

LET A MAN EXAMINE HIMSELF

By Steve Zeisler

This year marks the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. In the same year, 1948, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. A Bedouin shepherd boy, searching for his sheep in the desolate Judean wilderness, disturbed a rock which fell into a hole in the ground, shattering something below. The boy investigated and discovered that the rock had broken a clay pot in which lay a number of vellum scrolls. He sold the scrolls to a friend, who later sold them to an antique dealer. This man kept the scrolls in a shoe box under his bed, not realizing the value and uniqueness of what he had bought.

Today, Jews from all over the world visit the shrine of the book in Jerusalem to gaze upon the scrolls. They are awed that in the very year when Israel was founded God bestowed upon them the Scriptures in a way that was almost as dramatic and miraculous as the occasion when God himself spoke from Mt. Sinai. The scrolls are now the most priceless possession of the nation. There are even some "Indiana Jones"-type stories told about the acquisition of this treasure—quite a contrast to the initial discovery which, as we have seen, was marked by people's ignorance as to what they held in their hands.

This is the point I want to bring home to us as we look at a section from chapter 11 of Paul's first Corinthian letter. Christians have the priceless treasure of the presence of God in their lives but they frequently undervalue the truth, and at times fail to see people as God sees them. This is the problem which Paul addresses in the eleventh chapter of this letter, charging the Corinthians with failing to value their fellow-men or the truth of Scripture itself.

1 Corinthians 11:17:

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.

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.

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 among 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.

WORDS OF ADVICE ON THE LOVE FEAST

The apostle began this chapter by praising the Corinthians for their observance of public worship because, in his words, they "held firmly to the traditions." There were good and praiseworthy elements about their worship. But when he comes to the issues which he raises in our text this morning, he has no words of praise for them. On the contrary, they are in need of correction, he declares. Division and schism within the Corinthian church were the basic problem, according to Paul. That is why he uses these stern words to the believers in that church.

But, having chastised them for their divisions, in verse 19 the apostle makes the comment that "there must be factions among you, in order that what is approved may have become evident among you." In every Christian body there will be differences of opinion, in other words. People do not see eye to eye in all situations. Granted the opportunity, some would change the way things are done in the church. Christian unity does not mean that Christians should be in absolute agreement about everything. Thus, debate and discussion over issues makes evident what God approves of. We are all familiar with that process here in Peninsula Bible Church. But it is wrong for Christians to be divided, to lose fellowship with one another, to band together and exclude others. It is all right to debate, to engage and learn from each other, but this was not happening in Corinth. There were divisions and schisms among the brethren there, and that was something which the apostle could not praise them for.

We should make the point that Christian worship in the first century modeled itself on the Jewish form of worship. We find two manifestations of such worship in this chapter. First, when a group of believers met together in a setting much like a synagogue, they read the Scriptures, prayed, prophesied and heard the word of God preached. Verses 2-16 are written with such a service in mind. A second significant manifestation of worship is discussed beginning in verse 17. The agape or love feast was also borrowed from Judaism. Believers met together, either in a home or outdoors, to share a time of fellowship over food, much like the Jewish feasts of Purim or Passover. We learn from Acts 2 that this was a regular occurrence in the life of the early church. In our last study we saw that there was inappropriate use of gifts in the Corinthians' worship services of the first type. And here, as Paul makes reference to their love feasts, he comments on some inappropriateness in their meetings. Instead of sharing their food and rejoicing together over a meal, recognizing that it was during a meal that Jesus directed his followers as to how they should remember him, a spirit of selfishness and division prevailed among them. Cliques and factions dominated. The high and mighty flaunted their positions. The poor and the slaves were set aside and left hungry. Far from expressing love and a sense of community, their love feasts were marked by selfishness and division.

