

Sermon: Communion Chaos, 1 Cor 11: 17-34**John Koning* email: baldy.john1@gmail.com**

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Food matters. Meals matter. Meals are full of significance. A shared meal speaks of companionship and friendship. Someone we share a meal with is likely to be our friend – or certainly be well on the way to becoming our friend. Food connects. It connects us with family, friends, and it turns strangers into friends. Think about your kitchen table or your dining room. Incredible things have happened there. Food is so much more than fuel.

Jesus Christ instituted an ordinance involving food and wine – He insisted that his followers keep doing it. One of the most important factors/blessings that God has provided for us is this holy meal. One of the key factors in your happiness and growth is your proper observance of this sacrament. It's known by different names in Christian churches: Holy Communion, breaking of bread, the Lord's Table or Supper and the Eucharist. It involves food and wine.

We are generally accustomed to the observance of this sacrament happening in a church building, with a definite liturgy and order – a solemn and dignified time. 1 Corinthians 11 comes as a shock – there seems to be very

little that is edifying here – there is a feeding frenzy, a mad scramble for food, drunkenness and class divisions between rich and poor.

We must note the seriousness of the passage:

- Their getting together does more harm than good! v17
- Their behaviour amounts to a despising of the church, and a humiliating of others v22
- Some participate and bring judgement on themselves v29
- Some have become sick, even died because of their abuse of the Lord's Table v30

There is a lot to learn here. The passage calls us to look in three directions:

1. LOOK AROUND: v17 – 22, 33 -34

A bit of background is necessary. It was a very different occasion in those days – there was no special building, no fixed liturgy, no sharp distinction between the supper party and the meal. Followers of Jesus would hang out together in someone's home, worship, have a meal, and then do what Jesus instituted. In those days it was more informal, more organic. The Lord's Supper was usually part of a meal the early Christians shared together – called the Love Feast (Jude 12). But what happened at Corinth was a travesty of love.

The wealthier members of the congregation provided most of the food – this could have been a wonderful expression of love and unity. But it went the other way, v21. The poor would have to finish their work before joining the meal, and slaves would find it difficult to be on time. But the rich did not wait. They ate and drank in their cliques. There was disorder that was causing chaos in the church. The wealthy people would come with loads of food, eat and enjoy a "*lekker*" [superb or fantastic] three-course meal, and just ignore poorer people. Some were enjoying a feeding frenzy – others were being disregarded.

Others weren't too into the food – they were into the wine. They were going ahead and drinking too much! Imagine getting "wrecked" at the Lord's Table? It's the opposite of what should happen – it was a complete lack of compassion and care for the other person. The very ritual that was intended to celebrate the gospel and symbolically act out their oneness in Jesus had become an occasion for splitting the church on the basis of status. A meal designed to express unity was being so abused as to highlight the disunity of the church. The food was gone when the poor arrived. Some had over indulged and others had nothing. But there was no real sharing – no real communion, no genuinely common meal. The differences between rich and poor were being highlighted. It seems that there was social snobbery going on at their gatherings. Distinctions were being made between the rich and the poor. Some people felt IN – others felt OUT. And this was the meal that commemorated the death of Jesus Christ on the cross – where we are all on the same level. There is a selfish elitism. Romans 12:10 "*Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour.*" (See also, James 2:1-7).

Paul uses the expression "when you come together" no fewer than five times – there is to be a '*togetherness*' about this sacrament. The Lord's Table

is not just between you and God. The Lord's Table is never just a personal matter – it's never just for individuals. Communion is a fellowship meal of God's people. We are in relationship with others. We are to eat together and drink together. As families we sit down and enjoy a meal together, as family in Jesus Christ we are called to enjoy a special meal together. We are not to decide just to have communion by ourselves at home. If someone is sick, hospitalized, or bed-ridden, that is another matter. But the principle is that we are to enjoy the Lord's Table in community.

So this passage would pose questions to us:

- Do I know these people around me? Am I getting to know them better?
- Am I in communion with them? (in a church group of more than 80 it's difficult – but in our smallish group it's easier to know others.)
- Do I have grudges toward others? Are their suspicions? Have I got attitude? Am I prejudiced?
- Do I consider myself an insider and them an outsider?

