

CELEBRATING THE LORD'S SUPPER

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

Doug Goins

The saints of the New Testament church made the Lord's Supper, or communion, central in their corporate life. They celebrated communion whenever they gathered together, whether it was formally or informally, in larger groups or smaller groups, in meeting halls or in homes. That meal was given to be a beautiful reminder of two things: the sacrificial love of God expressed through the death of the Lord Jesus, and the unity that we have in the life of the church.

NOT FOR BETTER BUT FOR WORSE

As you know if you've been studying this first letter to the Corinthians, they had trouble getting things right in many different areas, and this was no exception. Serious abuses had crept into the service. In the opening paragraph, Paul describes the destructiveness of divisions at work in that Corinthian church that were reflected in their expression of the Lord's Supper, and also of behavior that was disorderly. Let's read verses 17-22, which set an unsettling context for the establishment of this meal that Paul is going to offer as an apostolic institution beginning in verse 23.

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you, and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.

This Corinthian congregation struggled with deep-seated problems of division, selfishness, and insincerity. God had given this meal to reflect unity, selfless sacrifice, and genuineness. But the ultimate result of these people's coming together was the humiliation of some, and a heart attitude described in verse 22 as despising the church of God. The problem was so bad that in verse 17 Paul suggests that the meetings were not for the better, but for the worse.

Since communion in the church today is usually observed in the context of a worship service, it's hard for us to visualize the circumstances that Paul is describing. But from the beginning of the church at Pentecost, it was customary for the believers to eat together. They established a beautiful weekly tradition called the love feast, or the *agape* meal, to which each member brought what he or she could share, rich and poor alike. All these resources were combined together, and the whole church sat down to eat a common meal, which gave a beautiful picture of the oneness they shared in Jesus Christ. It was a way of sustaining real Christian fellowship in the church. They climaxed this meal by observing the Lord's Supper. That was a very natural expression, because Jesus himself had instituted the practice at the close of the Jewish Passover meal. He used two of the symbolic elements from that meal, the bread and the wine (Luke 22:19-20).

Now, several problems had arisen in Corinth that undermined the loving atmosphere of the *agape* meal, and that motivated Paul's strong rebuke. When they gathered in that church, instead of being one spiritual family, they tended to divide into separate groups, eating with their own crowd instead of fellowshiping with the entire family of faith. Perhaps it was just an extension of the theological cliques that had developed in Corinth, the personality cults of favorite teachers that we discovered when we studied the first four

chapters of this letter. But it also reflected something deeper: social divisions between the rich people and the poor people in the congregation. Remember, over half the population were slaves with virtually no personal resources whatsoever. Paul mentions that the wealthy ate their own food rather than sharing with those who were needy. And it's likely that the weekly love feast was the only decent meal that some of the poorer members regularly had. Paul says some of the wealthy Christians were drinking so much wine at the meal that they were getting drunk.

So the true meaning of fellowship had been forgotten, and the attempts of this church to celebrate in communion God's loving sacrifice of his only Son for their sins were a mockery, was spiritual hypocrisy. It didn't make any difference if the right words were used and the right institutions observed.

Now, we have great fellowship meals together here at PBC. We enjoyed a great time of eating together last Sunday evening after the Night Life service. And I've never seen anything going on like what Paul describes in Corinth. I didn't see drunkenness, or one group hoarding food from another group. But just because we don't have those abuses doesn't mean that there are none at work among us. You see, if I bring to the Lord's Supper a divisive spirit or selfishness or insincerity, then I diminish the true meaning of the table. And if I allow any kind of prejudice, whether social, racial, generational, or cultural, to control my attitudes toward anyone in the body of Christ, then I undermine the integrity of this meal. This is the meal in which we celebrate the death of Christ for the whole world. I've got to be certain that I come to the Lord's table fully committed to the New Testament definition of *agape*, or sacrificial love, and Christian fellowship toward everyone. If I don't, then I could hurt the cause of Christ rather than helping it.

In that context, listen to Paul's beautiful description of this meal of salvation. These words come as a correction to misunderstandings that the Corinthian believers had. Verses 23-26:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Paul makes an amazing claim in verse 23. The one who had told him what went on in the upper room on that Passover eve was Jesus Christ himself. This is not Paul's opinion that he is offering, but God's revealed word.

