christ

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In 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." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 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. 28 A man ought to

examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

What's clear here is that Paul had laid foundations already. The pattern in the Lord's Supper had already been passed down. He had already passed it to them when he was there. They were disregarding the command of God in behaving in the way that they were. And what was the consequence? *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. 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.*

The horror of it is that God was actually judging them - some had even died because of their disobedience. Wow! They were plenty bad in other ways; so what was so different about the Lord's Supper?

Some people suggest that that the Lord's Supper is so deeply profound, that to take the body and blood of Christ lightly is something we should be careful about. Therefore many people live in fear that somehow if they have sinned they should not take communion just in case they get struck down. Or maybe if they are going through personal or spiritual problems they don't take communion - just in case God is upset with them.

But look at the context of the passage - that's not what it's about. These people were profaning the body and blood of Christ because they had knowingly and wantonly perverted something that had been directly given to the apostles and to Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ. In terms of open religious acts the Lord only specifically commanded two acts, one is baptism, the other the Lord's Supper. He actually didn't ask much - but what He asked was profound because it openly enacts our relationship with God and therefore again reminds us of the fact that our being as Christians is by grace through faith - not of works so that no-one can boast.

When the Lord instituted the meal it was intended for His people to affirm as a *fellowship* the Lord's death until He comes. Why? Because it was only that death that had made them part of His church and the only thing that bound them together as a fellowship.

What they were doing was the exact reverse. They used the Lord's Supper to affirm their division, for those who felt superior to affirm their fellowship together because of their social standing or because of their "special knowledge" and exclude the rest. It was based on their works and their supposed privilege, not on God's grace. They knowingly stumbled and humiliated other Christians and created resentment and division by perverting the Lord's Supper.

Now can you see how God's wrath was on them as a Church. They weren't asked to do much but that little has huge meaning and to do what they did was not just an insult to God, but it was an insult to the other believers whom they spurned and for whom they cared so little and whom they stumbled.

Take a look at Matthew 18 where we see of what God thinks of people who cause others to sin

3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6 But if anyone causes one of these

little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

So it's not surprising that these people were coming under God's judgement. That was the sin of Corinth and why they were sick and dying.

And that's the message of these verses in 1 Corinthians 11. It's not just about my personal belief and the need to proclaim the Lord's death to myself or any non-Christians present (now that's an interesting one - communion services are evangelistic? Yes they are!). We proclaim the Lord's death to one another. In that death we have our life together.

For years we have followed the philosophy of the world in interpreting the Christian faith as being a personal thing, but the two ordinances the Jesus gives us are not just reminders of our personal faith, but are communal acts by the fellowship of God's people. As we saw in 1 Corinthians 12 last week *immersed by one Spirit into one body*. We were made part of a church - a fellowship.

To mark our integration by the Spirit into the Church - the body of Christ, we have been given these two outward acts to perform. Baptism marks that entry, the Lord's Supper marks that continuation, until the Lord comes. You can't have one without the other. If we are Christians we don't argue with Jesus - we do both. And if we don't - how can we expect God's blessing. After all, look what happened to the Corinthians!

So what challenge does this bring us this morning?

🍷 *Let's examine ourselves and so let us eat 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.* Note the words - examine - eat. If you know you've sinned or that your fellowship with God is troubled when you come to communion and you know you are - what do you do? pass the bread and wine? *If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Communion reminds us that God forgives all who truly repent. So repent, eat, drink!

🍷 *Judge ourselves so we don't come under the judgement of God 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgement. 32 When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.* - We need to judge ourselves. It's not just a case of examining ourselves as we come to the Lord's Supper next week, it's actually about getting rid of the kind of lack of love and attitudes of the Corinthians that we may find in our lives - and they are there!

🍷 *Our true focus should be on Christ as we meet 33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. 34 If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgement.* Communion and for that matter any worship and any meeting we have as a church should have Christ as the centre. Our personal issues should be left at home, our issues with our brothers and sisters in Christ resolved so that we can focus on His grace and love. Our faith is all about Jesus

Prayer



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