



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 17

GENERAL OUTLINE

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

OUTLINE: Lesson 17

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	<u>Dividing the congregation</u>
Chap. 5, Incest	<u>Allowing behavior that was blatantly detrimental to the holiness and reputation of the church.</u>
Chap. 6, Litigation	<u>Dividing over business dealings.</u>
Chap. 6, Going to prostitutes	<u>Participating in behavior that defiled the congregation.</u>
Chap. 7, Marriage	<u>Intact marriages and holiness I celibacy were essential to a godly church.</u>
Chap. 8, Foods offered to idols	<u>Eating foods that created serious spiritual temptations and obstacles to other Christians.</u>
Chap. 10, Eating in pagan temples	<u>Breaking fellowship with God through fellowship with idols.</u>

The common thread is the unity and health of the church through personal godliness and loving concern for the well-being of the brethren.

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?

11:17ff, The occasion is distinctly the observance of the Lord's Supper, and the setting is "when you come together as a church."

11:1-16, The occasion is when praying and prophesying, but the setting is never stated.

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

11:17, "come together"

11:18, "come together as a church"

11:20, "come together in one place"

11:33, “come together to eat”
11:34, “come together for judgment”

The setting in 17-34 is clearly the assembly of the church for the Lord’s Supper. In the previous section Paul never clearly identifies the setting in which the problems could occur. If the setting is the same in both sections, it seems odd that he goes to such length to establish the setting in the part where it is the most obvious (i.e., the Lord’s Supper). This makes more sense if this is a new setting, section and topic. Remember also that the chapter divisions are not Paul’s.

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

He praised them in verse 2, but not concerning the Lord’s Supper in verse 17.

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)?

Paul could not praise them when “you come together as a church.” This would suggest that the previous section was not about actions during the same meetings.

Many commentators try to avoid this conflict by claiming that verse 2 is an isolated, stand-alone verse that has nothing to do with the discussion of head coverings that follows. But we must then ask why he would praise them for “keeping the traditions,” and then launch into a totally different subject where they were not keeping the traditions before finally emphasizing that, “I do not praise you,” for misbehavior during that same gathering?

If this is all about the same meeting, it would make more sense to put, “I do not praise you...when you come together as a church,” before verse 3.

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.

In verse 20, they were supposedly “coming together in one place,” but in verse 21 each one (of the wealthy) was eating “his own supper” (ESV, NKJV), “without waiting for anybody else” (NIV). Geographically, they may have been in the same building, but they were not “coming together.” They were eating private meals with their own clique of affluent friends

while leaving other members truly hungry, even though they may have been but a few feet away.

What a great expression of Christian fellowship it would have been had they waited for each other, and the wealthy had shared their sumptuous meal with the poor members who literally had nothing to contribute, and then, either before or after the meal, they had observed the Lord's Supper together. Their failure to have fellowship before the Lord's Supper humiliated the poor members (ESV) and turned the Lord's Supper into an empty ritual.

It was this lack of concern for one another that Paul is attacking not only here, but throughout the letter (cf. question # 1).

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?**

All of these passages describe ceremonies that were collective activities. They refer to "the congregation of Israel," a household (i.e., family), the children of Israel, the people, the house of Israel and the house of Judah, "My people," and "from the least of them to the greatest of them." The beneficiaries of these events were one people, and the beneficiaries of the body and blood of Christ are one people. We are brought together in one body by the death of Christ, and it is contrary to the spirit of the crucifixion to participate in the Lord's Supper thinking only of me.

- 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?**

Both passages refer to the crucifixion of Christ. The crucifixion, as highlighted in chapter 1, was the event that provides the power "to us who are being saved," meaning all of us who are being saved. Chapter 1 presents the crucifixion as the reason their divisions (1:10-17) were so terribly wrong. The crucifixion benefits equally "those who are called, both Jews and Greeks." In short, the crucifixion is a unifying force that calls for its remembrance at the Lord's Supper to demonstrate that unity among the saved. The attitudes demonstrated

in the Corinthian Lord's Supper were totally incompatible with the purpose of the crucifixion of Jesus.

- 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.**

The Lord's Supper is a simple meal, and depending on the size of the group, doesn't necessarily take much time, but it still reminds us that we all – no exceptions – would be in dire straits had Jesus not died for our sins. We were all equally lost (no one was a little bit lost and others a lot lost), and none are more saved than others. We have the same need and are saved by the same Christ. So the Supper remembers the body and blood of Christ, but it also celebrates our unity in Christ unless we distort the Supper as the Corinthians were doing.

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.**

It's interesting how these two verses present two opposite outcomes. One option is to proclaim the Lord's death that saves us, and the other is to make ourselves guilty of his death in much the same way as the people who were personally involved in his crucifixion.

- 8. Who or what was "unworthy" in the Lord's Supper as observed by the Corinthians?**

No one is truly worthy of the salvation we receive from Christ. And no one is even worthy of being allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. But Paul is not writing about our personal worthiness. The problem in Corinth is clearly the *manner* in which they participated in the Supper. Both times the word "unworthy" is used (vv. 27 & 29) it modifies the word "manner."

No one was good enough and no one had lived the preceding week in a way that was worthy of this privilege. But that wasn't the problem. It was the way they were treating each other during the Supper that defiled the meaning of the meal and the crucifixion that it recalled.

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

Their treatment of each other. It wasn't about the quality of the bread or the cup. It wasn't about the physical acts of eating or drinking. It wasn't that the bite of bread was too big or too small, or that they slurped the juice. It was the disregard for each other.

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)?

It's a trick question. Probably both are intended. At the very least, it is impossible to disregard either. Paul never accuses them of actually forgetting that Jesus died for their sins. He does say that their disregard for the church body showed great disdain for Christ's crucified body.

Verses 23-26 focus on our remembrance of the crucifixion of Jesus. But the entire problem that he rebukes in verses 17-22 is in reference to the division between members of the church body. For Paul, it was impossible to be in a right relationship with Christ while "despising" the church of God (v. 22).

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?

There doesn't seem to be any reason to take weak and sick in any other than the normal sense of physical ailments. If that is the case, then "sleep" is probably a euphemism for dead. This would be supported by the uses of "sleep" in chapter 15.

How their divisive actions at the Lord's Supper would produce these physical problems is another matter. Overeating and drinking would have adverse physical effects. Also, the lack of concern for one another would deprive some members of valuable assistance when ill. Chronic hunger caused by the lack of sharing would also contribute to poor physical health of those deprived of the food the wealthy members could provide.

Some commentators see a more direct punishment from God as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). In the end, we must remain undecided since Paul doesn't elaborate.

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?

If they came together to eat, then they should wait for each other and truly eat together. This encourages them to “come together” for fellowship meals, with the stipulation that they should wait for each other so that they truly ate together.

If they weren’t going to eat together in fellowship with each other, but rather eat a private meal to which others were not welcome, then they should eat at home.

If he has food available, a hungry person goes ahead and eats. This is what the wealthy were doing. They had the food and they were ready to eat, so they ate and left everyone else to fend for themselves. Paul says that this practice should stop.

We have had brethren who didn’t believe they should eat together in the church building and claimed verses 33-34 for their reason. But it is highly unlikely that the Corinthians met in anything that we would call a “church building.” They probably met in the home of a member who had a big enough space to allow large groups. On this basis, if this passage prohibits something it is the sharing of meals in someone’s home, which hardly makes sense. A literal reading of v. 34 (that also disregards the context) would require Christians to eat only in their own homes alone.