



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
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AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
CLASS – Lesson 17

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 11:17-34, A reported problem: The Lord's Supper

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1 Corinthians 11:17-34, A reported problem: The Lord's Supper

11:17-22, The setting and the problem

11:23-26, The Story (historical foundation)

11:27-34, Significance and solution

In contrast to the respect shown apostolic teaching about male and female relationships in the church, when it came to the Lord's Supper, Paul could not compliment the Corinthian Christians. As in several other aspects of church life, they were demonstrating and promoting divisions in the church. When they came together, supposedly to share the Lord's Supper, they divided into groups with complete disregard for the power of the crucifixion to unite Jews, Gentiles, rich, poor, male and female in the church as the body of Christ.

It is frequently the case in 1 Corinthians that we don't know as much as we would like to know concerning the details of their misbehavior. We are obliged to carefully attempt to reconstruct the likely situation. Scholars generally agree that the division was along socio-economic lines with the wealthier members discriminating against the lower classes. A possible reconstruction might be as follows.

Not only did wealthy members have more control over their personal schedules than did others, and especially slaves, but they had an abundance of food and drink available to them. It is also possible that the church met in the home of a wealthy member, which only aggravated the problem. The wealthy would arrive early, eat a copious meal – possibly even in a room separated from the larger atrium that was found in many large homes. In modern terms, we might say that they called it a potluck, but it was reserved for the more affluent Christians. When the worker and slave-class members arrived, they brought no meal (or, at most, a subsistence meal of bread and water), and were not invited to share the full course banquet enjoyed by the others.

It is often proposed that the Lord's Supper was included as a part of the fellowship or *agape* meal, or was observed immediately after the regular meal. The details are debated, but they don't change the fundamental problem, for whenever it was that they ate the Lord's Supper, the divisions described above were maintained with the wealthy having their private meal while excluding the rest of the congregation.

We often hear or read that the early church met as house churches rather than in single, large assemblies as we usually do today. That may, or may not, be the case (depending on the congregation), but it wouldn't change the spiritual problem that Paul treats in the passage we are studying today. In reality, practices probably varied from place to place. Romans 16 shows the church in Rome meeting in house churches, at least for some of their meetings. But Rome was much larger than Corinth, and the Corinthian letters do not show or imply that the Corinthian church met in separate house churches. In fact, meeting in house churches would have made the discrimination against the poorer members less obvious than what we see in chapter 11.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 11:17-22, The setting and the problem

1. Below is a list of the problems that Paul addresses earlier in the letter? What was the fundamental nature of the problem in each case? Is there a common thread?

Chap. 1, Favorite preachers

Chap. 5, Incest

Chap. 6, Litigation

Chap. 6, Going to prostitutes

Chap. 7, Marriage

Chap. 8, Foods offered to idols

Chap. 10, Eating in pagan temples

2. What is the occasion or specific action, and what is the stated setting for the problem that Paul now begins to discuss? What is the occasion or specific action, and what is the stated setting for the problem that Paul discussed in the first part of the chapter?

a. What key phrase does Paul use 5 times in vv. 17-34 to clearly identify the setting during which the problem occurred?

b. How does Paul characterize his attitude in each case?

- c. If Paul couldn't praise them for their behavior "when you come together as a church" (v. 17), how could the head covering problem be occurring during the same "come together" gathering since he begins that discussion with "Now I praise you" (v. 2)?
3. Look carefully at verses 20 & 21. What detail or phrase of verse 21 sets it in direct conflict with verse 20? This might well be the key to understanding the real problem that Paul is discussing.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26, The Story (historical foundation)

4. There are clear echoes of the Jewish Passover and other covenant meals to be found in the Lord's Supper. Consider: Exodus 12:3-4, 25-27; 13:8-9; 24:8; Jeremiah 31:31-34. There is a feature shared by all of these passages as well as 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 that is easy to miss, but is essential to comprehending the thrust of Paul's message. To whom does "you" refer in each of these passages? What element of these passages (including 1 Corinthians 11:23f) teaches that there should never be any deliberate division or discrimination as we partake of the Lord's Supper?
5. How does Paul's presentation of the initial "Lord's Supper" (vv. 23-26) connect to and build on his thesis statement for the entire letter in 1 Corinthians 1:10, 18-24? Or, stated differently, how does his thesis statement of chapter 1 explain why the Corinthian observance of the Lord's Supper was so far off the mark?
6. Talk about ways that our weekly observance of the Lord's Supper helps us bring together our appreciation of the saving work of Jesus and our relationship with all with whom we share that salvation.

1 Corinthians 11:27-34, Significance and solution

- 7. What are we doing when we eat the bread and drink the cup properly in reference to Christ (v. 26)? What are we doing when we eat the bread and drink the cup improperly in reference to Christ (v. 27)? See 1 Corinthians 2:8.**

- 8. Who or what was “unworthy” in the Lord’s Supper as observed by the Corinthians?**

- 9. What exactly was wrong with the manner in which they observed the Lord’s Supper?**

- 10. What body are we to discern as we eat and drink? Is it the physical crucified body of Christ or the church, which is the present body of Christ on earth (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17; 12:12-27)?**

- 11. In verse 30, are “weak and sick” physical or spiritual problems? Is sleep a reference to not being physically awake, or does it mean dead as rendered in some translations (cp. 1 Corinthians 15:6, 20)? How would your answer relate to abuse of the Lord’s Supper?**

- 12. Paul does not forbid fellowship or potluck meals, rather he encourages them. He does, however, set out some restrictions. What does verse 33 say that they should do? What does verse 34 say they should not do? When does a hungry person eat if he has the chance?**