As a church, we occasionally have love feasts (pot-luck dinners, we call them), where as a body we meet for fellowship. But there are dozens of other occasions when the essence of the love feast takes place. For instance, we meet for coffee on the patio between services on Sunday. A couple of our Sunday School groups serve food before their meetings. These are occasions when we recognize that as Christians we belong to each other. Wedding receptions too are times when the concept of the love feast is realized among us. Pancake breakfasts, pie socials, shared bag lunches, all of these things are a type of love feast

As I was preparing this message on Friday last in my study at home, I was thinking how I could best illustrate this idea of the love feast. My thinking kept being interrupted, however, by a steady stream of conversation, laughter and the noise of dishes being set out in our livingroom. My wife was hosting a ladies' brunch and among the women present were a grandmother, a young wife expecting her first child, a new Christian, and several mature women in Christ. They were meeting together because they all love Jesus Christ and each other. I should have thanked them for picturing for me what the apostle is talking about here in this chapter. Then yesterday, I was among a group of fathers who took their first grade sons to the beach for a day's fishing, food and fellowship. That too was a love feast, as men and boys met together to share their love for Christ and for one another.

Paul is saying that this should always be characteristic of Christians, that we have times for fellowship and food, without exclusivity, gluttony, or factions. While they did have love feasts in Corinth, the apostle says that these times were not characterized by love but rather by selfishness and schisms.

Greedy consumption of food is not the only way in which Christians can allow selfishness to divide them. There are other kinds of advantages which we can hoard to ourselves instead of sharing. Some people walk into a room and it seems everyone wants to greet them. One who has standing in the church, either because of the number of years he has attended, or the contacts he has made, can bask in the glory of that, or he can share it with those who feel they are on the outside. Social standing therefore can be used to include or exclude others. Parents who have successful, impressive children at times makes less fortunate parents feel put down and set aside. People who have traveled widely, or who have been blessed materially, can at times make those who are not as blessed feel excluded. But the Christian love feast should be all-inclusive and all-embracing. When we meet together we ought to look for ways to honor and draw into fellowship with us those who perhaps are less favored among us.

Next weekend we hold our annual Family Camp in the Sierras. There will be all age groups there-young, old, single, married. We will be worshiping together, eating and playing together. What an opportune time for us as a Christian family to ensure that no one feels excluded. Let us look for ways to honor those who feel thus, and not form into factions and groups seeking to minister only to ourselves.

So Paul begins this section with a strong admonishment to the Corinthians for their failure in these areas. These negative things occur because we do not value one another highly enough. The poor, the socially awkward, the new, the different, those whom the Lord calls his sons and daughters, who are being conformed to his image, are often set aside. Like the Bedouin boy who discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls, we fail to recognize the priceless qualities of those who surround us. When we learn to see one another as Christ sees us, however, then the idea of excluding anyone else will be abhorrent to us.

RIGHTLY CELEBRATING THE LORD'S SUPPER

The second element of the love feasts which were held in Corinth, the communion table itself, was observed in commemoration of the last meal which Jesus ate with his disciples. Then, Jesus instituted the observance that Christians for all time should remember him by partaking of bread and wine in his honor. But here, too, there were abuses by the Corinthians in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. They were perfunctory in their observance of it and had diminished it in importance. Not only was that wrong, Paul warns that it may be deadly. Referring to that supper, the apostle says it was held on the night when Jesus was "betrayed." Many things happened that night. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane; he washed the disciples' feet, etc. Yet Paul identifies that evening as the night when our Lord was betrayed. I feel that the apostle is making a direct reference to the Corinthians here, indicating that they too were betraying Jesus by their actions at communion. They were not observing the Lord's Supper in worshipful memory of him, nor were they sitting down together as one body in Christian fellowship. If we misuse the Lord's Supper, we too will be found to be a church which has betrayed the Savior.

Here is how Paul describes the institution of the Lord's Supper: "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.'" If your translation reads, "This is My body which is broken for you," it has not been taken from the better manuscripts. The statement which Jesus actually made is, "This is My body which is for you." The body of Jesus was intact upon death. Not one of his bones were broken, in accordance with Old Testament prophecy.

