

## **1 COR 11.17-34: THE LORD'S SUPPER – THE DISCIPLES' MEAL**

*[Chelmsford 9 May 2010]*

Do you remember the very first time you took communion?

I do - it was the day of my baptism on a November Sunday morning in 1957.

I remember one thing in particular: the sense of panic which overcame me.

Was I eating and drinking aright? Was I in danger of incurring the wrath of God?

My mind went to the words of Paul in 1 Cor 11.27,29, which in the AV can strike terror to any soul: "**Wherefore, whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord... For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body**".

If "**damnation**" be on the cards, then surely it would be better to let the bread and wine go by, rather than to eat and drink and risk the terrible consequences.

Modern versions improve the situation a little - and yet these verses still contain a dire warning: "**If anyone eats the Lord's bread or drinks from his cup in a way that dishonours him, he or she is guilty of sin against the Lord's body and blood... For if people do not recognize the meaning of the Lord's body when they eat the bread and drink from the cup, they bring judgement on themselves as they eat and drink**" (27, 29).

What did Paul mean? What does it mean to eat and drink in a way that "**dishonours**" Christ? To eat and drink "**unworthily**" (NRSV)?

### **A MEAL FOR SINNERS**

Let me state what these words do not mean. Paul was not saying that

- only those who are 'worthy' may eat & drink at the Lord's Table.
- only those who have reached a certain standard of Christian behaviour may share in the Lord's Supper.

The fact is that the bread and wine are for sinners only.

Christ didn't die for the righteous, but for the unrighteous.

The moment that we think we are worthy to receive the bread and wine, that moment we are most definitely unworthy.

The Table is for those who know their need of a Saviour.

The good news is that no sin is beyond the reach of God's power to cleanse.

In the words of Isaiah: "**Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool**" (Is 1.18 NRSV).

Or in the words of John: "**the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin**" (1 Jn 1.7 NRSV).

True, we need to repent of our sin.

The Table is not for those who are determined to go on breaking God's holy laws.

The invitation to eat & drink is "*for all who do truly & earnestly **repent** of their sins*".

But in principle, the table is for sinners.

## A MEAL TO SHARE

So what then does it mean to eat and drink "**unworthily**" (NRSV), in a way that "**dishonours**" the Lord?

Does it mean to eat and drink "**carelessly**"? Simply to go through the motions without giving any thought to the body of Jesus broken for us, and the blood of Jesus shed for us? Is that what it means to "not discern the body"?

Certainly not to care, as it were, a "damn" for the sacrifice of Jesus is to invite "**judgment**" on ourselves - but that is not the point here.

The body Paul has in mind is not the body of Jesus represented in the bread - but rather the body of Christ represented in the people.

Not to discern (GNB: "**recognise**") the body is to fail to acknowledge our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This meal for sinners is a meal in which we share together.

All this becomes clear once we set the words of Paul in their *context*.

Look at the beginning of the section where Paul deals with the issue of the Lord's Supper. Paul writes in vv20-22:

**"When you meet together as a group, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For as you eat, you each go ahead with your own meal, so that some are hungry while others get drunk. Haven't you got your own homes in which to eat and drink? Or would you rather despise the church of God and put to shame the people who are in need?"**

Or as Peterson puts it in his paraphrase: "*I find that you bring divisions to worship – you come together and instead of eating the Lord's Supper, you bring in a lot of food from the outside and make pigs of yourselves. Some are left out, and go home hungry. Others have to be carried out, too drunk to walk. I can't believe it! Don't you have your own homes to eat and drink in? Why should you stoop to desecrating God's church? What should you actually shame the poor?"*

From this it is clear that in three important respects the church at Corinth celebrated the Lord's Supper in a very different way to the way we do

1. *At Corinth the Lord's Supper*, like the Last Supper, *was a proper meal*. Our word '**supper**' is misleading – for supper for us can be a light meal. However, Paul uses a word which denoted the main meal of the day. The bread was broken and the wine was poured out in the context of an evening dinner. This is very different from this morning's celebration of the Lord's Supper, where the bread and wine each will receive would scarcely keep a sparrow alive.
2. *At Corinth the Lord's Supper was not provided by the church*. None of us this morning have had to bring along our own bread & wine. But at Corinth people brought along their own food & drink. "**As you eat, you each go ahead with your own meal**" (v21a). It is not clear whether some sharing of food took place – if so, we could liken the Lord's Supper to a form of a *pot-luck supper* where everybody brought a plate or dish of food to share with others. But the sharing appears to have been very limited.

3. *Not everybody had as much to eat and drink as others.*

Paul writes: “**As you eat, you each go ahead with your own meal, so that some are hungry while others get drunk**” (v21). It would appear that the wealthier members of the church were having a better meal than the poorer members, “**the people who are in need**” (v22). How come?

At this point we have to remember that the first Christians met in homes, and not in church buildings. Archaeologists have shown that the dining room of a typical Roman villa of this period could only accommodate nine people, reclining at table. Other guests would have to sit or stand in the atrium, which provided space for perhaps another 30–40 people.

Furthermore, it was not at all unusual for the higher-status guests in the dining room to receive better food & wine than other guests – just as people flying 1<sup>st</sup> or business class receive better food than those in economy.

Pliny the Younger, e.g., in one of his letters describes how “*the best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company*”; and how the best wine was served to the important guests, and cheap wine to the others.

From this we see that the church at Corinth was reflecting the social customs of its time.

But for Paul this was anathema. It was an outrage - a denial of Christian community. For when rich and poor come together in the name of Jesus, they come together as brothers and sisters. So Paul writes: “**Would you despise the church of God and put to shame the people who are in need? What do you expect me to say to you about this? Shall I praise you? Of course not!**” (v22). Paul was hopping mad.

