

Challenges Christians Face

Abuses at the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-22

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Abuses at the Lord's Supper

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of proper Christian worship. Let's learn about that in a message I am calling, "Abuses at the Lord's Supper."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22:

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses 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 commend you in this? No, I will not. (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)

Introduction

A few months after getting married I applied for permanent residence status in the United States. On the appointed day Eileen and I made our way to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) offices in downtown Chicago. We made our way up to the appropriate office. The office we entered had a gathering area leading up to a large counter. On the side of the counter was a gate that opened into a very large waiting area. As Eileen and I entered the room we noticed that there must have been about 30 or 40 foreign-

ers in the waiting area pushing up against the counter. These foreigners looked like they were mostly Hispanics and non-Anglos. In fact, Eileen and I were the only Anglos in the waiting area, and we expected to wait a long time before we could get to the counter. Suddenly, within a minute of our arrival, the lady at the counter looked up and over the heads of all the others in front of us, and then motioned for Eileen and me to come to the counter. When we got to the counter she proceeded to check us in and, in no time at all, we found ourselves seated in the very large waiting area. I realized then that all the other foreigners in front of us had been pushed aside and we had been invited to go ahead of them—simply because we were Anglos. We were given preferential treatment simply because of the color of our skin.

The issue of preferential treatment also plagued the church at Corinth. The church at Corinth had different groups of people and preferential treatment was given to the rich at the expense of the poor with regard to the Lord's Supper.

The Corinthian Christians tended to see themselves in individual relationships with Christ. They did not understand that they were also part of a corporate body in relationship with one another as well. When they came together to participate in the Lord's Supper, they demonstrated this incorrect understanding by neglecting the poor Christians in the church. Even though there were strict social distinctions in Corinth, they did not yet understand that it contradicted the essence of unity in the body of Christ.

Many modern Christians misunderstand the corporate nature of our relationship with Christ and with one another. We sometimes do what is socially acceptable, but it is in fact a misunderstanding of our unity in Christ. By mistreating other Christians, we tempt God's temporal judgment just as the church at Corinth did.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that proper Christian worship calls us to honor Christ and one another in the Lord's Supper.

Let's learn about this as follows:

1. Words of Rebuke (11:17)
2. Divisions at the Table (11:18-22)

I. Words of Rebuke (11:17)

First, notice Paul's words of rebuke.

You may recall that chapters 11-14 deal with the issue of proper Christian worship. Paul began the section in chapter 11 verse 2 by saying, "Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you." He began with words of praise because the Corinthian Christians were putting some of Paul's teaching into practice.

But Paul could no longer commend the Christians in Corinth. So he said in verse 17a: **"But in the following instructions I do not commend you."** Why could he no longer commend them?

"Because," he said, **"when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse"** (11:17b). When they gathered together for worship, their gathering actually did more harm than good.

That is astonishing, isn't it?

So, what was it that was so troubling to Paul? What aspect of their worship needed correction? Paul was about to correct them in the way in which they celebrated the Lord's Supper. They did not honor one another properly, and thereby they did not honor Christ.

Well, now let's see what was taking place that caused the apostle Paul so much consternation.

II. Divisions at the Table (11:18-22)

Second, notice the divisions at the table.

One of the main problems was the divisions at the table. These divisions were dishonoring to one another, and they were also dishonoring to Christ.

A. *Divisions (11:18-19)*

First, notice the divisions.

Paul began by saying in verse 18a: **“For, in the first place.”** Paul never moved to a second or third issue. This is actually somewhat typical of Paul. He would begin a thought, move on to another point, and not come back and pick up after his first point.

Paul was clearly addressing the issue of what took place in a worship service, because he said in verse 18b: **“When you come together as a church.”** He was about to address what took place when the Corinthian Christians gathered **together as a church**. The word **“church”** in the New Testament, by the way, never refers to a building but always to a group of people. So, the Christian believers in Corinth were the **“church.”**

Then Paul said in verse 18c: **“I hear that there are divisions among you.”** Paul did not reveal where he had heard about the **divisions**. Clearly, this was not something about which they had written to him, and to which this letter—*The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*—was a response. It is possible that he had heard about the **divisions** from Chloe's people (1:10-12), or Stephanas, Fortunatus, or Achaicus (16:17) who had come to him from Corinth. And though Paul did not all the details exactly, he did **believe** the report **in part** (11:18d).

