

## **“Worship as a Way of Life”**

**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

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### **Text Comment**

Remember, we are in a section of the letter in which Paul is dealing with problems in the worship services of the Corinthian church. The first such problem was a failure to maintain gender distinctiveness. The next, dealt with in our text this morning, was the fact that the division in the congregation, their lack of loving unity, was spilling over into their worship.

We have already learned that the church there was badly fractured. There were divisions that centered around personal loyalties to different teachers, there were lawsuits being filed against one another with regard to business matters, there were different convictions about divorce and remarriage and about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols and these differences resulted in hard feelings. Some of these divisions may well have been exacerbated by divisions of class and wealth in the congregation. That division, between the well-to-do and the poor in the congregation, between the haves and the have-nots, certainly lay at the root of the abuse of worship that Paul now considers.

Now, to set the stage for Paul's remarks, it is necessary that we have some idea of what must have been happening. As seems clear from this passage and others in the New Testament and from the materials of early Christianity, the Lord's Supper was taken in earliest Christian worship as part of a larger meal, known at least in some places as the *agape* feast. There is some question as to how the Lord's Supper fit into that feast, whether it *was* the feast itself, whether it came right after the feast, or whether the wine came at the beginning of the meal and the bread at the end of it. We needn't take time on that. Worship services in those early days of apostolic Christianity were held in homes and, primarily, in the larger homes of the wealthy. But in such homes, there was hardly room for everyone in the dining room itself which rarely would have held more than a dozen or so. The rest would have eaten in the atrium which may well have held many more. In class conscious Corinth it would have been natural for the wealthy home owner to invite into the dining room those of his own class, the wealthier Christians, while the poorer set ate apart. What is more, it would have been normal for them to expect that the rich would eat better food than the poor.

- v.17 A terrible thing to say about a Christian worship service!
- v.19 Paul isn't saying, of course, that such divisions are a good thing, but he is acknowledging that they become the forum in which God conducts his testing of their hearts and of their faith.
- v.20 They intended it to be the Lord's Supper but their sinfulness made it into something else.
- v.21 The point is, the social and economic divisions were being put on display in a crude form. The rich Christians were coming to the church potluck with their Gucci picnic baskets, caviar and fine wine. The poor had their day-old bread with peanut butter and jelly. Paul

puts the difference in its extreme form: one is hungry the other is drunk. It is hard to know if drunkenness was an actual problem or simply sarcasm on Paul's part.

- v.22 Paul doesn't intend to abolish the class and economic distinctions; they have their different homes and will have them. But they cannot bring those distinctions into the fellowship of the saints.
- v.23 It is necessary then to remind these Christians what the Lord's Supper is and what it is for. Obviously their behavior indicates that they have lost touch with the true meaning of the Supper.
- v.26 The "for" indicates that Paul is returning to his main argument. This is what the Supper is and is for and this is utterly inconsistent with what they have turned the Supper into in Corinth. You can't sincerely proclaim the Lord's death for sinners as your hope of eternal life and, at the same time, treat your brethren with contempt.
- v.27 Remember there is a context here. Paul is not talking about the continued sinfulness of Christians, as if we should not partake of the Lord's Supper if we are struggling with our sins. That, alas, is a capital misunderstanding of Paul's words that has traveled very far through the ages. Paul is talking about what is going on in the Corinthian church. To profane the meal by their behavior, as they are doing, is to insult the Lord and to belittle his work as our Savior.
- v.28 Again, this text has led to untold anxieties among Christians and more than faintly ridiculous practices, as if the Lord's Supper were a sort of magical talisman that only the worthy could touch. Fact is, you have the same warnings frequently in the OT prophets. What is meant, in this context, is that you should not come to the Lord's Supper and profane it by your misbehavior. And, in the larger sense, what is meant by all such warnings is that you should not suppose that the sacrament will do you any good if you do not sincerely intend to love, obey, and serve the Redeemer whose death you are remembering in it.
- v.29 Now here we come to the great debate concerning this section of Paul's letter. By "recognizing or discerning the body" – that is what Paul writes, the NIV has added "of the Lord" – does Paul mean the body of Jesus, the body represented by the bread, the body mentioned in v. 27 in the phrase "body and blood", *or* is he referring to the body of Christ, that is the people of God, the church, the body mentioned in 10:17? Howie Donahoe, whom many of you know, formerly a member of this congregation and now the session clerk of a substantial PCA congregation in Charlotte, NC, wrote a paper on this question for a class he took at the Reformed Theological Seminary campus in Charlotte. He sent it to me. It includes a survey of the commentaries which shows that more recent commentaries take the "body = church" view than the "body = the Lord's crucified body" view. Howie himself argues very ably for the body = the church view.

