

4. Case Study – The Corinthian Church and the Lord’s Table

Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians regarding spiritual gifts and the crucial centrality of love wasn’t accidental or routine. He wasn’t simply reiterating to them a generic doctrine he taught all the churches; his instruction regarding these issues was specific and pointedly directed toward a troublesome pattern in the Corinthian church. This is not to say that no other congregation experienced any of the same problems, but in the case of the church at Corinth, the troubles reflected a prevalent mindset that had corrupted the general life and practice of that body of believers.

The underlying problem at Corinth was “natural-mindedness.” The believers there continued to look at themselves, one another, the Christian life and the function of the Church through the thinking paradigm of the “old man” rather than the mind of Christ.

- This is evident first in Paul’s conspicuously recurrent use of the expression *Lord Jesus Christ* in the opening section of his first letter to the Corinthians. He employed it five times in the first ten verses alone (1:2, 3, 7, 8, 10); more than in the totality of several of his other epistles. This expression encompasses the breadth of Jesus’ identity and significance and Paul intended it to confront and inform the defective thinking at the base of the problems at Corinth:

He reminded the Corinthians of *who they were* – those who had called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, been set apart in Him and brought into fellowship with Him; *what they had received* – they had been given every spiritual endowment and privilege through their union with Him; and *how they were to live* – having been gifted and empowered, they were now to direct their lives with a conscious view toward the future glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- The natural thinking paradigm of the Corinthians is evident secondly in the issues Paul addressed with them. Their failure to understand who they were and what they were called to by virtue of what Christ had accomplished and inaugurated was demonstrated in the way they aligned themselves under different spiritual leaders (1:10-17), how they viewed wisdom and power in the Church (1:18-2:16), the way they regarded and distinguished certain of God’s ministers (3:1-23) and themselves as a congregation (4:1-21), and the manner in which they related to one another as fellow members of the household of faith (5:1-10:33).

Whatever the specific issue, the problem at bottom was that the Corinthians continued to operate with the mind of the “old man” rather than the “mind of Christ.” They had been given a renewed mind through the Spirit’s power and indwelling presence (ref. 2:12-16), and yet were effectively denying that truth by their immature foolishness and fleshliness (3:1-4). In spite of their new life in Christ and all that His Spirit had given and taught them (1:4-7), the Corinthians continued to think and act as “mere men.” **And at the heart of what it means to be “men of flesh” is a natural, loveless mind that views all of life through the perspective and interests of oneself.** Everything plaguing the church at Corinth was the outflow of an autonomous, self-seeking spirit.

a. The Lord's Table and the Mind of Men

Natural-mindedness (what James called “natural wisdom”) refers to the way human beings instinctively conceive of themselves and the world around them in the context of their estrangement from God. Because of man's essential nature and intended function as divine image-bearer, human estrangement from God means estrangement from oneself, all other people, and the created order in general. Estrangement results in the effective *isolation* of the individual – in his thoughts, affections, interests and even his interactions. However selfless a person may appear, in their estrangement human beings cannot help but have themselves as their ultimate point of reference, judgment and concern in everything.

Estrangement means the isolation of the individual, and such isolation destroys the capacity for authentic human *community*. This is precisely why the Church is an “other-worldly” entity whose origin and life reside in the renewal inaugurated by Christ: The Church expresses a reality of intrinsic unity and mutuality that is impossible in the context of man's fallenness. What men call “community” is nothing more than a larger-scale manifestation of the principle of reciprocity. ***Human communities – whatever their specific ground, form, purpose and orientation – find their cohesion in the individual's hope of fulfilled self-interest, not the intimacy and self-giving of authentic human love.***

The Corinthian church was ordering itself in just this way. Though it had a spiritual “charter” and self-understanding (at least to some extent), the community of believers at Corinth was administering its communal life as if it were still a natural organization or society. Thus, at its core, the Corinthian church was *divided* – characterized by the “schism” of individualism with its pride, pretension, posturing and pursuit of personal ends (cf. 1:10-13, 1:26-2:5, 3:1-4:21, 5:1-6, 6:1-8, 8:1-10:33, 11:1-16, 12:1-14:40, 15:1-12).

- 1) As it was with every other aspect of its communal life, so it was with the Corinthian church's observance of the Lord's Table: That which, more than anything else, was to exemplify and testify to the true nature and extent of the community's bond had become merely another expression of its elemental and defining schism (11:17-22).
- 2) When the Corinthians gathered to celebrate the Lord's Table, it wasn't as Christ's spiritual Body but as a group of self-interested individuals. Their physical “coming together” belied their essential division (11:18), so that their gathering for the sake of partaking in the Table only heightened their guilt; it was for the worse, not the better (11:17).

