

Day 38: The Supper as a Symbol of Unity

Today's Reading

1 Corinthians 10:14-17

Devotion

"We, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

1 Corinthians 10:17

"We, who are many" – this little phrase seems like an understatement. Jesus' church has been growing for 2,000 years. It thrives today in more than 300 countries and cultures. More than a billion people on the planet are affiliated with churches that partake in Jesus' name.

The text also says "we...are one." That's a lot harder to understand. Churches don't agree on many key convictions. The divisions among churches affect every neighbourhood.

This becomes even more challenging with the phrase "for we all partake of the one loaf." How difficult this is when many churches, sometimes for very compelling reasons, choose not to participate in the Lord's Supper celebrations with other churches.

So what do we make of this text? Two things to consider:

1. Think of it as an invitation. Every time you participate in the Lord's Supper, picture in your mind that you are united with people from 20 centuries and 300 countries and cultures.

2. Think of it as a prophecy. In the coming kingdom, at the wedding feast of the Lamb, all institutional barriers to church unity will be gone – along with all the wars and other divisions that God is going to overcome. We live in hope of that day!

Prayer

Lord of the church, help us see beyond the disunity that often marks our church life. Help us discern all the ways that your Spirit is building us up together as one people. Amen.

Day 39: The Supper as a Pledge of Faithfulness

Today's Reading

1 Corinthians 10:18-22

Devotion

"You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons."

1 Corinthians 10:21

Many love songs focus on the exclusive nature of love. Often the radio brings us all kinds of singers crooning words like "you are my only one".

It's one of the basic rules of dating that you can't sing "you are my only one" to more than one person at a time. When someone tries to do that, all kinds of mistrust and despair break out.

Taking the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper is also a pledge of exclusive faithfulness. Accepting Jesus' nourishment means that we choose not to look for nourishment from other sources.

Yet it is easy not to take this verse seriously. Maybe that's partly because very few organisations today advertise that they offer a "table of demons." But we have to realize that many of the world's most potent institutions – politics, business, education, entertainment, and more – urge us to take nourishment from forces that are fundamentally opposed to the reign of Jesus Christ.

Over the last few days we have explored many poetic images for the Lord's Supper. It's a feast of covenant renewal, remembrance, hope, discovery, unity and proclamation. Today's Scripture reading helps us to see that all of these things are a powerful way to tell the world that we renounce Satan and all of his empty promises.

Prayer

Holy God, help us to understand that saying 'yes' to you means saying 'no' to every other force that calls for our allegiance. Deliver us, we pray, from all evil. Amen.

Day 40: All For Your Glory

Today's Reading

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Devotion

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

1 Corinthians 10:31

Paul now moves on from the question of temple dining and eating food sacrificed to idols, instead focussing specifically on the matter of food from questionable origins – food that may have been sacrificed to idols before coming into the hands of a believer. Again, although this specific dilemma may not be something that you and I confront on a regular basis, Paul's answer to this problem provides helpful guidelines for us today as we seek to act with integrity in a world brimming with idols.

Paul could have out right banned Christians from touching food that had been sacrificed to idols. Instead he opts for a more nuanced response. He argues that if everything on earth belongs to the lord (10:26), this includes even food used for idolatrous purposes. Therefore, all things are permissible – and our actions and decisions should be guided by what would be of greatest benefit to others (10:23-24). If this means abstaining for the sake of another's conscience, so be it (10:28-29a).

Paul concludes this section of the letter with the oft-quoted refrain: “so whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (10:31). If ever there was an all-encompassing vision for our lives, this would be it! Let us not be so caught up with the minutia of every-day ethical decision making that we lose sight of the grand picture. If the glory of God is what we ultimately seek, all of our smaller decisions will eventually fall in line as well.

Prayer

Lord, we humbly recognise that because everything came from you, everything must also point back – and give all the glory – to you. May this be the guiding principle to all of our decisions, whether big or small. Amen.

Day 41: Paul Speaks on Worship

Today's Reading

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Devotion

"For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God."

1 Corinthians 11:12

Welcome to one of the most notoriously difficult and wildly controversial passages in all of the New Testament! Highly intelligent theologians who hold to a variety of different perspectives about gender roles and marriage all agree on one thing about this passage – that Paul's intent here is difficult (if not impossible) to determine. In some verses, it is unclear what Paul is referring to – and in other verses Paul seems to contradict what he has previously written!