THE BREAD--IDENTITY, NOURISHMENT, UNITY

He focuses on two compelling visual aids, the bread and the wine, as symbols of salvation. Every time we take these elements we are to remember the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Let me review for you some of what the Lord Jesus taught Paul about the spiritual significance of the bread and of the cup. There are many things that we could focus on, because these visual aids are so rich and so powerful in instruction, but I'll just talk about six.

The first one we saw when we studied 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. The bread teaches us about this new identity we have in Christ, this newness of life, newness of heart: "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast-as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth." (NIV.) Remember, in the Bible yeast or leaven is always a symbol of sin in the life of the believer. But in the cross of Jesus that issue of sin has been dealt with. Christ became the final and ultimate sin offering. So as Christians, we are free from sin. We have the resources of Christ within us to live undefiled lives of purity and holiness. We are, in fact, bread without yeast, Paul says, by virtue of Christ's accomplished work on the cross. So we ought to live that reality out in our daily lives with "sincerity and truth." Both of these words imply behavior that is authentic, without deceit, in which there is nothing to be ashamed of. The saving work of Christ allows us to live out that purity of life, that commitment to integrity.

Second, the bread reminds us of the ongoing spiritual nourishment that Jesus Christ himself provides us. Let's look at the words of Jesus in John 6:33-35. Jesus is speaking of himself:

''For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

'Sir,' they said, 'from now on give us this bread.'

Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry....''

Just as we need bread, or physical sustenance, every day, we need spiritual sustenance as well. You've probably heard people talk about "devouring" a good book, they were so captured by it. Jesus offers the same thing as we read the words that he spoke as well as all the commentary on his life that we have in the Scriptures, as we commune with him in prayer, and as we have serious relationships with other people who want to be nourished by him.

The third beautiful picture that we find in the symbol of the bread is our unity, our common identity in the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, again Paul reflects on what the Lord Jesus taught him: "Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread." This bread that we partake of becomes a symbol not only of our participation and our fellowship with Jesus Christ, but of the common life that we all share together as brothers and sisters, our common spiritual identity because of who Jesus is. What that means is that we don't have to be alone. When we come to this table, there's no isolation, no place for rugged individualism. We've been placed into a body, and we are part of one another.

THE CUP--REDEMPTION, PROPITIATION, RECONCILIATION

Now let's think about the cup, this symbol of the blood of Jesus Christ. Let me suggest three things that Christ taught the apostle Paul about the shedding of his blood in death. The first is that we are redeemed from sin. Paul speaks of Jesus in Ephesians 1:7-8: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us." Through the shed blood of Christ on the cross, God has provided redemption from sin. We've been bought back, set free. The issue is liberation from our sinful state of being, and apart from Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, we would all still be in bondage to death, sleep-walking through life. But now through the work of Christ on the cross, we have been made alive. We have been purchased from the slave market of sin. That picture is of the first-century slave market, where men and women were sold as human chattel to anybody who could pay the price. Apart from being purchased and set to some sort of use, the slave really had no purpose in life. But because of what Christ has done in buying us from slavery to sin, we've been given purposefulness and usefulness and freedom. And it was secured at tremendous cost--Jesus' own blood.

Second, the symbol of the cup tells us that we have propitiation. This is a great word that Paul uses in Romans 3:24-25: "...Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed...." He passed over our sinfulness in the same way that the angel of death, in Egypt, passed over the houses of which the blood of the sacrificed lamb had been placed on the lintel. The blood was a covering, a protection. And through the cross of Jesus Christ, God has done the same thing for each one of us.

The word "propitiation" is also translated "expiation" or "satisfaction." The issue is that there is an irreconcilable difference between God's absolute holiness, sinless perfection, and righteousness, and our ugly, horrible sinfulness before him, our shameful nakedness, if you will. As rebellious sinners we have offended God's holiness and we deserve his righteous anger against sin, because he understands how destructive it is. But now, through the work of Christ on the cross we are acceptably covered, or clothed, before a righteous God.

