The Lord’s Supper, A Study of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

by John Zens

Introduction

In the New Testament we should be struck by the utter simplicity that characterized life in the early churches. We are given a broad picture of church life, but many particulars – which are troublesome for us – are left untouched by the New Testament. As time elapsed, the visible church lost its original simplicity and became enmeshed in a quagmire of ecclesiastical machinery and theological speculation.

The Lord’s Supper is a case in point. There is a simplicity about this ordinance in the sketchy New Testament data. Yet in post-apostolic times the rembrance meal (1) became embedded in hierarchical church structures so that it became a mysterious ritual to be “administered” by the “ordained,” and (2) ended up being the source of endless speculation about “what happens” in the “sacrament.”[1]

The evidence indicates that this remembrance meal, and the instruction which accompanied it, was a centerpoint in Christian assemblies (cf. Acts 20:7). Eating together in the “breaking of bread” and remembering the Lord in the Supper were virtually synonymous in Christian worship.[2] Obviously, many things have changed in our practice since the early days. In this article, I would like to explore some basic points concerning the Lord’s Supper – based on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 – and compare them with our conceptions and practices.

The Historical Structure of the Supper

First of all, it will be helpful to isolate the threefold historical structure that exists in the institution of the Supper itself. Only by holding these three perspectives in proper balance can we even hope to approach the Supper correctly.

1. Remember the Past

In the Lord’s Supper we remember the past. The covenant that brings us the forgiveness of sins was ratified, or “cut,” by the shedding of Christ’s blood. The Lord instituted the Supper on the eve of His impending death in the context of a Passover meal. “Remembrance” itself is a covenantal word. The Israelites were often commanded to “remember” God’s acts of covenant faithfulness. In the Supper, Jesus has given us an ordinance by which we continually remember that our blessings were purchased through a costly price.

2. Enjoy the Present

In the Lord's Supper, we enjoy the present. Jesus has brought us into fellowship with others in the new covenant. When we come together "as a church," we can eat as a body in the presence of the Lord Jesus. The emphasis here is on a joyous meal, a covenant celebration. Again, in the Old Testament covenantal meals which celebrated the mighty acts of God on their behalf were enjoyed (Exod. 24:11). The pattern of redemptive history is that celebrative meals follow covenant enactment.

3. Look Forward to the Future

In the Supper, we look forward to the future: "you do show the Lord's death until he comes." This ordinance is to be repeated ("as often as you do it") until Christ returns. Each time we proclaim His death in the Supper, we are also reminded that He is returning. In His death, burial and resurrection Christ was removed from us physically. The Holy Spirit now gives us Christ's presence. When He returns, our faith will become sight.

Given these three dimensions – past, present, future – it is no wonder that in the early church the Lord's Supper was "the central action in Christian worship."[3] Although there is overlap, we might rightly generalize and say that in the Supper our faith looks back to the cross (Rom. 3:25), our love for Jesus and the saints is kindled by the Spirit (Rom. 5:5), and our hope is stirred up as we long for His return (Heb. 9:28; cf. 1 Cor. 13:13).

The past dimension gives the Supper its objective character – we come together to remember the definitive work of Christ. The present dimension emphasizes the Supper's social character – in order to remember His body, we must be one body (1 Cor. 10:16,17). The future dimension recognizes the tension of Christian experience – we enjoy now only the first-fruits, and long for the full harvest (Rom. 8:18,23).

The Historical Setting of the Supper

An Overview of 1 Corinthians 11:17

In the remark, "your meetings do more harm than good" (11:17), Paul probably has in view all the concerns he covers through 14:40.[4] These issues relate to "the disorders…in the public assemblies of the congregation."[5]

The first issue Paul isolates has to do with divisions evident "when they came together as a church" (11:18). These divisions had a different twist, but certainly could not be totally divorced from the divisions described in 1:10-12; 3:3,4. Specifically, these divisions came to expression in connection with their practice of the Lord's Supper (which also involved a meal together; 11:20-22).

