

DINING WITH DEITY 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

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Throughout this topical section of 1 Corinthians (11:2-14:40), Paul focused attention on several dimensions of worship. Having just spoken of head coverings for women (11:2-16), he turned to the Lord's Supper.

The Corinthians had so twisted the celebration of the Supper that it was hardly recognizable. To correct this problem, Paul applied the three principles that he employed in each subject related to worship. He appealed to: 1) the honor of God in worship (11:3,8-9,12,23-26; 14:21,34); 2) proper regard from one believer to another (11:7,10,21-22,33-34; 12:14-16,21-26; 13:1-2; 14:1-5,12,16-17,19,26,34-35,39); and 3) the testimony of the church to outsiders (11:14-15; 14:22-25,35). In effect, Paul insisted that the Lord's Supper at Corinth had seriously degenerated because it no longer met these criteria.

WORDS OF REBUKE (11:17)

Paul mentioned that he had a particular outlook on **the following directives**. It seems best to understand these words with respect to 11:17-34 only. The closing words of this section (**I will give further directions** [11:34]) and the opening words of 12:1 (**now about spiritual gifts**) indicate a significant break in subject matter.

This section sharply contrasts with the previous materials. In the preceding section (11:2-16), Paul had begun with words of praise. But here he said just the opposite. Instead of an initial **"I praise you"** (11:2), Paul said, **"I have no praise for you."** Paul's disgust with the Corinthians focused on how they had allowed their **meetings**, or public worship gatherings, to degenerate to the point that they did **more harm than good** ("not for the better but for the worse" NRSV). A criticism of this magnitude certainly should have arrested the attention of the Corinthian believers. To be sure, some good came from their gatherings. Paul did not condemn them absolutely and categorically — he had already praised them for holding to many of his teachings on worship (11:2). Yet, his assessment was that, in the final analysis, the **harm** of their worship times far outweighed the **good**. When one hears that a church service does more harm than good, it raises a serious question.

What kinds of things would yield this kind of condemnation? In a word, Paul was about to criticize the extraordinary ways in which the Corinthians had corrupted one of

the most sacred events in Christian worship: the Lord's Supper. The Corinthians had not regarded Christ (11:27,29), nor had they honored or edified each other (11:21-22,29,33-34) in the celebration of the Supper.

DIVISIONS AT THE TABLE (11:18-22)

When the Corinthians gathered to eat the Lord's Supper, they discriminated against the poor, leaving their hapless brethren hungry while others ate and drank their fill. Paul condemned this perversion of the Lord's Supper, and went so far as to say that Christ would not accept their act of worship under these conditions — he would not even be associated with it.

11:18. Paul began by saying, “**In the first place,**” but never moved on to a second or third matter. Therefore, his words should be understood to mean, “the most important way this is true is.” He also introduced this matter by adding, “**I hear.**” Paul did not reveal his source here, but elsewhere he said that Chloe's household had informed him of similar matters (1:10-12). Others from the church had also reported to him (16:17). Not having witnessed the matters he addressed here, Paul had some doubts as to their accuracy, but he knew the church well enough that he believed the reports were true at least **to some extent**.

The heart of Paul's criticism was that there were **divisions** among the Corinthians, but he had already addressed this issue extensively in chapters 1-4. Here, Paul did not focus on divisions and factions in general, but on the way these divisions became evident when the Corinthians came **together as a church**. References to the gathering of the Corinthian believers for worship appear five times in this section (11:17,18,20,33,34), both in the opening and closing of Paul's argument. Paul's chief concern was that divisions perverted the times of public worship.