It would take too much time to survey the arguments pro and con for each position. Suffice it to say that the obvious argument for taking body in v. 29 to refer to Christ's

crucified body is its proximity to v. 27, the nearest use of the term “body” to its use in v. 29. There “body” clearly refers to the Lord’s crucified body. The strongest arguments for taking “body” to refer to the church are that there is no reference to blood in v. 29, even though he speaks of eating and drinking, and that, in context, it is the failure to consider that body, the Christian fellowship, which is the problem in Corinth that Paul is addressing in this text. He began with that point in chapter 10, where “body” = church in v.17, and returns to it again in chapter 12, which immediately follows, where “body” again is used of the church. I think I lean to the body = church view, though I’m open to the possibility that Paul, perfectly well understanding the ambiguity of the term, intended the double reference. After all, he had himself used the term in both ways and would again in several verses.

- v.32 Paul knows, as an apostle, that the physical troubles that had bedeviled the Corinthian church are in fact the Lord’s discipline. Those who died, as this verse makes clear, are not necessarily said to be unsaved, but the entire community is being punished for its sins in order to wean them from those sins. God does that with his children so that they do not live in sin as those do who are not saved and are not the objects of his saving love.
- v.34 If you are interested in fine food that other believers can’t afford, eat that at home. When you come to worship, keep your unity with your brothers and sisters in view. We would, of course, love to know what “further directions” Paul gave them!

It is interesting that we are told very little about the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. Besides the accounts of its institution in the Gospels and this passage in 1 Corinthians there is nothing apart from its being merely mentioned a few times in Acts. Most books of the New Testament say nothing about it, we are given no description of a Lord’s Supper in apostolic Christianity, and there is nowhere any reflection on its meaning or its way of working. No wonder it has been the cause of such controversy in Christendom.

But the fact that the NT says so little about the Lord’s Supper has had the effect of making this passage in 1 Corinthians 11 of unusual importance. It doesn’t tell us very much, but it is the main statement in the NT about the Lord’s Supper and so the church has, perhaps understandably, been deeply influenced by it. And, unfortunately, this has led to some very unhappy consequences. Most of the Bible’s sacramental theology is given in the OT. This simple fact has betrayed many, who should have known better, into views of the Supper that are seriously unbiblical.

Paul is dealing here with an abuse of the Lord’s Supper in the Corinthian church. He is not giving us a comprehensive doctrine of the Supper or account of its role in a believer’s life. The congregation was practicing the Lord’s Supper in an overtly sinful way, they were bringing their divisions and their pride and their envy into their celebration of the table of the Lord. Much of the problem was due to the fact that they were, as apparently other Christians did at that time, observing the sacrament as part of a fellowship meal that the church ate together on the Lord’s Day. There was nothing wrong with that. After all, the original Lord’s Supper had been taken as part of a larger meal. But, as part of this meal, they were practicing discrimination, an unbrotherly preoccupation with status and pleasure at the expense of the poorer members of the

church. The rich Christians were flaunting their position and openly enjoying their fine fare while the poor Christians made do with much less. They were taking the Lord's Supper – which is, after all, all about his love for us and sacrifice for us – while showing no love and no spirit of sacrifice.

It is against that background that Paul's remarks are made. Like the prophets before him he warns them against a profane use of the holy things of God, against entertaining the notion that God will be pleased with their participation in worship if they are not obeying him and serving others. So Paul tells them to look at themselves and their behavior, to see how inconsistent it is with the Lord's Supper itself, and to begin to practice their brotherhood in and through their worship.

That is what Paul said, but many through the centuries have largely missed Paul's point because they have taken his remarks out of context and taken him to be teaching that the Lord's Supper is a dangerous thing, that one should not take part in it without careful preparation, and that one should never come to it unless one's spiritual house is in order, otherwise the Lord might punish you as he punished the Corinthians.

Let me give you an example. John Flavel is a Puritan author I greatly admire and appreciate. He is a fine representative of everything that is good in Puritan theology and spiritual writing. I have often used him in preparing sermons. I will always be grateful to the Rev. Ian Tait for the gift of an early 19<sup>th</sup> century leather-bound edition of the six volumes of Flavel's works as a wedding present.

Well, in vol. 6, Flavel has some 80 pages of meditations for the Lord's Supper, much of which, of course, is very fine. But right at the beginning he stresses the seriousness, the gravity that ought to mark the believer's approach to the table of the Lord. He quotes with approval the dictum from the medieval church: "sacramentum et mortis articulus equiparanter," that is, the Lord's Supper requires the same seriousness as the very moment of death. "A man's spirit," Flavel writes, "should be as deeply composed at the Lord's table, as upon a death-bed. We should go to that ordinance, as if we were then going into another world."