So without trying to make any definitive statements about these particular aspects of the passage, here are three observations from the text that we can discern with relatively certainty:

- Despite many taking this passage as justification for the view that all women are subject to the authority of all men, Paul clearly emphasises the common origin of men and women and the mutuality and interdependence that this implies. In verses 11-12, Paul makes it clear that God is the ultimate source of both man and woman

- The passage does contain a number of convoluted statements about the specific issue of hair and heads of men and women in worship. These have very little direct bearing in our context as hairstyles and headwear do not necessarily convey meaning or denote class distinctions. Nevertheless, it is still worth remembering that the way we appear and behave in church communities should not be giving the church a bad name to those outside of the church

- We shouldn't be so preoccupied with the finer points of the argument in this text that we forget what this passage does mention: which is that women do pray (speak to God) and prophesy (speak for God) in church meetings. One could say that these two ministries sum up the function of corporate worship.

Prayer

Lord, grant me the wisdom by your Spirit to more clearly understand how today's reading may inform our gathered worship. Thank you for making it clear to me that the manner in which we conduct ourselves in these settings really does matter to you – so much so that you inspired the apostle Paul to write this portion of his letter to the church in Corinth. May our worship always be pleasing in your eyes. Amen.

Day 42: All For Your Glory

Today's Reading

1 Corinthians 11:17:22

Devotion

"So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers."

1 Corinthians 11:20-21

In this section, Paul seeks to correct the Corinthian desecration of the Lord's Supper. This sacrament was intended to enhance group solidarity, but the way that the Corinthians practiced it ended up having the opposite effect. For when they partook of the Lord's Supper, they divided along socioeconomic lines – each one ate his/her own supper, and those with plenty ignored those who had little or nothing.

Paul was not able to regard this state of affairs as a mere breach of social etiquette. When conducted in this way it is not so much the Lord's Supper as it is their supper. For the Lord's Supper is intended to convey to every participant that he/she is somebody precious to God. Instead, the Corinthians' practice of it – tainted by indifference and indulgence – communicated to some that they were nobodies. This seeming indifference to others showed contempt for the church of God and dishonoured Christ's self-giving sacrifice, which the Supper commemorates.

The underlying reason for their obliviousness to the needs of their fellow Christians is that they were too acclimatised to a culture in which contempt for the poor was typical of the wealthier class. This value began creeping into the church – the privileged Corinthian Christians in particular did not want their advantages to vanish when they associated with believers of a lower socioeconomic status.

In what ways might we be susceptible to a similar sin? Paul seeks to correct this by reminding the Corinthians that even though the primary focus is on the horizontal relationships between Christians, the people they insult belong to God. So ultimately it is God Himself who is wronged, and He will not take this lightly. Let us not forget that the church is one large extended family, and all are expected to share their resources with others – especially when it comes to something as sacred as the Lord's Supper.

Prayer

Lord, keep us from making the same mistake as the Corinthians, who in busying themselves with adhering to religious customs ended up forgetting the true heart and meaning behind the custom. In our celebration of the Lord's Supper in particular, may we do everything in our power to ensure that it accurately evokes the free availability of your gift of salvation to all those who would accept it – regardless of race, age or social standing. Amen.

Day 43: Proclaiming the Lord's Death

Today's Reading

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Devotion

"Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

1 Corinthians 11:26

The early Christians gathered to break bread. There would also be singing and preaching, but the breaking of bread was at the heart of their gatherings. They were "remembering" Jesus as they broke bread even though he was physically removed from them.

Paul gives us added insight about what happens at the communion table. He says, "You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." How does that happen? What and how am I proclaiming when I take the Lord's Supper? To whom am I proclaiming?

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 10:21, Paul talks about two tables – the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (The table of demons had to do with eating food sacrificed to idols – a common social practice at that time.) Today, as we live our lives, we may often be tempted to let something besides the Lord feed our hearts. If we yield to that temptation, we wander from God and associate with demons. When we take the Lord's Supper, we tell the spiritual world that Jesus is the source of our lives. We tell the devil that he has been defeated and the curse of sin has been broken. He no longer has a say in our life because we belong to Jesus Christ. The forces of evil do not want to be reminded of this, but at the Lord's table we celebrate with heaven the victory of the cross. May we be nourished at His table alone!

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for empowering us to proclaim your victory and ours over all the forces of evil. Lord Jesus, may we fix our eyes on you, in whose name we pray. Amen.