11:19. This verse is difficult to translate and to understand. Two interpretations seem likely. On the one hand, the verse may concede that some divisions are necessary for the sake of the gospel. The visible Christian church has within it both those who are true believers and those who only profess belief. In this view, Paul affirmed that from time to time it is necessary for true believers to establish **differences** from the false teachings of others. Doing so is necessary to make clear who has **God's approval**. Support for this view may be provided by the fact that the word translated “**differences**” (*hairesis*) (“factions” NASB, NRSV, NKJV) is not the same word translated “**divisions**” (*schisma*) earlier (11:18). Divisions are obviously condemned; differences, however, are somewhat ambiguous. Thus, the term *hairesis* may indicate legitimate differences in this context.

On the other hand, Paul did not actually say that he approved of these differences, but only that they were necessary. He may have spoken facetiously, saying that he recognized the **differences** as a subset of the **divisions**. “**Divisions**” is clearly

negative (**I have no praise for you** [11:17]), therefore “**differences**” may also be negative. Sinful **differences** might explain why the church allowed some of its members to go hungry (11:21) — the poor may not have been considered “approved,” and perhaps may even have been counted as “dispensable” (see 12:21-23).

11:20. Paul next focused plainly on the issue at hand, introducing the matter very abruptly. The introductory “**for**” (“therefore” NASB, NKJV) returns the argument to the subject of 11:18. Paul knew that divisions existed in the church because, **when** the Corinthian Christians came **together** to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, their practice was so corrupted it could **not** rightly be called **the Lord’s Supper**. Although this terminology is common in the church today, this passage contains the only expression of the phrase “**Lord’s Supper**” in the New Testament. It may connote a number of ideas: “the Supper belonging to or hosted by the Lord”; “the Supper which the Lord ordained” (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 23-26); or “the Supper at which the Lord’s body and blood are shared” (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23-25).

The association of the Supper with the Lord indicates how holy this event was and is for the church. This New Testament expression of the Old Testament Passover ritual (Exod. 12:2-27,43-49) was a central worship practice in the early church (Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11). To be sure, the church at Corinth probably called it “the Lord’s Supper.” They did not intend to dishonor Christ in their observance, but their practices so outraged Paul that he told them their so-called Lord’s Supper was not the Lord’s at all.

11:21. What was wrong with the Corinthians’ observance of the Lord’s Supper? Paul explained (**for**) his remark by describing the report he had received. **As** the Corinthians ate, **each** of them went **ahead without waiting for anybody else**. This phrase “**each of you goes ahead**” may be translated “each one takes his own supper” (NASB, NKJV). Paul may well have intended this identification of each person’s “own supper” to explain why it was not the “Lord’s Supper” (11:20). Some in the church had lost the corporate aspect of the ritual, and had come to focus mainly on themselves.

The descriptions of hunger and intoxication in this passage may sound strange to modern readers because today, churches generally observe the Lord’s Supper much differently from the way the first century church did. Now, Christians observe the ordinance with a representative meal — a pinch of bread and a modicum of drink — but the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper with great banquets. According to the book of Acts, the early church often ate meals together (Acts 2:46; 20:7,11). These meals came to be known as “love feasts” (Jude 12), and probably climaxed in an observance of the Lord’s Supper.

In their meals the Corinthians favored the privileged and rich. Similar situations occurred elsewhere (Jas. 2:1-9; 2 Pet. 2:13; Jude 12). Archaeological findings suggest that the common practice in Corinthian homes may have been to allow more important guests to recline at tables while less important guests stood. If the Lord’s Supper was

observed in Christian homes in Corinth, it may have been that the rich and powerful members of the church were given privileges that included the first opportunity to eat. Instead of waiting for everyone to receive some food, the privileged of the group partook ahead of others.