Paul does not condemn the meal aspect of their gathering. Rather, he rebukes their contradiction of what the Lord's Supper signifies – the unity of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16,17). The way they were coming together reflected schism, not bondedness. They were not eating together as a unit. The poor were thereby humiliated. The giving nature of Christ was not reflected in their sharing of food with one another. In such a setting, the Lord's Supper could only be done "unworthily" because the very way in which they came together was a denial of all that the Supper signified.

In order to correct this horrible situation, Paul recalls the apostolic tradition he delivered to them concerning the institution of this ordinance (11:23-26). Obviously, the focus of the Supper is Christ – we come together to remember Him. But this has social implications. It is impossible to eat the Lord's Supper if the brethren come together in disunity – eating at different times, and clustering in various separated groupings (11:20).

Verses 27-32 reflect the implications that Paul sees when the true meaning of the Supper is applied to the Corinthian situation. It is a very serious matter to go through the motions of the Supper together in a state of disharmony and division. Contextually, eating and drinking in an "unworthy manner" refers to the divided way in which the Corinthians were coming together (this is reinforced in vv. 33,34).

There is such a vital, organic connection between Christ and the body of His people on earth, that to eat and drink the Supper when the church is in a divided state is to sin against the body and blood of the Lord. You cannot sin against the brotherhood without also sinning against Christ (1 Cor. 8:12; cf. Acts 9:4). Thus self-examination is in order with a view toward maintaining, and not violating, the unity of the body that is mandatory in the remembrance of the meal. Various visitations of God upon the saints occurred here because of their selfish, loveless actions that resulted in body divisions (11:30). Godly repentance is in order so that the body would be healed, and again reflect the oneness Christians have in Christ (11:31,32).

In vv. 33,34 Paul returns to where the problems began with some concluding remarks. Again, Paul assumes the propriety of their "coming together to eat" (11:33a). But in such meetings, they must wait until all are gathered before they eat (11:33b). If some are hungry and cannot wait, they should "fill up" at home. This would ensure that at the public gathering, the body would be one at the table, and not divided by (wealthy) early eaters who thus left the poor with nothing.

Some Implications/Questions

Is A Meal Part of the Lord's Supper?

At this point, I would have to answer the question by saying that to isolate the

bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper from a meal is certainly unnatural. All the evidence points to the integral connection of the Lord's Supper with a meal.

Consider the following:

1. The old covenant Passover involved a meal "which was meant to satisfy hunger as well as to commemorate the Exodus."[6] The evidence in Matthew, Mark and Luke suggests that the Last Supper was a Passover meal.[7]

Since Christ ate the Passover dinner with His disciples before He instituted the ordinance, the early church continued that practice by eating an evening meal (often referred to as a "love feast") together before the Lord's Supper was observed.[8]

2. The "blood of the covenant" language (Matt. 26:28) suggests a parallel of the Lord's Supper with Exodus 24, where after the Mosaic covenant was ratified with blood, a fellowship meal was enjoyed (24:11).

3. In the context of Jesus' institution of the Supper, He and His disciples were eating a meal: "while they were eating" (Matt. 26:26; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).

4. The accounts in Acts indicate that the brethren were fond of "breaking bread" (Acts 2:42,46; 20:7) together. Few would deny that "breaking bread" and the "Lord's Supper" were almost synonymous in the practice of the early church.[9]

5. In 1 Corinthians 11 we find that "coming together to eat" (v. 33) and "coming together as a church" (v. 18) coincide.

These meals were called agapae – love feasts – and became a marked feature of the early church. On a fixed day, generally the first day of the week, the Christians assembled, each bringing what he could as a contribution to the feast: fish, poultry, joints of meat, cheese, milk, honey, fruit, wine and bread. In some places the proceedings began by partaking of the consecrated bread and wine; but in other places physical appetite was first appeased by partaking of the meal provided, and after that the bread and wine were handed round.[10]

Lenski asserts that "the Agape is not a divine institution. Therefore Paul lays down no regulations concerning it."[11] However, while there is truth in his remark, it would seem that the burden of proof rests on him to show what sense Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 make if the ordinance is removed from a meal context. Just how do we propose to relate the Lord's Supper to the little piece of bread and the sip of wine that characterize our services?