There is an important principle from Mt 5:23-24. This is not about coming to the Lord's Table – but the principle applies: *“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”* Make peace/make right with your brother before you celebrate the Lord's Table.

This problem of cliques, bias, divisions, is not the problem of Corinth only. Do we gravitate toward others because they are successful? Do we want to socialize with people just like us? Why do we struggle to reach out to people unlike us?

2. LOOK BACK v23 -26

We look back to the greatest person, greatest event and greatest achievement ever. Paul takes the Corinthians back to the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples (Mark 14:12-25). When Jesus did this in that upper room we must remember he was not doing something brand new. Remember what happened that night he was betrayed in the upper room? It was a shared meal in a rented room. He was taking something very old, very established and very important – and giving it a radically new interpretation.

Jesus died on the Passover weekend. The Lord's Supper is based on the Passover – the greatest Jewish festival (see Exodus 12). God's timing and God's wisdom and God's plans are absolutely breath-taking! The Passover commemorated their escape from slavery in Egypt. It involved sacrifice of lambs, blood, substitution, atonement and escape. Those that escaped out of Egypt were those that were saved by the blood of the lamb on their doorposts.

By God's perfect wisdom, Jesus was crucified the very day the Passover Lamb was to be sacrificed. The whole Jewish system is replaced by Jesus, and

everything centres on the death and resurrection of Jesus – it's his death that establishes that covenant. 1 Corinthians 5:7, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."

The Lord's Table is a meal of remembrance. After serving the bread, Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19b), likewise the cup. By participating we are not just saying these things happened. But we are involved – they include us.

Note that verses 24 and 25 of 1 Corinthians 11 do not command us to "say this" – but "do this!" Not "think this" – but do this. It calls for us to do – it's a drama in which we participate. It's habit-forming. Each time we're learning and re-learning our role. We're learning the habits of cross-centred living. Each time we participate we are reminded of the cross. We're reminded that our sin is atoned for, we're free, forgiven, acquitted and adopted. And we're reminded that the cross is our model. We're called afresh to serve and sacrifice.

The Lord's Table is a picture of the whole scope of Christ's relationship to His people: it indicates Jesus Christ *for* us in the atonement; it indicates Christ *in* us by appropriation; it indicates Christ *among* us by communion, it indicates Jesus *coming* for us. It binds together past, present and future.

It is the **Lord's Table**: He has done the work; He is the risen and ascended Head of the table. This is not an act of remembering a dead hero but of communion with the living Lord.

In verses 24 and 25, there are two phrases that have proven to be divisive:

- v24 Jesus took the bread, broke it and said: *This is my body which is for you...* What exactly did he mean? Was he being literal?
- v25 he took the cup saying: *This cup is the new covenant in my blood...*

Here we part company with our Roman Catholic friends. They believe and teach that the bread mysteriously becomes the real actual body of Jesus, and the juice in the cup becomes the real, actual blood of Jesus. In every mass the body and blood of Jesus is being re-created. But the Scriptures teach that Jesus was sacrificed once for all. Consider these passages from Hebrews:

7:27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

9:12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

10:10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

One of the frustrations in life is that very important things expire. Official things expire. Licences, passports, ID's expire – and it's a "schlepp" to get them renewed. Jesus death and its great effects never expire! Once – for always.

We believe as Protestants that the bread is a symbol of Christ's body – it represents his body. And the cup represents or symbolizes the blood of Jesus. The bread remains bread and the juice/wine remains juice. Many Protestant

friends see the Table as merely symbolic. It's a potent reminder of what God has done for us in His Son at the Cross; as a result, we should rededicate our lives to God. That is true – but there is more to it.

As Reformed Protestants we believe that the Lord's Table is more than a mere memorial, it's more than just remembering what Jesus did for us. It certainly is that – but it's more! The Lord's Table is a *means of grace* – when we participate with faith, it is a means by which we grow, by which our faith is strengthened, our hope is reinforced. When we participate in faith we believe that God graciously ministers to us. The Lord's Table, properly observed, changes us. It is more than a mere memorial. The shared activity of participating of the one loaf forms us afresh. It reinforces our identity as a community shaped by the cross.

I like what the old prayer book says: The Lord's Table is appointed for the “strengthening and refreshing of our souls. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on Him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.”