In fact, at Corinth's so-called Lord's Supper, **one remain[ed] hungry**, while **another** got **drunk**. The fact that some became intoxicated indicates that they ate and drank to excess. This would have been bad enough in itself, but they magnified the harm by leaving nothing for the others. By and large first century Christians were relatively poor, and Corinth was probably no exception (see 1:26). This poverty created a setting wherein the relatively few wealthy Christians were easily given too much honor. In the general cultural setting, the rich were used to having special privileges. At any given meal, for instance, wealthy guests would have received as much of the best foods and wines as they wanted long before the household servants and the poor. Such social practices were so common that it would have seemed natural for the church to do the same. The gospel, however, demanded a radical departure from custom. This is why the New Testament warns against giving special honor to the wealthy (Jas. 2:1-26). The apostles and Jesus himself always treated the poor with the same dignity as they did the wealthy (Matt. 11:5; 19:21; Mark 10:21,46-52; Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13; 18:22; 2 Cor. 9:5-9; Gal. 2:9-10).

Paul had already exhorted the Corinthian Christians to consider their neighbors' good above their own (10:24). He had also told slaves to consider themselves free in Christ, and the freemen to consider themselves Christ's slaves (7:21-23). He was also about to repeat this theme (12:13), and to deliver some rather extensive teaching on establishing loving relationships (13:1-13). Clearly, the Corinthians had forgotten the principles of love for others and of common human dignity, just as many in the modern church have.

11:22. Paul began his correction of the Corinthians by asking several questions. First, he asked if they did not **have houses** in which to **eat and drink** ordinary meals. It may have been that Paul's question was an indirect way of saying, "If this is what you do at the Lord's Supper, then simply stay home." Paul did not approve of discrimination against the poor in any venue, but it would have been less offensive for someone to disregard others in an ordinary meal than in the very midst of Christian worship. The sin of discriminating against the poor at the Lord's Supper was so heinous that Paul insisted it would be better if those who discriminated simply did not attend.

Second, Paul expressed further just how terrible this practice was by asking those who abused the poor if they **despise[d] the church of God**. The church consists of those people gathered out of the world because they belong to God. They are his special, highly prized people. When believers have such disregard for the sanctity of the Lord's Supper that they keep the poor among God's people from partaking, they actually demonstrate that they hate God's people. Because the poor are an inseparable and integral part of the church community, one cannot hate the poor without hating the

church. Those who hate and mistreat the people of God are destined for God's judgment (Gen 12:3; 15:13-14; Exod. 6:2-8; Deut. 32:43; 1 Chr. 17:10; Ps. 94:1-23; Isa. 3:13-26; 10:1-4, 24-34; 34:8; Jer. 5:26-29; 23:2, 32-34; Ezek. 13:9-10; 25:1-32:32; Joel 3:19-21; Amos 2:6; Obad. 1-21; Mic. 3:1-12; Zeph. 2:8-10; Rom. 12:19). In fact, Paul was about to address this issue directly (11:30-32).

Needless to say, Paul expected a resounding negative response to his question. He hoped the very thought of disdain for the church of God would repulse the Corinthians, and reveal to them just how horrific their practices were.

Third, Paul asked if the rich members of the Corinthian church actually wanted to **humiliate those who had nothing**. The poor of the ancient world were constantly mocked and humiliated by the wealthy. According to the Old Testament and Jesus, however, this was not to be the situation of the poor in God's kingdom. In fact, Jesus blessed the poor (Luke 6:20-21) and severely warned the rich of the difficulties that accompanied their social status (Matt. 19:23-24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). The poor already had nothing in human, worldly terms. In Corinth, they also had their sense of dignity stolen by fellow believers — and this at the Lord's Supper. Such behavior was utterly unthinkable in the Christian church, and yet it was happening in Corinth.

Paul closed his accusation with a rapid volley of questions. Sarcastically, he asked what he should **say to** them, and wondered if they thought he **should praise** them for their behavior. He then answered his own questions with a determined, "**Certainly not,**" or as it may be translated, "How unthinkable" ("In this I will not praise you" NASB; "In this matter I do not commend you" NRSV; "I do not praise you" NKJV). Paul could never tolerate such mistreatment of God's people, much less praise them for it. Humiliating poor Christians at the Lord's Supper was so contrary to the teachings of Christ that Paul had to condemn it utterly.