Hodge puts a wedge between the Lord's Supper and a "common meal." Thus he believes Paul's words in 11:23-26 "are specially designed to separate the

Lord's Supper as a religious rite from the social element with which it was combined."[12] But it is not a question of "either/or." The Lord's Supper was embedded in a common meal. What Hodge separates, the early church viewed together. The Corinthian abuse did not rule out the meal dimension (11:33).

It was apparently "the very purpose of these congregational gatherings to celebrate the Lord's Supper."[13] But the disorderly actions of the Corinthians made it impossible to have the Supper.

Instead of taking all the food that was brought and apportioning it to all who were present so that each should receive a proper share, cliques were formed, and relatives, friends, those of one clique at together, probably at private tables, the rich and prosperous separated from the poor, letting those who could bring little or nothing sit by themselves….when the Agape ceased to be an Agape, the Sacrament was also virtually impossible.[14]

Thus, for Lenski to say later that "to discern the Lord's body means to perceive that in the Sacrament that body is really present and received"[15] totally misses the point of the context. The Corinthian problem was not related to "the elements" in the Supper, but to their broken relationships in the body of Christ.

The warnings and judgments of 11:27-32, therefore, must be seen in light of this problem which is twice articulated by Paul before and after the "institution" section (11:23-26). It appears to me that 11:23-32 has more often than not been considered in isolation from that which surrounds it. This has led to serious misunderstandings concerning taking the Supper "unworthily" and examining one's self.

What Does "Unworthily" Mean?

Clearly from the context, it means that the Corinthian gatherings were for the worse, and brought judgment, because "in their partiality and divisive spirit, they contradicted the truth of oneness in Christ."[16] Historically, the focus has been on the individual discerning the Lord properly "in the elments,"[17] but, as Barclay points out:

The person condemned is not the person who does not discern that the elements he takes in his hands are the Lord's body. The person condemned is the person who does not discern that Christians are the Lord's body, and must be in unity before they dare approach the sacrament.[18]

Why Is There "Self-examination"?

If it were not for the problems in Corinth, we would be left with only the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 to a disorderly church. He was speaking to a situation where God's hand had come upon Christians. It seems to me that we have removed "self-examination" out

of its context and blown it out of proportion. Would Paul direct words parallel with 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 to a basically orderly gospel church? Given the state of many churches today, Paul's warnings are certainly in order!

Traditionally, "examine yourself" has focused on the preparedness of an individual for taking communion. As Lenski comments, "the communicant is to test himself as to his fitness for the Sacrament."[19] There is a place for self-examination, but when the Supper has been removed from its fellowship-meal context – its social dimension – the tendency has been for self-examination to be misunderstood and misapplied.

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What Should the "Mood" Be in the Lord's Supper?

It should be one of celebration and joy. The table should not be a place of "gloom."[20] However, in too many cases the atmosphere at the Lord's Supper is more like a funeral than a festival. We cannot be like the two sorrowful men on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:17,21). These mens' hearts came alive with joy when Jesus made Himself known to them in the "breaking of bread" (Luke 24:30-35).

Obviously, our blessings have come through a great price. We cannot reflect on the cross without a due sense of sobriety. But even from Christ's perspective there was "joy" mixed in with the knowledge of His impending death (Heb. 12:2). With joy we can remember His death in the past, enjoy His presence with us now, and look forward to His glorious return.

Do We Share Our Goods in the Supper?

Most of the time, the Lord's Supper in the early church was an occasion to share with the poor.

For many, for the slaves and the poor, the Lord's Supper must have been the one real meal of the week. The idea of a tiny piece of bread and sip of wine bears no relation at all to the Lord's Supper as it originally was.[21]

There is something here in the spirit of all this that we need to recapture in our Lord's Suppers.