The word "propitiation" is an Old English word, and it means to be covered over with the right kind of clothing. The only way to be socially acceptable is to have clothes on. One doesn't run around in the streets

naked. We know intuitively that it's shameful and embarrassing to do so. Most of us have probably dreamed that we were naked in front of people we knew, and we were trying to find a way to hide or be covered up. That's the same awareness that Adam and Eve had in the garden after their innocence and their relationship with God had been destroyed. When sin came in they immediately knew they were naked, and they were ashamed and they hid from God. Because of the guilt, embarrassment, and shame they felt before the Lord, they tried to make their own propitiation-aprons of fig leaves. In God's grace at the end of the story in Genesis 3, he provided propitiation for them. He brought them the skins of some sacrificed animals so they could be clothed. Blood was shed so that their guilt and shame could be covered up. And that was a type of the death of Christ that was to come in the future.

That is good news for us—we don't have to try to cover up our own nakedness. Through the cross we find propitiation. We're acceptable before God. And there is no shortcut to some kind of easy relationship with God, in which we decide how we want to clothe ourselves on our own terms. Drastic ills call for drastic remedies. The cross was brutal because God's anger against sin is a holy rage. Only the blood of Christ can cover us and turn that anger aside. But the result is wonderful. Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 5:21 this way: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (NIV.) Clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, there is no more embarrassment, no more nakedness. We don't have to be afraid of God's righteous anger anymore. We don't have to hide anymore.

Third, we've been reconciled to God and to one another because of the death of Christ. Look at Colossians 1:19-22: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." (NIV.) Through the cross God has provided changed relationships with himself and with other people. This is the work Jesus accomplished on the cross in dealing with our rebellious attitudes, described in Colossians 1 as alienation, enmity, and evil behavior. We acted all that out toward one another. And we couldn't bridge the gap of our broken relationship with God. But here is Paul's great word: God took the initiative to reconcile us to himself. He showed himself to us not as an enemy but as a loving heavenly Father who sent his Son to die for our sins. He willingly sent Christ to the cross for our good, because he wanted to heal and soothe our bitter anger and resentment, to make peace with us.

Again, the cost to Jesus was awful. At the heart of his dying was his estrangement from his heavenly Father. So that we could be reconciled, he experienced total distance from his Father. There was that horrible cry of dereliction from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.) But he was willing to die in isolation so we wouldn't have to live that way. That's what we celebrate when we drink of the cup of his blood.

Any one of these six things that Paul learned from the Lord Jesus should overwhelm us when we come to this table. It should not be business as usual. The bread reminds us that we are new creatures, with newness of life, newness of heart. It reminds us that Christ wants to nourish us spiritually every day of our life. It reminds us that we have common identity, a unity in Jesus Christ, because we participate in his body. And the cup, the shed blood, reminds us that we've been redeemed, bought back from the slavery of sin. It reminds us that we are covered by the blood of Christ. Propitiation has turned aside the wrath of God. We have nothing more to be ashamed of; we are fully clothed now in the righteousness of Christ. And finally, it reminds us that we've been reconciled to other people and to God himself. We don't have to live alone.

THE NEED FOR SELF-EXAMINATION

Now, the final section of our passage, verses 27-34, applies what Paul has just said about this institution of the Lord's Supper to some of the abuses that were evident in Corinth. He tells the Corinthian Christians, and us as well, just how seriously God takes this important meal. He makes three points in this final paragraph. The Lord has committed himself to protecting the table from unworthy participation. He is willing to use physical discipline if necessary. And finally, there's a very personal, practical challenge to protect the table through sacrificial love toward one another as we come to participate.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many of you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment. And the remaining matters I shall arrange when I come.

Paul's main point is that this observance ought to cause everyone who participates to stop and examine themselves. His concerns are the issues already raised in verses 17-22: the divisiveness, the selfishness, the drunkenness that was ruining the meal. Paul is asking, Do you think your attitudes and activity are worthy of this awesome spiritual tradition that the Lord Jesus gave to us? The warning to Corinth and to us is clear. We could be in danger of profanity in our actions at the table, of partaking presumptuously without self-understanding, if we don't deal with sin in our lives. We're called to an objectivity about ourselves, to total honesty about our sin. We're called to have repentant hearts, to be humble in spirit, to allow the Lord to look inside of us and warn us, correct us, convict us of sin, chasten us if necessary, and bring whatever he desires to bring into our lives.