Then Paul said something which is not altogether clear. Paul said in verse 19: **“For there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”**

Two interpretations of this statement are possible. On the one hand, Paul may concede that some divisions were necessary because the visible church contains both true Christians and false professors. Thus, Paul affirmed that it is sometimes necessary for true Christians to establish **factions** so that the **genuine** Christians **may be recognized**.

On the other hand, Paul did not actually say that he approved of these **factions**. So, he may have spoken facetiously, recognizing

factions as a sub-group of **divisions**. “**Divisions**” is clearly negative because Paul does not commend the Corinthian church for their divisions; therefore, “**factions**” is also negative. These sinful **factions** may be the reason why there were problems in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the Corinthian church.

B. Not the Lord’s Supper (11:20)

Then, Paul turned abruptly back to the issue at hand.

Paul said in verse 20: “**When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat.**”

When the Corinthian church came **together** to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, divisions so corrupted their proceedings that **it was not the Lord’s Supper** that they were eating.

By the way, it is worth mentioning that this expression—**Lord’s Supper**—is the only occurrence in the entire New Testament. We take the term for granted, but the expression occurs only in this verse in the New Testament.

The **Lord’s Supper** means something like “the Supper which the Lord instituted” (Luke 22:19-20), or “the Supper at which the Lord’s body and blood are shared” (Matthew 26:26-28).

But, back to the point at hand: what did Paul mean when he said to the Corinthians: “**When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat**”?

C. Mistreatment of the Poor (11:21-22)

Paul was distressed that when the Corinthian church came together to eat the Lord’s Supper, there was mistreatment of the poor. How so?

Paul said in verses 21: “**For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.**”

The way the Lord’s Supper was celebrated in Corinth was very different than the way we do it today.

It is important to remember that there were no buildings in

the first century that were used exclusively for worship and ministry by Christians. There were no “church buildings,” as we would call them. The first-century Christians met in homes for worship and ministry.

Since the 1980s commentators have examined the architecture of Roman homes of the period in places such as Ostia (outside Rome) and Anaploga (near the Corinthian site) as well as the social customs of the day. Early Roman homes were designed to reinforce social status and difference, especially between slaves and owners, and also between dinner guests and kitchen staff (Osiek and Balch 1997:199, 215).

Apparently in some locales the church met upstairs in modest homes (*insula*) of artisans like Priscilla and Aquila, similar to our apartments located over stores at street level. On the other hand, a few wealthy Christians could host larger gatherings in a more spacious home (*domus* or “villa”), like those of Philemon of Colossae or Stephanas and Gaius of Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:15-16; 16:15-16; Romans 16:23).

“Roman domestic architecture is obsessively concerned with distinctions of social rank, and the distinctions involved are not merely between one house and another. . . but within the social space of the house” (Osiek and Balch 1997:29). The wealthier the household, the more status was recognized in the partitioning of space within the home.

Archaeology has shown that in a large home the dining room was known as the *triclinium*. A *triclinium* is actually a three-sided table at which guests would recline. The *triclinium* could have as many as 12 guests in the dining room.

In addition, a large home would also have an entry courtyard, known as the *atrium*, which could seat up to 50 guests.

So, it was likely that the wealthy guests were being seated in the *triclinium* and the poor guests (who may not have had much food and drink to bring, and who were also likely to arrive late because of work commitments) were being seated in the *atrium*.

The better food and service came to the guests of greater sta-

tus, who occupied the *triclinium* dining room, while those who counted less were served in the nearby *atrium* with scraps of food.

The first-century Roman governor of Bithynia and letter writer, Pliny the Younger, complains about how some were treated at the home of a wealthy man: “I happened to be dining with a man, though no particular friend of his, whose elegant economy, as he called it, seemed to me a sort of stingy extravagance. The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends were graded), and the third for his and our freedmen” (*Letters* 2.6, quoted by Murphy-O’Connor 1983:159–60). This secular practice seems to have crept into the Corinthian church gathering and in some manner into the Lord’s Supper observance, with disastrous consequences.¹

Now, you may recall that Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper on the night of his betrayal and arrest. It was in fact a regular meal that Jesus and his disciples were having. And it was during the latter portion of the meal that Jesus referred to the bread and the wine as symbols of his body and blood. And ever since that first evening Christians throughout the world have celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

It is likely, then, that the first century Christians continued celebrating the Lord’s Supper at the end of a regular meal. So, the believers ate a regular meal together. Then, toward the end of the regular meal, they celebrated the Lord’s Supper by eating bread and drinking wine as signs and seals of the body and blood of Jesus.