THE CENTRAL FOCUS OF THE SUPPER (11:23-26)

Paul was not satisfied simply to condemn the Corinthians' misconduct at the Lord's Supper, so he turned to give positive instructions on the observance. His positive direction amounted to reminding them of the proper purpose for which they were to observe the Supper. The central focus of the Lord's Supper is the remembrance and proclamation of Christ's saving work. Remembering this central concern should have led the Corinthians to correct their misconduct.

11:23a. Paul explained (**for**) that he could not praise the Corinthians for their behavior because they had failed to adhere to the teachings about the Lord's Supper he had **passed on to** them. The expression "pass on" was technical terminology among the rabbis of Paul's day for the official, sacred transmission of religious traditions. Rabbis received and then "passed on" the teachings of their masters.

This passage stands in stark contrast to Paul's praise for the Corinthians at the beginning of this chapter where he commended them for holding the teachings he had **passed on** to them (11:2). Here he had no such praise, but indicated that he had already informed them how to observe the Supper. By saying that he would not praise them (11:22) because they were blatantly disregarding the instruction he had already given them, Paul offered an obvious rebuke. They already knew the proper way, but had not carried out the teaching.

Their failure to hold his teaching was all the more tragic since Paul had not concocted the Supper himself. Even though his own authority would have sufficed to settle this issue, Paul pointed beyond himself, saying he had only passed on what he had **received from the Lord**. He did not specify the precise manner in which he received this teaching from **the Lord**, but it may have come supernaturally from Christ himself during Paul's early years in Arabia (Gal. 1:15-17). It is also possible that Paul received the teaching indirectly through other apostles (e.g. Gal 1:18).

While Paul's record of Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper does not perfectly match any gospel account (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20), neither do his words contradict any gospel writer. The differences exist because of Paul's special focus in this passage. In any case, he mentioned that this teaching came from Christ himself in the hopes that the Corinthians would pay careful attention to what he was about to say.

11:23b-24. At this point, Paul began to describe how to observe the Lord's Supper. These instructions are so simple and straightforward that they appear very abbreviated. Yet, this simplicity was needed to correct the Corinthian situation in which believers had allowed the Supper to become a drunken party.

Paul revealed the proper way to observe the Supper by recounting how **the Lord Jesus** himself had observed it. He chose this designation for Christ to draw attention to the fact that Christ instituted the Lord's Supper during his earthly ministry. Paul also provided a rare historical reference to an event recorded in the gospels when he spoke of **the night he was betrayed**. The well-known story of Jesus' betrayal indicates that Judas left the meal and betrayed Christ to those who would crucify him. Paul may have intended this reference to allude to the fate of those who mistreat Christ — or who mistreat those in Christ (compare 11:27). His wording differs slightly from the gospel records of the last supper (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20), but clearly reflects the same event. Paul's summary divides into three parts: the bread (11:23b-24); the cup (11:25); and a brief explanation (11:26).

The bread was the first concern, and four verbal ideas described the activities surrounding it: **took bread**; **had given thanks**; **broke it**; and **said**. Jesus **took bread**, that is, he picked it up. The term **bread** may also be translated "loaf" ("a loaf of bread" NRSV). It is likely that Jesus used a single piece of unleavened bread to symbolize the unity of those who partook together (see 10:17). Next, he gave **thanks**. The practice of

giving thanks was well established in the rituals of Jewish meals (Matt. 14:19; 15:36; Mark 6:41; 8:6; Luke 9:16; 24:30; John 6:11,23; Acts 27:35; Rom. 14:6; 1 Cor. 10:30; 1 Tim. 4:3-5). Christ followed this practice at the first Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26,27; Mark 14:22,23; Luke 22:19), and Paul established it as a permanent aspect of the Supper for all generations.