Thus Paul could declare to the Corinthians that their partaking in the Lord's Table was anything but that (11:20). Yes, they were gathering, eating and drinking with the perception that they were celebrating the Table, but the truth was that their celebration amounted to a denial of it.

- 3) The *mechanics* of the observance were in place, but the *substance* was absent because of the fundamental disconnect between the reality of the Lord's Table and what it signifies and the way the Corinthians were observing it. They were bringing their individualism and self-interest to the very ordinance that so powerfully speaks of corporate oneness grounded in personal union with Christ.
- By partaking in the Table – by symbolically partaking of Christ's body and blood – the Corinthian believers were testifying to their personal union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit (John 6:48-58).
 - But for that very reason they were equally testifying to their essential union with one another (whether they discerned it or not). Yet the mindset they brought to that public attestation – evidenced in the way they ate and drank – served to negate the very thing they were supposedly affirming. *Their coming together affirmed, not their oneness in Christ, but their division* (11:21-22).

b. The Lord's Table and the Mind of Christ

It's noteworthy that Paul wasn't willing to simply rebuke the Corinthians for their abuse of the Lord's Table or communicate to them the seriousness of their violation. It was crucial to him that they understand *why* their actions respecting the ordinance were so grievous and culpable in the sight of God; he wanted them to clearly and fully discern the true nature of their offense.

- 1) Some have located the Corinthians' offense in a disposition of selfishness that dishonored the Table's spirit of welcoming fellowship. Others have concluded that the problem was that they were violating the law of love. While both of these views contribute something to the discussion, they fall short of identifying the real issue: It wasn't simply that these saints were acting selfishly and disrespectfully toward one another; their actions revealed a fundamental way of thinking that was antithetical to the Table and its significance. *It wasn't that the Corinthians were violating the spirit of the Table; they were not observing it at all.*
- What the Corinthian believers were doing when they came together was simply one more manifestation of natural "community" that has absolutely no connection with the realities of the new creation inaugurated in Christ – the realities that underlie and are so powerfully signified by the Lord's Table.
 - Inasmuch as their gathering effectively denied their true identity and function as the "dwelling of God in the Spirit," it constituted a denial of Christ Himself; the Corinthians were guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (11:23-27).

- 2) The Corinthian offense wasn't selfishness, disrespect, or inhospitality, but the blasphemy of a practical denial of what Christ had accomplished and initiated by His self-offering. The Table was to be a testimony and celebration of the truth and uniqueness of Christ's Body as the community joined to Him and one another by His Spirit. The Table exalts Christ by spotlighting and celebrating His fulfilled sanctuary – His Body, but in their eating and drinking the Christians at Corinth had failed to “rightly discern the Body,” thus bringing judgment upon themselves (11:28-29).

Understood in this way, the gravity of the Corinthians' offense becomes evident and it's easy to see why God responded to it with such severity. Their flagrant abuse of His Son's Table had moved Him to afflict many among them with infirmity, sickness and even death. But this wasn't an act of condemnation, but the loving discipline of the heavenly Father seeking His children's correction and restoration (11:30-32).

- 3) Thus the remedy for the Corinthians' plight was *repentance* – not a change in their behavior, but a conscientious rethinking of who they were in Christ, the meaning and purpose of His Table, and their relationship to it.

- The remedy was for them to rightly judge the Body by “*laying aside the old self*” and “*putting on the new self which, in the likeness of God, has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth*” (ref. Ephesians 4:20-24; cf. also Colossians 3:9-11).
- If they would renounce the natural thinking that formerly defined them and, with the mind of Christ, judge themselves and the body rightly, there would no longer be the need for God to judge them.

- 4) This, then, is the meaning of “self-examination” in relation to the Lord's Table (v. 28). For many Christians, self-examination in preparation for partaking in the Table consists of a mental scan of one's recent thoughts, words and actions measured against perceived biblical demands. When this process yields awareness of violation, some respond with conscious confession and petition for forgiveness. But in some instances, the sense of personal failure leaves the individual hesitant to participate in the Table at all, while others are even left questioning their own salvation.

As common as this approach to self-examination is, it completely misses Paul's point and distracts the believer from the real matter of concern (for himself as well as for the Corinthian church). Even if a person were to come to the Table innocent of all acts of transgression, he could very well still be guilty of the body and blood of Christ. If he brings to the Table an underlying disposition of individualism and autonomy, he is guilty of wrongly judging the body. In contrast to the Corinthians, he may be sober and pious, but he has nonetheless despised the Table and denied its Lord.