

“Living the Lord’s Supper”
1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1
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Text Comment

Paul has been warning the congregation in Corinth to take heed to their lives. Their indifference toward one another, their lack of loving regard for one another, must raise the question whether some of them are saved at all. Now he returns to the specific issue that had exposed the Corinthians’ lack of love, viz. the controversy in the church over whether Christians could eat meat that had been offered to idols – which would have been most of the meat sold in the meat market – and whether they could eat that meat at banquets held in pagan temples. In chapter 8 he said that it was permissible for Christians to eat such meat and he will say the same again in our text. But, one must not exercise this freedom if by eating he wounds and weakens the conscience of another Christian. In chapter 9 he had illustrated the principle of surrendering one’s rights for the sake of fellow Christians and that had led him into a digression on the subject of the seriousness with which each of us must live as a Christian and the care we must take not to deceive ourselves as to the true state of our souls. Now Paul picks up his interrupted argument and returns to the actual practices in dispute.

The question concerns, of course, the limits placed on a Christian’s participation in a pagan culture. In those days the same word was used for both “butcher” and “sacrificer” and the procedures for butchering meat were religious. In Corinth, in those days, the leftovers of a sacrifice, which might often be the largest part of the meat of the carcass, were sent to the meat shops for sale. Had Paul forbidden Christians to eat meat that had passed through some pagan ritual he would have, in effect, been requiring the Christians in Corinth to become vegetarians. No, he allows the eating of that food, but only if one does not, by eating it, violate the demands of Christian brotherly love.

But, what Paul is going to say is that there is a difference, a world of difference between eating the meat itself and participating in a pagan banquet. It is possible to eat meat that pagans have sacrificed or offered to their idols and give thanks to God for it. It is not possible for a Christian to participate in a banquet dedicated to Luna the Moon Goddess and give thanks to the living God. [Peter Leithart, “Politics at Prayer,” *First Things*, 114 (June/July 2001) 15] You can’t participate in the Lord’s Supper sincerely and participate in the feasts of pagan gods. Now, we aren’t going to appreciate the weight of this teaching unless we understand that such banquets were a common and important feature of Corinthian society. For someone who was used to attending them, to resolve not to do so again would be no small thing. It would inevitably bring him into serious conflict with family members, employers, clients, fellow workers, and neighbors. Think yourself of having to refuse to attend your brother’s birthday party or to tell your mother you can never go to her house for Thanksgiving again. It might well cut off opportunities for advancement. It would exacerbate the division that already separated Christians from non-Christians in the city.

v.14 The idolatry is that of the pagan temple where the feasts are held and the reason to flee it is that playing with idolatry is what Israel did in the wilderness, the subject of the

previous paragraph, and Israel, despite all her privileges was not saved. You don't want the same thing to happen to you that happened to her.

- v.16 That word "participation" is the Greek *koinonia*, the word ordinarily translated "fellowship."
- v.18 Paul literally writes: "Consider Israel according to the flesh." After all, these believing Gentiles are Israel in the spiritual sense.
- v.19 In the ancient sacrificial ritual, remember, the people of Israel who had come to make sacrifice, at a meal of the sacrificed food at the end of the ritual. They who sacrificed shared in the food that had been sacrificed. Paul's point is that there is a connection between the ritual and the meal that follows, binding the people who eat the meal to the ritual that preceded the meal. In that case, Christians could not eat a meal that was thus bound to a pagan and idolatrous ritual that preceded it.
- v.20 He has already admitted that an idol is not really anything; there isn't really some "god" represented by it. But that does not mean that idolatry is not the work of evil powers.
- v.21 You share in the work of a demon when you participate in a meal offered to an idol and no Christian who, every Sunday, fellowships with the Lord at his table can do that.
- v.22 God's jealousy in the Bible, is his zeal for his own name, his holiness; and his unwillingness to brook rivals to his people's devotion and loyalty. He rejected Israel for her willingness to consort with idols and these Christians must take warning from that fact.
- v.23 As we have already seen in 6:12, "Everything is permissible" is a slogan the Corinthians, or some of them, were using to justify their practices. But, says Paul, not everything is beneficial, and, in context, it is clear that he means, not beneficial for someone else.
- v.26 He has already established this point in 8:4-6.
- v.27 That is, if an unbeliever invites you to eat at his home, or perhaps in a restaurant, you are free to go and eat. He is obviously not including meals at pagan temples.
- v.29 It is difficult to know precisely what situation Paul is envisaging here: a pagan host who wants to be helpful and assumes that Christians, like Jews – for the two sects were closely connected in the Greco-Roman mind – would not want to eat such meat, or, perhaps another Christian present at the same meal? In whatever case, as before, the Christian's conduct is to be determined by the consideration of what is best for others, not what is more pleasing to himself.
- v.30 Remember, some in the church had criticized Paul for not eating such meat when with Jews and for eating it when with Gentiles.