Why Do We Practice the Supper in Such a

Different Way?

It is obvious that there is little, if any, resemblance of our Lord's Supper practice to that of the early church. Hodge admits that "these disorders [in Corinth] were of such a kind which, according to our method of celebrating that sacrament, seems almost unaccountable."[22] Barclay observes:

There can be no two things more different than the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a Corinthian home in the first century and a cathedral in the twentieth century. The things are so different that it is almost possible to say that they bear no relationship to each other whatsoever.[23]

The essential characteristic of our practice is its non-fellowship, non-meal setting. We try to have a Supper without a meal! The question we must face is this: are we right in continuing this individualistic approach? In light of all the Biblical evidence, does not our practice look out of order? On what textual basis can we continue our "tiny piece of bread and sip of wine" method?

The history of what happened is easy to trace. In time, the Agape was separated from the Supper, and it was "prohibited" by the Council at Carthage (AD 397).[24] Abuses of the Agape are given as the reason why it faded out of church life.[25] But every doctrine and practice have been abused in some way. We would not do anything if we stopped because of abuses. The New Testament answer is to correct abuses, not to cease doing right because of abuse.

Implementing the Lord's Supper

If the New Testament data would suggest that our practice of the Supper needs to be changed, then how are we going to do it?

First of all, the fact that our Lord's Supper practice is so "out of context" from early church practice is indicative of a broader problem: our church life in general is out of whack. Thus, the Lord's Supper issue is an indicator of some deeply-rooted problems in our overall conception of "church."

This means, secondly, that in most churches a period of time involving patient instruction and responsible experimentation and change is necessary. Traditions that block obedience and stifle edification die hard. So we must function in a tension where we consider (1) the necessity to obey light discovered from the New Testament, and (2) the necessity to bear patiently with those who are struggling. If we emphasize #1 without #2, we will cause strife to abound. If we emphasize #2 without #1 nothing will ever change and the status quo will go on.

Thirdly, it is important to see that capturing the spirit of the New Testament church life is the key. We are not talking about just changing the form to a

situation where the Lord's Supper is celebrated in the context of a fellowship meal. Rather, when we get a vision of the kind of care and fellowship that should characterize Christian assemblies, we will see the value, blessing and edification of remembering the Lord together in a meal context. Changing a form cannot produce life. Instead, vibrant life brings with it a strong desire to employ those forms which will maximize edification.

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As churches get ahold of New Testament principles, they can freely work out creative ways to implement a remembrance meal that meets the needs and particulars of their circumstances. I believe that many saints know (painfully) in their hearts that there is something missing in the churches' practice of the Supper. May a consideration of the historical structure and setting of the Supper help us in recovering the truth as it is in Jesus.

Footnotes

1 William Barclay, The Lord's Supper, 1967, pp. 102,104.
2 Ibid., pp. 56,57.
3 Ibid., p. 16.
4 Charles Hodge, 1 Corinthians, p. 216; R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of 1 & 2 Cor., p. 455.
5 Lenski, p. 454.
6 Marcus Dods, The Expositor's Bible: 1 Cor., V, 1940, p. 683.
7 Barclay, pp. 27,28.
8 Robert G. Gromacki, Called to Be Saints: An Exposition of 1 Cor., 1977, p. 141.
9 Hodge, pp. 214,215.
10 Dods, p. 683.
11 Lenski, p. 462.
12 Hodge, p. 235; cf. pp. 216,219,220.
13 Lenski, p. 457.
14 Ibid., pp. 458,459.
15 Ibid., p. 482.
16 Gromacki, p. 144.
17 Hodge, p. 231.
18 Barclay, p. 109.
19 Lenski, p. 480.
20 Hodge, p. 233.
21 Barclay, p. 100.
22 Hodge, p.214.
23 Barclay, p. 99.
24 Hodge, p. 210; Lenski, p. 488; Barclay, p. 60.

25 Hodge, p. 219; Barclay, pp. 60,61.

SOURCE: http://lords-supper.org/resources/zens_ls.html