One slogan you have heard several times – and you will hear several times again – is: “We must learn to preach the gospel to ourselves.” Well, God has instituted this occasion when he calls us to preach the gospel to ourselves and to the rest of the church. Why? Because we forget, we get distracted; we get side-tracked, because we live in a world where we are bombarded with other gospels.

Have you ever responded to an altar call? How many times? I am not a fan of altar calls. No doubt many people have responded genuinely. In the earlier days of my ministry (in another town), we sometimes had guest preachers – they loved to preach the gospel and invite people to accept Jesus Christ there and then – on the spot! “Give your heart to Jesus! Say the sinner's prayer!” People did. The problem was that several people did several times. The same people seemed to be being converted or to be rededicating their lives to God repeatedly. What on earth was going on?

People thought this was great – God was at work. I thought, “Here is a real problem.” This was very confusing to me. Can you get converted every week? No! But what happens if you sin? What happens if you go through a really rough time? What can God offer you? What does God call you to do? He doesn't ask you to walk the aisle or go upfront – he invites you, no he *commands* you to participate in this Table! It's at the Lord's Table that we come to the living God, in repentant faith, and He ministers to us. This Table is God's perfect provision for us repenting believers.

v26. “... until he comes”. The Last Supper looks back to the Passover meal, but it also looks forward to the messianic banquet. It's a tiny foretaste of God's coming new world. Before the fall, food was the way we expressed our trust and obedience. At the fall, food was the way we expressed our disobedience

and mistrust of God. Now for us – food becomes an expression of our trust in God’s provision and our own repentance.

3. LOOK IN v27 -32

This is a time for self-examination, v28. In what ways can we participate in an unworthy manner? The Table is a representation of God and his gospel. Just like a flag is a representation of the country. The person who publicly tramples on his nation’s flag insults his country. He says his leader and his government stinks. He is not merely destroying a piece of material. It is a symbolic action. A person who takes communion in an “unworthy way” similarly mocks the Lord Jesus and what he has done. This warning troubles believers with tender consciences. Can we ever make ourselves worthy? No! It’s for sinners – real sinners – who can never make themselves worthy. Yet the command is to refrain from participating in an *unworthy manner* – v29 *Without recognising the body of the Lord* – without distinguishing the Lord’s Supper from other meals – or – without recognising the body of Christ i.e., the wider church. So, I repeat, “In what ways can we participate in an unworthy manner?”

- In context, it must refer to what’s been going on there in Corinth – where there is no regard for others, where there is disunity and favouritism. That “body” v29 – may well refer to the body of Christ – the church, 1 Corinthians 12.
- By treating it like religious medicine. By being superstitious – by thinking that in participating it automatically conveys blessing or benefit. The attitude: “It will do me good, it will make me acceptable.” A thousand communions won’t bring you to God or make you acceptable! The Table takes us to the One who died for us to make us acceptable. Many believe falsely that they were given grace at baptism – then lose some along the way – and need to get topped up at Communion. This is completely false! J.C. Ryle: “I cannot help fearing that millions substitute attendance at the Lord’s Supper for repentance, faith and a real, living relationship with Christ.” I have done visitation and invited people to join us in worship, and people have responded: “*I will come along when you have communion.*” Those people have misunderstood.
- When there is an extravagant amount of outward ceremony. Smells and bells don’t make the Lord’s Supper “legit.” The grace of God and a lively faith are the essentials of the Lord’s Table. The Last Supper was a simple affair in a rented room. There was a *godly* simplicity about it all.
- By being careless or flippant. By just going ahead because it’s routine. By not actively believing the gospel. By not confessing our sin and repenting from it. It becomes like brushing your teeth. When we don’t recall Jesus and his death and resurrection for us; when we don’t

preach the gospel to ourselves; when we don't recall the love and grace of God – then we are misusing the table.

So as we participate in communion this morning, we recall the benefits:

- It reminds us of God's great love for us
- It humbles us – it shows us the enormity and ugliness of our sin
- It assures us – atonement has been made, sin has been covered
- It restrains us- if this is what Christ did for us, we cannot go on sinning
- It sends us – we have a gospel to tell and to show
- It points to eternity – there is a glorious banquet coming in the new heavens and new earth.