After picking up the bread and giving thanks, Jesus **broke** the bread. It was customary for the host of a meal to break the bread for his guests (Matt. 14:19; 15:36; 26:26; Mark 6:41; 8:6; 14:22; Luke 9:16; 22:19; 24:30; John 6:11,23; Acts 27:35). It is not likely, therefore, that the breaking of the loaf was a symbolic action intended to convey the breaking of Christ's body. In fact, John's gospel comments on the remarkable fact that the bones of Christ's crucified body were not broken (John 19:33-36).

Jesus then spoke to his disciples about the symbolism of the bread. Paul summarized Jesus as having **said** three things:

1) **"This is my body"** — this expression has been the source of much controversy throughout church history. In precisely what way is the bread (and wine) of the Lord's Supper the body (and blood) of Christ? With the help of Aristotelian philosophy, Roman Catholic tradition has interpreted this passage in a woodenly literal fashion, arguing that the bread and wine actually change their physical substances to become the body and blood of Christ. Their view is called "transubstantiation." The Lutheran tradition of "consubstantiation" contends that Christ's body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine, but that the substances of the bread and wine do not change. Calvinism has purported that Christ himself is spiritually present in a mysterious way, but not that his physical body and blood are somehow present. Christ is present only through the Holy Spirit and must be received by faith. Other groups have argued that the elements of the supper are merely symbols that encourage a focus on Christ's body and blood through faith. Neither this passage nor the gospel records answer this question, but the vast majority of Protestants hold to one of the last two understandings.

2) **"Which is for you"** — Christ's death was not pointless, but had a particular purpose. He suffered the torturous death on the cross on behalf of others. The atoning power of Christ's death is of infinite value and is offered to all. It is available to anyone in the world who turns to Christ in faith, confession and repentance (1 John 1:9-2:2). Yet, in these words of the Supper, Christ said that he laid down his life for a particular group of people: his followers (Matt. 1:21; Luke 19:9-10; John 6:35-40; 10:11,14-16,24-28; 11:47-52; Acts 20:28; Rom. 8:29-34; Eph. 5:25-27; 1 Thess. 5:9-10; Heb. 2:11-17; 9:15; 1 John 3:16; Rev. 5:9-10). His suffering actually atoned only for the sins of those who believe in him.

3) **"Do this in remembrance of me"** — the Lord's Supper was ordained as a time when God's people were to remember the death and resurrection of Christ. The last

meal Jesus shared with the apostles was set within the context of Christ's betrayal, arrest, and eventual death. The same focus on the centrality of Christ is to be observed throughout the years as the meal is celebrated.

Interestingly, the Lord instituted this ritual at the Passover, which itself commemorated the Exodus (Exod. 12:14-27). By telling the disciples to perform the new ritual in his own remembrance, Jesus made quite a bold statement, appearing to claim significance at least equal to the Exodus. This third portion of Christ's words occurs again in association with the blood of Christ (11:25). The centrality of Christ in the Supper is the main point of this entire section (see comments on 11:26).

11:25. Next, Paul turned to **the cup** (11:25). He noted the parallel between the distributions of the bread and of the cup by saying that the latter occurred **in the same way**. Whereas 11:23-24 mention talking, thanking, breaking, and speaking, 11:25 only explicitly mentions taking and speaking. The expression "**in the same way**," however, indicates that Paul intentionally abbreviated his description of the procedures with regard to the cup. In 10:16 Paul called this cup "**the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks**." This description makes clear that "**in the same way**" includes a separate blessing for the cup (compare Matt. 26:27; Mark 14:23). Moreover, Paul may have intended "**in the same way**" to draw attention to the one element that Paul repeated (from 11:24), but which was absent from every gospel account, namely, "**Do this . . . in remembrance of me**" (11:25). As should become evident, Paul saw the honor of Christ as a central motif in the Supper.

The **cup** was taken **after supper** (11:25). In the ritual meals of Jews during the first century, it was customary to have several courses involving food and drink. Matthew and Mark recorded that Jesus took the wine after bread (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24). Luke, however, mentioned that Jesus gave the cup to his disciples, broke bread, and then gave the cup (Luke 22:17-20). The gospel writers simply give different portions of a ritual involving drinking from four different cups. The third cup was known as "the cup of thanksgiving." Paul had this cup in mind here.

