

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

The Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17–31

The Corinthians were not living according to the Grace life, but instead were disunified, not being of the same mind, and divided up into small cliques with each group following different people and doctrines. Paul's goal was to get them to come together as one, united under one doctrine, and living to help each other in their spiritual walk (1 Corinthians 1:10; 3:3). These divisions were made evident when they celebrated what Paul calls the Lord's supper. Instead of being unified as they remembered the Lord's death, they demonstrated to what extent their quarrels with each other had affected the whole church. Those who were well off would grab the best foods that were being served leaving scraps for those less fortunate. The Corinthians were selfishly watching out for their own individual needs instead of looking out for those within the congregation who were in need.

To their shame, Paul needed to tell them to think of others and to build up each other. This is a common theme throughout the book of 1 Corinthians. Beginning with chapter 1 verse 10, Paul tells them to be perfectly joined together instead of being divided. If they were following the right doctrine, they would have been united. Paul even presented himself as an example of putting others ahead of his own needs (1 Corinthians 9:12–17; 11:1). Although believers have a great amount of liberty, that liberty is to be used to edify others and not for personal gain. This includes living your life in a manner that will not offend or cause another weaker brother to fall into sin.

This self-centered behavior had become evident in their celebration of the Lord's supper where one is well fed while another leaves hungry. They were celebrating the Lord's supper as a meal and then perhaps finishing the meal by taking the cup and the bread. Paul tells them, with a bit of sarcasm, that if they are unable to control themselves while eating at church that they should just eat at home. Instead, they were bringing judgment upon themselves by the way they were acting. The Lord's supper was all about being united, not about division. The Corinthians were making a mockery of this time of remembering the Lord's death.

Lord's supper observance

Most fundamental churches often have what they like to call two ordinances. The first is baptism, and the second is the Lord's supper, often called communion. A few churches recognize the Lord's supper but not baptism because they understand that baptism is not part of this dispensation of grace. Still fewer churches do not observe either ordinance. Although they are often called ordinances (laws, commands), most people do not put them on the same level as the 10 Commandments. I believe Paul has given us much leeway in what we do, how we do it, and how often it is done. Unlike the Mosaic Law, we are not constrained by explicit rules. They perhaps should more accurately be called observances.

Most mid-Acts churches don't believe baptism was given to the church as an observance. Baptism was given to Israel under the Mosaic Law (as pointed out in Hebrews 6:2), and was used under John's ministry as a symbol of purification to those who were saved by the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. We are under no such compulsion because we are not under Law and were not saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom. Although baptism is characterized as an outward expression of an inward change, there is no credible biblical support for that analogy. It is actually a man-made tradition, not a biblical concept.

The other common observation, the Lord's supper, is often celebrated within mid-Acts churches because Paul speaks about it to the Corinthians. Although 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 sounds like a perfect description of the events that happened at the end of Jesus' last supper with the Disciples, mid-Acts people are quick to point out that what Paul is describing is not the Passover supper (Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24;

Luke 22:17–20), but is completely different. We are to observe the Lord’s supper to remember Christ’s work on the cross, not as a Passover meal.

Notice, beginning with verse 23, that Paul had received this information directly from the Lord. The Lord had personally told Paul what happened on the night before His death, and now Paul was delivering this information in his letter to the Corinthians. In the gospel accounts, it was implied, but not stated, that the Disciples were to do this until Jesus returned to set up His kingdom (Luke 22:19 “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”). His coming was mentioned in Luke 22:18 when Jesus said He would not drink wine until the Kingdom of God is comes, meaning when He comes back and sets up the earthly Kingdom.

A careful reading of 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 shows that Paul is not tell them to follow this procedure, but is only telling them what happened on the last night that He ate with His Disciples. The Corinthians were calling their celebration the Lord’s supper, but Paul’s description of the actual last supper of the Lord and how they were celebrating it were completely different (1 Corinthians 11:20). The paragraph following Paul’s description of Jesus’s last supper merely tells them what they are doing wrong while comparing to the actual Lord’s supper. They had decided to observe what the Lord told the Disciples to do, but they are making a mockery of it. The whole context of this section is that of being united, as exemplified by Jesus when He shared the cup and bread with His disciples. Although the Corinthians were going through the actions of sharing the cup and bread, the whole thing became a free-for-all where only a few would indulge leaving the rest needing. The unity demonstrated by Jesus and His Disciples was not being exhibited at all by the Corinthians. They seemed to be clueless as to why they were doing what they were doing.

I believe that Paul was telling the Corinthians what happened on the night before Jesus was to die to show the Corinthians that what they were doing was far from the unity demonstrated by Jesus and the Disciples sharing the cup and the bread. Since the Corinthians had decided to commemorate the Lord’s supper, then they needed to have the right heart and attitude. Since we have much liberty, there is nothing wrong for a church to take what Jesus did with His Disciples and use that to remember His death. However, Paul is not giving us an ordinance to observe the Lord’s supper, and therefore we have the liberty to decide whether we do or don’t observe it. It seems to me that if we were commanded to celebrate an observance, that it would include Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, not just His death.

Eating unworthily

There are many ideas on what eating in an unworthy manner entails. Some say it is partaking without fully understanding its significance. Some say it is about taking the elements without confessing your sins. Others think that taking the cup and bread without mending a broken relationship would not be acceptable. The only way to properly understand what eating in an unworthy manner means is to evaluate that phrase in light of the whole context of the passage, and even within the whole book of 1 Corinthians. The whole book is a rebuke against the Corinthians for being carnal Christians. They were living for themselves instead of looking out for the needs of others within the congregation. This carnality spilled over into the manner in which they were celebrating the Lord’s supper. Instead of looking out for each other, it was every man for himself. There were those of prominence who over indulged while others went hungry. Instead of unity and edification, the congregation was rife with disunity and self-serving people.

The simple explanation for eating in an unworthy manner was that they were literally eating the Lord’s supper in an unchristian-like manner. It is a continuation of the thought from verses 20–22. When they ate in that manner, it was not about unity, and it therefore would bring condemnation upon them. This condemnation is about judgment, not eternal damnation, as some read into this.

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