11:1 In conclusion, Paul substantially repeats the point he made in 9:19-22.

Now Paul makes his point about what may and may not be done by Christians in this case by making reference to the Lord's Supper. This passage is not *about* the Lord's Supper, it is about participating in the pagan feasts of Corinthian society, but Paul makes his argument by *referring* to the Lord's Supper. No doubt the Corinthian believers participated in the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. It was the climax of their worship every Sunday. It was a defining moment in their ongoing Christian experience. It not only was actual communion with the Lord and, in ways we can hardly understand, the nourishment of their faith, it was also, Lord's Day by Lord's Day a summing up and a recapitulation of their faith in Christ and the salvation they would someday realize in its fullness in the world to come. So it was natural for Paul to refer to the Lord's Supper as illustrating the point he wanted to make. I am so glad that we now participate in the Lord's Supper every Sunday. It would be hard to enter into Paul's argument if we still celebrated the Lord's Supper infrequently, if we thought about it only from time to time, and if it was only an occasional feature of our corporate life together as a congregation. Yesterday I heard of a man in a Scottish Presbyterian church who was excommunicated, barred from the Lord's table; but that church has the Lord's Supper only once a year! So, excommunication affected him hardly at all! But now it is the climactic act of our public worship on the Lord's Day, the great summing up of our faith as Christians when we are together in the house of God.

And what Paul is saying is that coming to this table, as we do Sunday by Sunday, as we will do this evening once again, has vast implications for our lives and our living.

I. First, Paul says, this Supper, this communion with God and with Christ at his table, expresses, signifies and publicizes our indissoluble unity with other Christians.

When we come to this table to receive the bread and wine according to Christ's appointment, when we seek this nourishment in the faith of Jesus Christ, when by our coming we express our dependence upon his grace and our hope of his salvation from sin and death, we are laying ourselves under an absolute obligation to live in true unity with other believers. We are so much as committing ourselves to practicing with them a fellowship of love.

"Because there is one loaf," Paul says, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." Now Paul's point is clear enough. If you participate in the Lord's Supper, you are both declaring and practicing your unity with Christ's people. You come with them to receive the same food. You confess your faith in the same Savior and your commitment to the same life. Well, in the same way, if you were to participate in pagan rituals, you would be, whether you meant to or not, expressing your solidarity with and your belonging to the people who worship in that way.

No, says Paul. Your behavior must reflect reality. The reality is Christ and his salvation. The reality is that you belong to him and to all others who love and trust him as you do. You express that reality in your participation in the Lord's Supper. Every time you come forward to take this food together with the other believers, you are saying by that act that you belong to them and they to you. You must not do anything, you must not act in any way that would suggest that you have such a unity, such a solidarity, such a brotherhood with pagans. For you do not.

There is a marvelous illustration of this principle in the life of Martyn Lloyd Jones. I know that I've told this to some of you, but others of you haven't heard it and it makes the point exceedingly well. Lloyd-Jones, for those of you who do not recognize the name, was one of the greatest Christian preachers of the 20th century, who exercised a considerable influence from his pulpit at Westminster Chapel in London and continues to do so through many volumes of his printed sermons. His is a name that well-read Christians will know for generations to come.

He did not set out to become a minister. He trained to be a doctor and, in fact, had so distinguished himself in his studies and early work as a physician that he had been selected by Lord Horder, the physician of the royal family and England's most famous doctor, as his assistant. But during these promising early years of medical practice, Lloyd-Jones was converted and began thinking about his life in a very different way. He began thinking about the ministry but the tug of his present life and his many friends in young London society was still very strong. He enjoyed his life, he had wealth and fame before him for the asking. One night some friends persuaded him to go with them to the theatre. Here is his own account of that night.