And, then, to illustrate the kind of seriousness he means, he points to what Chrysostom, the church father, says about how Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper in his day, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. They used to sit up whole nights in meditation and prayer before their participation in the Supper and their nights were called "vigils" or "watches." Such was the reverence the saints had for this sacrament, which they often called *mysterium tremendum*, that Chrysostom said they would not give "sleep to their eyes, or slumber to their eyelids," when so great and solemn a day drew near. Well apart from the fact that by Chrysostom's time they were celebrating the Lord's Supper less frequently, not every Sunday as in Paul's day, you can hear the echo of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 in all of that! The need to compare the Lord's Supper with death surely derives from Paul's statement about some having died on account of the church's profanation of the Lord's Supper, and the long night of meditation and prayer surely owes itself to Paul's command to examine oneself lest one eat and drink judgment to oneself.

And so in some of our Presbyterian churches over the centuries there used to be special services of self-examination prior to a communion Sunday; sometimes even visits from elders to determine whether an individual or a particular family was in suitable condition to partake of the sacrament. And we have all run into Christians who felt that they shouldn't take the Supper because their lives were not what they knew they ought to be. They examined themselves and found so much sinfulness that they thought it dangerous for them to partake.

Indeed, in some circles, that idea was carried to the point that large numbers of people felt that they should *never* come to the table until they had attained the spiritual state of a mature, thriving, victorious Christian, able to avoid the great danger a younger, immature believer might easily not recognize, of coming to the table with unexamined sin, with offenses of heart and life which would anger God and bring down his judgment upon them. And so many would wait for years and in some churches – for example in the Scottish Highlands or among some circles of Dutch Reformed folk – one could find congregations of hundreds of believing adults of whom only a few participated in the Lord's Supper.

Walter Marshall, in his classic of the Christian life, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, recognized this error already in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century.

“Many account it the safest way wholly to abstain from such a dangerous ordinance, or at least, that once a year is enough to run so great a hazard... Instead of striving to receive Christ and His salvation therein, they account themselves to have succeeded well if they come off without the sentence of damnation.” [199]

Imagine! The goal has become to *survive* the Lord's Supper.

All of that was supposed to derive from Paul here in 1 Corinthians 11. But that is a terrible misunderstanding. Paul is not giving an introduction to the Supper; he is not explaining its manner of working. He is correcting a terrible abuse that was being visited upon the Supper by Christians who were behaving selfishly and arrogantly toward one another in the very celebration of the Supper itself. He told them such behavior had to stop. It takes Paul entirely out of context here to make him teach that the Supper is dangerous, that it needs to be approached cautiously, that we need to be in sound spiritual shape to take it, and the like. There is nothing of pre-sacramental vigils in the Bible. Why, if the early Christians had taken the Lord's Supper like Chrysostom says they took it in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, they would never have gotten any sleep! And in the Bible, one comes to the sacrament not because one feels on top of one's sins, but because one feels the need for help with one's sins. There is nothing of a craven fear to approach the table for reason of their sin; they came to the table *precisely because they were sinners!*

But the Supper being a sign and seal of our salvation in Christ, a salvation all of grace and all of Christ and his sacrifice, it was utterly necessary for Paul to point out how hypocritical, how unsupportably insincere it was to take the Supper while looking down your nose at other believers. Christians have to line up their living with their worship. Not perfectly, but really and sincerely. The Corinthians weren't and Paul told them that had to stop. The Supper should have been the grand demonstration that in Christ and his love all the distinctions between human

beings, all the differences that separate one from another, had been abolished and that Christians were a single family and a single fellowship of love, no matter their class, their wealth, their education, their background. And that as the salvation represented in that Supper was accomplished by a great sacrifice, the life that flowed from it should be marked by the same self-sacrificial love on behalf of others, the same delight in serving others, the same delicious pleasure in annihilating all distinctions between us for love's sake.

I read a wonderful book a few days ago, a new edition of a book first published in 1963. It is the firsthand account of the terrible ordeal of the mostly British soldiers who, captured by the Japanese, were put to work as slave laborers to build the railroad through the Thai jungle that was to support the Japanese advance into Burma and eventually into India. This is the same history that was more fancifully recounted in David Lean's famous movie, *Bridge on the River Kwai*.

It is a moving account of suffering and death, of the descent of civilized human beings into unqualified depravity, as hunger, disease, brutal mistreatment, weakness, and the fear of death drove otherwise decent men to utter unconcern for anyone else but themselves. Soldiers stealing from one another the few meager personal possessions that they had been able to keep, stealing food from one another, leaving the sick to die and the dying to die alone, caring for no one but themselves. And, then, the great turn in the camp. It came about through the sacrificial, loving example of a few Christian men, who taught the rest both the power of God's grace in Jesus Christ to illuminate even the darkest night of the soul and that even in the face of almost certain death there was a reason to live and to serve the Lord.