Apparently, what was happening in the Corinthian church is that the wealthy Christians would arrive early with their larger portions of fine food and wine and would dine in the *triclinium*, the

¹ Alan F. Johnson, vol. 7, *1 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 201-202.

special area for honored guests. They would gorge themselves and have plenty of wine. That is why Paul said at the end of verse 21: **“ . . . another gets drunk.”**

The poor Christians would arrive later and be required to occupy the *atrium* area. The food that was left over or that they could afford to bring was not enough to satisfy their hunger. And that explains why Paul said in verse 21: **“One goes hungry.”**

The poor Christians perhaps tried to satisfy their hunger pangs by eating the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper as part of their regular meal, and by doing so they failed to distinguish the regular meal from the Lord's Supper.

So, both the wealthy and the poor Christians were guilty of abusing the intended purpose of the Lord's Supper through preferential treatment and discrimination based on Corinthian social status.

Therefore, Paul's solution was that the wealthy Christians who arrived early were to *wait for* the late arrivers, and all were to eat together a regular meal and the Lord's Supper, *or* only the Lord's Supper.²

It is likely, by the way, that our tradition of partaking only of the Lord's Supper is one of the ways to ensure that there is no preferential treatment or discrimination in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The situation Paul has just described fills him with such indignation that it calls forth a series of rhetorical questions intended to reduce the wealthy to a level of shame similar to that to which they have reduced the poor.

The first question he asks in verse 22 responds directly to what he had just said in verse 21. Paul asked in verse 22a, with biting irony: **“What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?”** In other words, Paul is saying, “If you really do *not* have houses in which to eat such “regular” meals, then you are excused for doing so in the assembly of God's people.”

² Alan F. Johnson, vol. 7, *1 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 202-03.

But of course if you are eating such meals deliberately in the presence of others at the Lord's Table, then a second question must be asked in verse 22b: **“Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”** By asking this question Paul is getting at what for him is the real nature of their behavior, which is that they do not understand what it means to honor the Lord and to honor one another.

And so with a third and fourth question in verse 22c he brings the argument full circle: **“What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this?”** To which the answer is: **“No, I will not.”**

Conclusion

Let me suggest some points of application.

First, it is possible to celebrate the Lord's Supper in conjunction with a regular meal. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper while having a regular meal with his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. Also, although we do not have as many details as we would like, the Corinthians also celebrated the Lord's Supper while having a regular meal. While Paul wrote to correct the abuses at the Lord's Supper, it is instructive to note that he did not abolish the regular meal. He simply set down guidelines for the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper.

I read one commentator who said that his church celebrated the Lord's Supper after a Thanksgiving Dinner. It seems to me that doing so would be a permissible way of celebrating the Lord's Supper.

Second, the Lord's Supper is a vivid reminder that Christ has broken down the walls that divide Christians. The Corinthian Christians were still recognizing their social distinctions. They had the rich and the poor, the owners and the slaves, and so on. The gospel breaks down all social distinctions so that we are now *all* one in Christ.

When I was growing up in apartheid South Africa, blacks and whites did not worship together. Usually there were churches for

blacks and churches for whites. I remember how glad I was when the church I attended in Cape Town was one of the first to encourage *all* ethnic groups to worship together. And celebrating the Lord's Supper together was one of the clearest demonstrations that we Christians are all one in Christ.

And third, the Lord's Supper is a time to get right with our fellow believers before we partake of the Lord's Supper. As I have studied this passage of Scripture, I now realize that I need to broaden my understanding of how to approach the Lord's Supper. Generally, as we approach the Lord's Supper, we focus our attention on our individual sins and our worthiness to partake of the Lord's Supper. We take time to get ourselves right with God, as it were. As important as that is, it is also important (based on what we see in today's text) that we not only engage in personal piety, but that we also focus on right relationships with one another. We need to ask ourselves, "How am I treating my brothers and sisters in Christ? Am I treating anyone in a preferential or discriminatory manner? Have I sinned against a brother or sister in Christ?" If so, then we need to go and seek forgiveness from that person and be reconciled to each other before proceeding with the Lord's Supper.

As we learn what proper Christian worship is, let us honor Christ and one another by correctly celebrating the Lord's Supper. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Lord Jesus, we celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly. We don't do it in quite the same manner as the Corinthian Christians. Nevertheless, we can be guilty of the same wrong attitudes to you and to others in our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Would you show us our wrong attitudes so that we can repent of them and seek reconciliation with you and others.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve the only true God who is faithful.