“They wanted to go to a theatre in Leicester Square and they persuaded me to go with them. I have no idea what the play was about, but they were very excited about it. What I remember is this: as we came out of the theatre to the glare and glare of Leicester Square, suddenly a Salvation Army band came along playing some hymn tunes and *I knew* that *these* were my people. I have never forgotten it. There is a theme in Wagner's opera *Tannhauser*, the two pulls – the pull of the world and the chorus of the pilgrims – and the contrast between the two. I have very often thought of it. I know exactly what it means. I suppose I had enjoyed the play. When I heard this band and the hymns I said, “These are my people, they are the people I belong to, and I'm going to belong to them.” [Murray, *Bio.*, i, 93]

The sophisticated young doctor in the midst of the sophisticated theater-set among whom he was accustomed to moving, but he *knew* he was not *one with* that crowd of theater goers, dressed to the nines, talking about the play, but that he was one with the clanking, tooting Salvation Army band. He shared the same faith with them, the same love, the same hope, the same bread and wine when they gathered as one in the Lord's house on the Lord's Day.

Well, that is what these Corinthian Christians needed to feel, to realize. Especially the wealthy among them who would have been more likely to have been invited to banquets in pagan temples. They were inclined to fellowship with their rich friends, to enjoy the sophisticated conversation of the banquet, the better wine, the worldly atmosphere. But Paul is reminding them that their brotherhood, their unity, their family tie – if they are Christians at all – is and must ever be with that motley group of rich and poor, smart and not so smart, sophisticated, cultured and elegant *and* vulgar, ill-bred, and unrefined who come with them to the Lord's Table Sunday after Sunday, some of whom can't seem to get it through their thick heads that it is perfectly alright to eat meat which has been sacrificed to idols!

And so it must be with us today. When you come to this Table you will be demonstrating your oneness with this congregation, with every Christian who participates in the Lord's Supper. For this is the Table Christ spreads for his people, people who have come to acknowledge that they are desperate sinners, desperately needing salvation, have come to realize that such salvation can be found nowhere else but in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who trust in him, love him, and want to live for him, and whose life in this world is dominated by the sure and certain hope they now have of life forever in the world to come. This is the Table he spreads for his brothers and sisters, and for those who, by faith in him, have become the children of God, members, as it were of the imperial family. With all of *this* in common, holding these mighty realities in common, what possible difference could drive us apart? What difference in status, or education, or income, or background, or race, or class, or personality could be sufficient to break the strong bonds which unite us to the family of God?

So, the Holy Spirit is saying to us: when you come to this Table, as you will tonight, the table the Son of God has set for you, to eat the meal that he himself will feed you, be sure you realize that the unity with one another that you so profoundly express when you come together to eat at this same table must then be demonstrated in the love, the care, the consideration, the interest you show to one another and in the sacrifices you make for one another in Christ's name.

So our participation in the Lord's Supper, our worship in this house every Lord's Day has vast implications for the practice of our fellowship and our unity in love with one another.

II. But, says Paul, this same table, this same weekly worship, has another implication, higher still: it demonstrates and reconfirms our indissoluble and all-encompassing union with Christ himself, our dependence upon him, our trust in him, our love for him, our intention to live for him.

In this context, Paul is saying to his original readers: Look, when you participate in the Lord's Supper you are sharing again in Christ's salvation and receiving the benefits of it. At that moment the Lord is ministering to your soul, to your life, the blessings of his love and grace which he purchased for you by his life and death. Israelites, in the days before the incarnation, before Christ came into the world, when they ate the meat that had been sacrificed, did so at the conclusion of the sacrificial ritual. The fellowship meal was really part of the sacrifice. It concluded an act of worship in which their hearts, from beginning to end, were in communion with God and in which God was ministering his forgiveness and his blessing to them.

Well, according to the same principle, if you eat a sacrificial meal in some pagan temple, a meal that follows on a pagan ritual, you have become a part of that whole ceremony, all of the prayers to the so-called gods and the worship of idols. You can't separate the temple meal, which for everyone else there is the climax of a pagan ritual, from the ritual itself, any more than you, as a Christian, can divorce the Lord's Supper from its context in Christian faith and worship, from all that means and signifies and causes to happen in your heart and life.

Of course, he goes on to say, as he did in chapter 8, that idols are not real – we all know that – so it isn't as if you are really giving offerings to a real god. But the whole false worship of paganism is an instrument by which the devil holds multitudes of people in bondage and, by

participating in that worship, therefore, you are really giving homage to the devil. You can't have it both ways. In coming to the table of the Lord on the Lord's Day you are proclaiming Jesus to be the Savior and your Savior, that he alone is the Lord. You cannot then behave as if there were some truth, some authenticity to the pagan worship of idols. Rituals that represent lies so vicious and so damning are rituals no Christian can smile upon simply in order to cultivate friendships with pagan neighbors.

No, the Lord's Supper is the demonstration of reality, and your participation in it is the demonstration that you know full well what reality is! Now, you must live in faithfulness to that reality.

