

Week 4: Paul and The Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

R⁴: Read, Reflect, Review, Resolve.

1. **Read** 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.
2. **Reflect** on the ideas, context, concepts, and stipulations presented in this passage and in your conversations.
3. **Review** the handout provided, including the discussion questions offered. Take your conversations in whatever direction you like. Have fun with them.
4. **Resolve** the major issues and tensions that arose in your discussions (whether in the biblical text, in your reflection, or in your review of the handout). Remember to focus on how each topic refers back to the Lord's Supper.

Reconstruction of the Situation in 1 Corinthians

Dear Paul,

Our church has experienced many divisions and arguments since you left. One division that particularly saddens me is the way some people are eating the Lord's Supper. You see, some of the wealthy members of the church are eating great meals by themselves in their dining rooms while the poorer members, who arrive late due to work, get only the leftovers—if anything at all. Can you please comment on this practice?

Warmly,

Chloe in Behalf of the Corinthian Church

Initial Interpretive Notes

- The primary concern is social norms. The people of greater status and wealth—as was the custom in their culture—expected the best food and best seating. Paul, familiar with this custom, uses Jesus an example of one who humbled himself and went against expected customs (cf. John 13). He demands unity in the church (1 Cor 1:10-11).

- “Within their own four walls they are to behave according to the norms of their social status, while at the Lord's Supper the norms of the congregation have absolute priority. Clearly this is a compromise.” (Gerd Theissen, *1 Corinthians* [page 164])
- The Lord's Supper here is not referring to an elaborate ritual celebrated in a church building. It was an actual meal (not a piece of bread and drop of juice) that believers ate together in private homes.
- This passage has nothing to do with introspection on the part of the individual believer. It is about how our actions offend *others* in the congregation; it is about the community, in other words, and not our personal sins before God.

Condemnation of the Situation (11:17-22)

- Paul begins this section with a clear rebuke, in contrast to his former discussion (in v. 2).
- The problem was that wealthier members were feasting on their own fine food, while the poor were going hungry. The wealthy were eating in a separate dining room, which could only accommodate a few people; the people of lower status had to eat in a separate room. In this way, the wealthy were shaming the poor.
- “Imagine going on a picnic with a large group of friends. Suppose when you get to the picnic spot some people get out elaborate hampers with expensive cutlery and glass, and serve themselves delicious and lavish food and fine wines, while other people sitting alongside them have brought a couple of small sandwiches and a bottle of water. Even at a picnic that wouldn't seem right. How much more when you're meeting for worship, and the people you're with are not just friends, they are your brothers and sisters [in Christ].” (Tom Wright, *1 Corinthians* [page 146])

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The Tradition of the Last Supper (11:23-26)

- Paul passes on the tradition that he received about Jesus' Last Supper. He "hands on" to the church that Jesus was "handed over" for our sins (cf. Isa. 53:6, 12). He follows Luke's version of the story (22:14-20) rather than Matthew's (26:26-30) or Mark's (14:22-25).
- "The sharing of the Supper calls the community to think of Jesus' death for others, and that death is understood to initiate a new covenant. To be in covenantal relation with God is to belong to a covenant people bound together by responsibilities to God and to one another; the character of this new covenant should be shown forth in the sharing of the meal. The trouble with the Corinthians is that they are celebrating the Supper in a way that disregards this structure of covenant obligations and demonstrates an odd amnesia about Jesus' death. By showing contempt for those who have nothing, they are acting as though his death had not decisively changed the conditions of their relationship to one another. Paul therefore retells the story so as to spotlight the death of Jesus as the central meaning of the Supper." (Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* [page 199])

Resolution of the Situation (11:27-34)

- To eat of the Supper "unworthily" has nothing to do with being perfect with God before one can eat (v. 27). And the call to examine oneself (v. 28), which is all plural in Greek, has nothing to do with coming to terms with some great personal sin that separates one from God. This is an historically misguided interpretation—the exact opposite of what Paul intends. Paul is speaking to the wealthy that were shaming the poor and causing division in the church.
- To "discern the body" (v. 29) means to recognize that the church is one body, and that no one member or group (like the wealthy) is

more important than another; one cannot rely on his social status as a way to assert his power or prestige over others during this meal.

- As a result of the Corinthians' sinful and selfish practices that have caused such division and consternation, Paul writes, God has brought judgment on some by making them sick and killing them (v. 30). This is a theme that runs throughout the NT (Acts 5:1-11; Heb 12:5-6; James 5:13-16). It should come as no surprise that God's goodness to his people, available now as a foretaste of the goodness of God's coming kingdom, should not also appear as judgment, which is also a foretaste of what will happen when Jesus appears.

Questions

1. What is the importance of the fact that the "new covenant" that Jesus instituted occurs in a setting of *equality* during table fellowship (cf. John 13)? How does this relate to the covenant in the OT and the section that Paul addresses directly beforehand (1 Cor 11:2-16)?
2. What is the meaning of the phrase, "Do this in remembrance of me"? (See Ex 12:14.)
3. How do Paul's words help us as we try to observe the Lord's Supper in our context?
4. What is the most "biblical" way to observe the Supper: weekly, monthly, as a meal, or as a brief snack / ritual?
5. What have you learned about the Lord's Supper in this study?
6. How would you begin crafting a document of the purpose, theology, and ideal practice of the Lord's Supper for church?