Last week I talked with Priscilla McCully. She's been a widow for two months now. She and Bob had been part of our church family for many years. She told me some of the things that God has taught her in recent months. I've asked Priscilla to tell you some of the things that she told me.

PRISCILLA MCCULLY'S TESTIMONY

"For a long time I felt my Christian walk was at a standstill, or maybe even slipping backward. One of the indications of this was that instead of getting up early in the morning and spending time with the Lord, I was spending it with the newspaper. It was enjoyable, and I felt well-informed, but it hurt my spiritual life. There were other things, too, like eating too many cookies, especially chocolate cookies. Dozens of convicting verses kept floating through my head, and I knew my life was not being lived according to the principle, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" [1 Corinthians 10:31]. But I felt powerless to change. I kept asking God to help me, but I followed the same old patterns.

Then awhile back, one of our pastors mentioned chocolate in his sermon. I don't remember exactly what he said, but somehow he equated chocolate with sin. Or I thought he did. I laughed, along with the others, because we all know the Bible doesn't say you shouldn't eat chocolate. However, this was one area where I was tempted. Then, during one of our communion services, while again telling the Lord how sorry I was that I was not living up to his standard, and how I wanted to change, I asked him to show me one little step-not a big step, just a little step. I knew I couldn't handle a big one, but I felt if he showed me one step, he could show me the next step as well. Well, it came to me, and I am sure it was from him, that I shouldn't eat any more chocolate for awhile, especially chocolate cookies. So I went home determined not to. And I didn't. I didn't eat any chocolate that was offered to me, and I didn't buy any.

Then I thought of a Christian author whose books had been very helpful to me in the past, and I decided that I would reread one of those books. And as I did, the Lord enabled me to put my focus wholly on him again. I no longer wanted to get up in the morning and read the newspaper, because I had such a desire to hear directly from God. And so that's what I did. I got up and spent time with him.

One of the things that I felt the Lord told me during this time was that my husband would die in his upcoming operation. I thought about Ezekiel and how God had told him that he was going to take his wife, and he was not to mourn, but I thought I must be imagining that God was telling me this. However, my husband, too, felt that he might not recover from his operation, although there weren't risks beyond the ordinary risks that go with any operation.

Well, my husband did die. Two days after a completely successful operation, he was walking, joking, and talking about coming home. But then he was overtaken by a staph infection, and the Lord took him.

death two months ago, I have had a strong sense of the Lord's presence and the knowledge that wouldn't the Lord of the whole earth do right? Only God knows the future. And I felt assured that God had done the best thing for my husband, me, my children, and everyone else. I have felt his love more completely at this time in my life than at any other, and the sense of his presence has more than compensated for the loss of my husband. It really has. I know I'll go through times of intense loneliness, and I don't have any illusions about my ability to live the Christian life successfully. My past life has proved that to me. But I do know that as I keep my eyes on Jesus, he will continue to forgive, guide, and uphold me. And I know that he's always calling all of us, and forgiving us, and restoring us.

I shared this because I felt the Lord wanted me to. We all feel powerless to make the big changes that are sometimes necessary in our lives. But we can all ask God, as I did, to show us one little step that will lead to another little step, and who knows what revelations are waiting for us."

I don't want these things we've talked about to create anxiety of mind or heart as we come to the table. Paul didn't say that we had to be worthy to partake of the Lord's table. He just said that we shouldn't participate in an unworthy manner. I read about a communion service in Scotland in which the pastor noticed that a woman in the congregation didn't accept the bread or the cup from the server, but instead just shook her head and wept. The pastor left the table, went to her side, and said, "Take it, my dear. It's for sinners." And it really is. What God is looking for is brokenhearted awareness of our sin. If we approach the table with this attitude, we don't have to be afraid of eating or drinking in an unworthy manner. The Lord's Supper is a continuing reminder that there is forgiveness for the sinner, and there is strength for the person who is struggling with weariness and a sense of their own weakness. The warning in our passage is against insensitivity to God's presence. It's a warning against being unloving toward our brothers and sisters. It's a warning against being ungrateful for Christ's great sacrifice on our behalf. What God wants to do is sensitize us, soften us, open us to these saving realities.

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