Ernest Gordon, the author of the book, who came to Christ in that camp, did so through the sheer, selfless kindness of one such Christian young man. Gordon was dying, or so it seemed, and he was taken to the large shelter where the dying were laid in rows to await their end alone, where they wouldn't contaminate or depress the others in the camp. Dozens of young men were dying every day in that camp. But he was found there by a Christian friend, who moved him out, who made a little hut for him, and who sent him the next day this young fellow, Dusty Miller, to bathe him, to squeeze the puss out of the many running sores on his legs, and to massage back into them the life that diphtheria had taken. Day after day he ministered life back into this dying man until he was dying no longer. And while he worked he spoke of Christ and the Word of God and soon Ernest Gordon was a Christian himself. And from a small circle of Christians soon the camp itself had fallen under the spell of self-sacrificial love. As Gordon put it,

"What I had experienced – the turning to life away from death – was happening to the camp in general. We were coming out of the valley. There was a movement, a stirring in our midst, a presence. Stories began to circulate around the camp, stories of self-sacrifice, heroism, faith, and love." [*To End all Wars*, 98]

One man starved himself to death to ensure that his sick and dying mate had enough to eat. Another offered himself as the guilty party when a group of prisoners was accused of having stolen a shovel and the commander threatened to shoot a prisoner at random unless the guilty man confessed. He was beaten to death in front of the others, and, then, when the tools were collected and counted it was found that none was missing after all.

And there were other confirmations of the source of this grace and power in human lives. Once the entire group of prisoners was marched from their camp to another work site.

“Usually as we marched through the villages, we were treated with indifference and contempt. Thai maidens held their noses as we passed – although perhaps they were only being practical. Sometimes we encountered yellow-robed Buddhist priests going along the road with their silver begging bowls. Our plight meant nothing to them – why should it? They were on their way to salvation by non-attachment. Humanity, with its suffering, was secondary. A man dying by the side of the road was left to die. There was no place for mercy in their philosophy.

But once we came to a village where we received a treatment so different that it astonished us. There was mercy in the eyes of those who rushed to the roadside to watch us go by. Before we had reached the end of their settlement they were back laden with cakes, bananas, eggs, medicines, and money which they thrust into our hands. Later we learned that this village had been converted to Christianity by missionaries. The Japanese, who found out about their friendly behaviour to us, severely punished them for it.” [106]

A church was established in a clearing in the prison camp. It was a church in which all distinctions disappeared. Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, worshipped as one; officers and enlisted men, men who at home belonged to different classes but in the church at Chungkai were by need and by saving grace made one. At one end of the clearing “prayerful hands had fashioned a Holy Table of bamboo on which were placed a cross and a lamp. The cross was a simply carved piece of wood; the lamp a tin can with a shoelace as a wick. A roof of palm protected them from the elements.” [153]

Gordon recalls his first communion at the Chungkai prison camp church.

“The first communion which I attended was memorable. The elements were of our daily life: rice baked into the form of bread and fermented rice water. The solemn words of the fraction were said:

‘Who the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread and when he had blessed it and given thanks, he brake it and said, “Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me.”

We broke the bread as it was passed to us and handed it to our neighbour. The elements were returned to the Table, a prayer of thanksgiving said, a hymn sung, and a blessing given. We slipped quietly away into the singing silence of the night, cherishing as we did so our experience of the Communion of the Saints – the Holy Spirit had made us one with our neighbours, one with those at home, one with the faithful in every land, in every age, one with the disciples.” [156]

Many of the emaciated men who partook of that holy Supper of the Lord never made it alive out of Thailand. The two men who were instrumental in Ernest Gordon's coming to faith in Christ both died before the liberation.

But you have only to picture that scene and to appreciate what grace and what spiritual power had transformed the hopeless lives of those men and made them so beautiful in the midst of such terrible brutality and suffering. And there in the middle of that beauty sits the Table of the Lord Jesus Christ. There as a symbol of that love and unity, of that life worthy to be called life, sits the Lord's Table. And expressing the love for one another and the meaning of their existence that they had found in the most unlikely and inhospitable place in the world was the Lord's Supper, which they took together, entirely together, as one.

Well, brothers and sisters, the same table that sat in that jungle clearing in Thailand, sits here before you today. And it means the same thing here and now as it did there and then. And it should be unmistakably clear to all of us that when we come to this table it is not to think about or to express or to manifest our differences, but to confess and to practice and to receive a renewed sense that we are all one, members of the same family, partakers of the same salvation, hungry for the same food, committed to the same life, animated by the same love.

They had forgotten that in Corinth and needed very much and very quickly to remember it. We need to remember it too and live remembering it, going away from this table every Lord's Day determined to love as we have been loved.