This failure to share food fairly would be an unworthy Christian act on any occasion. But to behave like this at the Lord's Supper, where the Lord's death was celebrated, was tantamount to blasphemy.

Why, one might as well celebrate the Lord's Supper in a strip show, as in a divided church. For at the heart of the Lord's Supper is the Gospel of God's love for all. At the Lord's Table we come to celebrate that “**God was in Christ reconciling the world**” (2 Cor 5.18 NRSV).

Yet where there is division, this Gospel of reconciliation becomes a nonsense. Indeed, Paul says that by eating the bread & drinking the cup in an unworthy manner the Corinthians “**will be guilty of sin against the Lord's body and blood**” (27).

This is strong language - he is implying that there is no difference between the Christians at Corinth and those who put Jesus to death.

What they were doing was tantamount to crucifying Jesus all over again.

So Peterson in *The Message* writes that anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup in any unworthy manner “*is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death*”.

Paul therefore goes on to say: “**So then, you should all examine yourselves first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup. For if people do not recognise the.... Lord's body when they eat the bread and drink from the cup, they bring judgment on themselves as they eat and drink**” (vv28,29).

Well, enough of Paul and Corinth.

How does God's Word apply to us here at Central Baptist?

Things have radically changed since Paul's time.

Because of abuse, the Lord's Supper has ceased to be a proper meal - instead it's become a token meal.

Today we retain just the action of breaking of bread, which preceded the meal, and the drinking of the cup, which probably ended the meal.

And yet it is still possible to eat and drink in a way that “**dishonours**” the Lord, “**in an unworthy manner**” (NRSV). It is still possible to eat and drink “**without recognising** (NRSV “discerning”) **the body**” (v29).

## 1. REMEMBER THE HORIZONTAL!

*We can fail to "recognise the body" when we over-individualise the Lord's Supper.*

There is a danger that when we come to the Table we want to focus exclusively on the Lord Jesus. Indeed, I'm told that there are some people in our church who would like to do away with the greeting one another with the Peace.

They feel it interrupts the service – it stops them focussing on God.

But hang on a moment: although we do need to focus on the Lord Jesus, it must not be at the expense of our relationship with others.

Let me ask you a question: would the Lord's Supper have any less meaning if you were to celebrate it privately at home, rather than gather around the Table with us this morning? If so, then you need to re-focus.

The Lord's Supper is a corporate act.

In our church we try to symbolise that in a variety of ways:

- Before communion *we give the Peace to one another* – in so doing we are following the Biblical injunction to ‘greet one another with a holy kiss’.
- We use *one loaf*, as a symbol of our oneness in Christ. In this way too we follow Biblical precedent. NB Paul: “**Because there is one loaf of bread, all of us, though many, are one body**” (1 Cor 10.17).
- *We sing together* as the cups are passed round and then *drink together* when all have been served.
- We *pray for one another* at the Table.
- *We bind hands with one another* at the close of the meal as we say the Grace together.

All these acts are highly important.

They emphasise the horizontal aspect of the Lord's Supper.

## 2. PUT RIGHT BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

We can fail to “**recognise the body**”, when relationships are out of sorts

Yes, let's be honest, there are times when relationships are soured - when disagreement leads to breakdown in fellowship.

This is inevitable - it is unrealistic to expect any church made up of sinful men and women to be full of sweetness and light all the time.

Relationships are bound to go wrong from time to time.

But when they do, they need to be put right - immediately.

***To allow broken relationships to fester is to fail to discern the body.***

Jesus had something of this kind in mind when he said: **"If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar - i.e. when you are in church and about to worship God – and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God"** (Mt 5.23,24).

NB not just if you have something against your brother/sister, but if your brother/sister has something against you!

Broken relationships must be put right. To allow broken relationships to fester, and at the same time to eat bread and drink wine is **dishonours** the Lord.

It is to fail to **"recognise"** or discern the body.

Better to sit out a communion service than to take part with a relationship which is wrong.

True, there times when we do our best to put right a relationship, but the other person involved refuses our advances. My mind goes to Rom 12.18: **"Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody"**.

In such circumstances, if we have tried our best, then we may eat & drink at the Lord's Table - but not until we have truly extended the olive branch and sought to put things right..

### **3. STRENGTHEN RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS**

***We can fail to discern the body by failing to communicate with one another.***

Communication – talking to one another - is vital to every human relationship. Just as a family which simply sits around watching TV together, is in danger of becoming a dysfunctional family, so a church where people do not take time to talk to one another is in danger of becoming a dysfunctional church.

Communication is vital to church life if relationships are to be real.

Unfortunately at Corinth people had given up on communicating with one another.

Nobody was doing anything against anyone, but nobody was doing anything for anyone. One section of the church was ignoring another section.

Relationships weren't right - not because they were wrong, but because they just didn't exist.

Does this ring any bells? Are their sections of our church ignoring one another?

Or if not ignoring one another, are there sections of our church not engaging in meaningful relationships with one another?

And by meaningful relationships I don't have in mind the after-service chat, but the kind of deeper sharing which to my mind is only possible within the context of a small group.

I believe that our church, as indeed every church, needs to strengthen relationships one with another.

But to return to where we began: the Apostle Paul exhorts us not to eat or drink in a way that “**dishonours**” the Lord. Rather, he encourages us to "**recognise the body**". As this morning we come to eat bread and drink wine, let us "**examine**" ourselves:

1. To what extent am I aware of my brothers & sisters - do I remember the horizontal?
2. Are there any broken relationships I need to put right? Is there a brother or sister who feels out of sorts with me?
3. To what extent am I actively seeking to strengthen relationships within the Body of Christ.?