Jesus wants us to recall the incarnation when we take the bread. God became human for us. He left his throne in glory, becoming the humblest of men, born in a stable. But that, according to the writer of Hebrews, is why Jesus can well understand our weaknesses and why he is able to minister to us. He suffered as we suffer; he experienced sorrow as deep as anything we feel. He is personally knowledgeable about you and the situation you are facing. He could find no expression of his love for us more powerful than the expression he made in becoming a man. The incarnation (his body) is supremely God's statement that he is for us.

Then Jesus took the cup, which he described as "the new covenant in My blood." His blood was poured out for us. The great covenants between God and humanity in the Old Testament were always sealed by the shedding of blood to illustrate their solemnity. If the body of Jesus represents the personal involvement of

Jesus with us, his tenderness, love and closeness with us, then his blood is a statement of covenant, and as such is the most far-reaching action he can take in our behalf. When warring nations today enter agreements to end the state of warfare between them, they save thousands of lives by their decision. Covenants are the means by which fortunes are transferred from one generation to another. But when God makes a covenant, he acts in a way that no one can dissuade him; he will not change. Thus, believers are assured of their inheritance because God made a covenant in the blood of his Son. Because God gave his word the power of sin is broken, its stains cleansed, and our certain future is assured. That is the new covenant, the new agreement between God and man. God has committed himself and he will not change.

This is what Christians are to remember: the great, personal involvement of God in the incarnation, and the blood of Jesus shed on our behalf in order to make us right with God. Let us not trivialize these memories by the way we partake in the Lord's Supper.

The past, present and future are all witnessed to here. The past, because we remember something that took place in history; the present, because right now we hold bread and drink in our hands in order to elicit the memory; the future, because of Paul's words "in these things you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Each time we partake of these elements we proclaim to the world who we are in Christ; and we will proclaim this until He comes again, when all eyes will see him and every knee shall bow before him.

Having recalled the words of Jesus, what problem is Paul suggesting the Corinthians were guilty of here? It is the same problem we have when we do not place sufficient value on the people next to us, and when we do not value highly enough the life and death of Christ; when we treat it as if it were not a very big deal, not sacred or remarkable, as the shepherd boy did with the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is what will happen with us if we are not taken by the truth, if we undervalue the life and sacrifice of Christ.

JUDGING OURSELVES RIGHTLY

That is why Paul goes on to say that Christians should examine themselves: "If you eat and drink this meal in an unworthy manner," says the apostle, "you will find yourself as those who crucified Jesus, guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." This examination which Paul speaks of is not to be undertaken so as to discover what is not really there. He is not laying a guilt trip on the Corinthians. The examination is really for the purpose of saying, "Lord, if you have been speaking to me about something, I want to agree with you." It is not to dredge up things that will make us feel bad, but to ask the Lord, "What is it in me that you want to address?" It is God's examination of us, and our agreeing with him.

Let me recall two things that might help our examination. Verse 21 of chapter 10 says, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." One thing you can ask yourself about in this examination is double-mindedness. Is there a dual loyalty in your life? Are you trying to be committed to righteousness and unrighteousness at the same time? We might also recall the word "betrayal" in 11:23 when we examine ourselves. Have we accepted some payoff from the world to abandon our loyalty to Christ? Those are the kinds of questions you should ask in your self-examination. The intent here is not to create an emotional response but to hear from the living Lord about himself, and then to agree with him.

Paul says that there is a discipline that follows those who are cavalier about these things, a discipline that includes failing health, even death itself-which is probably a specific reference to something that happened in Corinth. But certainly this discipline includes a deterioration in one's life, or marriage. We think we are fooling the Lord, and then life suddenly begins to go to hell in a hand-basket. It is exactly this problem of saying that what Christ says is valuable is not valuable. We should rightly judge the body, Paul says. That probably is referring to the corporate body of Christ as well as the sacrificed limbs and heart of Jesus himself. We should give weight and glory to the body of Christ among whom we sit, and to the body of Jesus on the cross.

As we come to the communion table, we may want to ask ourselves whether we have been loveless toward our fellow-believers. Has the Lord been speaking to us and we have not been paying attention to him? Let us examine our hearts in light of the truth of God.

Catalog No, 4072
1 Cor. 11:17-34
Fourteenth Message
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May 22, 1988

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