One of the most electrifying and epoch-making moments in the life of John Calvin, the Reformer, occurred in September of 1553. You may remember that, throughout his ministry in Geneva, Calvin had to fight for the right of the church to exercise discipline over its own membership, an authority the magistrates of the city wished to retain for themselves. Many of the magistrates were not devout men and they sought to keep the church from exercising discipline precisely because they wanted to maintain the church in a spiritually lax condition so that they would be comfortable in it. It was partly this same controversy that had led to Calvin being banished from the city years before and, now that he was back, the controversy had flared up again.

One of Calvin's most implacable and bitter enemies was a man by the name of Philibert Berthelier, a man about whom, to be honest, almost no one has much good to say. He was a talented but quarrelsome individual and had been excommunicated by the church officers for a number of offenses, including a drunken brawl in which he and some of his cronies had pursued a minister to his home and threatened him. Berthelier, defiantly unrepentant, had been excommunicated and, so barred from the Lord's Table, but he appealed to the city magistrates and they had promptly restored him. At that moment Calvin thought that the cause of the church's spiritual freedom had been lost, after so many years of struggle, and fully expected that if he defied the city fathers he would be banished again and this time for good. But the very next Sunday was the September communion and St. Peter's church was packed with people who had, by now, heard of the Council's overturning the decision of the church's ministers and were waiting to see what would happen when Berthelier came to receive the bread and wine at the front of the church.

After a powerful sermon, the weary Reformer began his Table address: "I asked that God would give me firmness and my prayer was answered. Therefore know that whatever may occur, I shall act according to the clearly revealed command of my master. Should there be anyone during the Lord's Supper which we are about to celebrate approaching the Table of the Lord who has been denied this privilege by the elders, I shall take the stand required of me. You may kill me, but you will not force this hand to administer the bread of God to an unworthy man!"

The emotion of the preacher was conveyed to the large congregation. In hushed silence they awaited the next move. "Slowly he descends the pulpit and places himself before the Lord's Table. There he stands, the sickly, pale, slight and exhausted man whom any breeze threatens to blow over and whose eyes with a feverish glow search for him who, unworthy, will be pressing

himself to the Lord's Table. The congregation...is searching with him. Berthelier is not among them. [Stickelberger, *John Calvin*, 122-123] Theodore Beza, who was there that morning, wrote: "The communion was celebrated in profound silence, and under a solemn awe, as if the Deity himself had been visibly present among them." [Schaff, *Church History*, viii, 512] The result was the triumph of the church and the establishment of her freedom, her rights to exercise authority over Christian worship and Christian people.

Well, no wonder. The Lord's Supper is a depiction of the eternal verities of our faith, of that fundamental reality that is the meaning of human life, of our divine Savior and his stupendous work of salvation, of the life of holiness and purity and obedience and love that we owe to him, and of the coming day when we shall sit down with him at the marriage supper of the lamb.

May it never be, says the Lord to us today, as he said to our Genevan ancestors that long ago Sunday and to our Corinthian ancestors long before that, that anyone should come to this Table, to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God, who then will not strive to live each day as befits a poor, hopeless, guilty sinner, whose Savior is no one less than the Son of God and whose Master is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

What is the Lord's Supper for? Robert Bruce, the Scot preacher of the 16th century and successor to John Knox, put it in this beautiful way in his famous sermons on the sacrament: "By the sacrament my faith is nourished...and so, when I had but a little grip of Christ before, as it were betwixt my finger and thumb, now I get him in my whole hand; for the more my faith grows, the better grip I get on Christ Jesus." [In *Banner of Truth* 232 (Jan. '83) 27]

Well, says Paul, get your grip on Jesus and his salvation strengthened each Lord's Day as you come to the Supper. Pray that it will have this effect and partake in faith that it will. But as you come and partake, as you participate in this meal, do not forget that the more you have of Jesus, the better a grip you have on him, the more you must live for those very brethren who come to the same table when you do. Look around you as you come to the table, remember what it means to participate in the table of the Lord, and remember that the Lord himself made this sacrament a powerful witness to your brotherhood with every other believer, a brotherhood he expects you not simply to confess, but to love and to cherish and to practice even at some real cost to yourself. Remember Corinth and its stratified congregation, remember Lloyd-Jones in his tuxedo and the Salvation Army band, and then remember Christ in agony on the cross for you, and pledge yourself that for every time you come to the Lord's Supper you will seek to love a brother or sister in some sacrificial way and prove that your loyalty to the Lord, your grasp of this reality, runs deep, all the way to the bottom of your heart and from there out to the furthest corners of your life.