Paul's record of Jesus' words closely parallels Luke's account (Luke 22:20). The main point is that the wine represents **the new covenant in Jesus' blood**.

Throughout the Scriptures **covenant** established the parameters of the relationships between God and his people. The Old Testament speaks of at least four major covenants made with: Noah (Gen. 8:15-9:17), Abraham (Gen. 15:1-21; 17:1-21), Moses (Exod. 19:1-24:18) and David (2 Sam. 7:8-29; Pss. 89:1-52; 132:1-18). Some theologians would add a covenant with Adam (Gen. 2:15-3:24; Hos. 6:7). Each of these covenants was established by God's grace, but each also required certain responses from God's people. Some dimensions of these covenants were unconditional, but each covenant also had conditional elements.

The expression **new covenant** derives from Jeremiah 31:31. In this passage the prophet Jeremiah described the covenant arrangement that God would make with the remnant of his people after they returned from exile. Ezekiel and Isaiah called the same restoration covenant the “covenant of peace” (Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26). Other prophets described it as an “everlasting covenant” (Isa. 55:3; 61:8; Jer. 32:40; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26), and a “covenant of love” (Dan. 9:4). That portion of the Bible that we call the New Testament derives its name from this concept of new covenant. It tells us that the covenant renewal that took place through Christ’s ministry was the fulfillment of the promise for a great covenant after the restoration following Israel’s exile. Jesus is the restoration of the line of David to the throne (Acts 13:22). He brings forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28; Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Col. 1:14) and returns righteousness and blessings to the true people of God, including both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 1:16; 9:23-30; 10:12; Gal. 3:28-29; Eph. 2:4-19; Col. 3:9-11). Just as Christ inaugurated the kingdom of God in his earthly ministry (Matt. 4:17; 10:7; 11:11-12; 12:28; 13:24-30,36-43,52; 16:19; 21:43; 23:13; Mark 1:15; 9:1; Luke 7:28; 9:27; 11:20; 16:16; 17:20-21; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 4:11), he also inaugurated the new covenant arrangement (Luke 22:20; compare Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24). This new covenant will not reach its fullness, however, until the kingdom of Christ reaches its fullness at the second coming of Christ (Matt. 7:21-23; 13:24-30,36-43,47-50; 25:31-34; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 2 Tim. 4:1).

Paul also reported that Jesus defined the **new covenant** in terms of his **blood**. Christ’s sacrificial death paid the debt for sin. His death made it possible for people to enjoy forgiveness and new life in him. The expression “**in my blood**” recalls the importance of blood rituals in covenant making. Not every covenant in the Bible is directly connected to sacrificial blood, but blood sacrifice has been the way of good standing before God from the earliest times (Gen. 4:4; compare Heb. 9:22). Perhaps the clearest expression of this principle appears in the institution of Moses’ covenant (Exod. 19:1-24:18). The whole ceremony of covenant ratification at that time revolved around the sprinkling of sacrificed blood (Exod. 24:6-8) and the celebration of a fellowship or peace meal after the covenant had been ratified (Exod. 24:11). In fact, the terminology Paul used here recalls the words of Moses in Exodus 24:8: “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you.” The prophet Zechariah also announced that the remnant of God’s people would be restored after the exile because of “the blood of my covenant” (Zech. 9:11). The cup of the Lord’s Supper symbolizes the centrality of Christ’s blood as covenant sacrificial blood (compare Heb. 9:18,20; 10:29; 12:24; 13:20). As Paul made clear on several occasions in this book, the death of Christ is the only hope of salvation (1:13,17-18,23-24; 2:2).

Echoing what he said about the bread (11:24), Jesus exhorted his disciples regarding the cup, “**Drink it, in remembrance of me**” (11:25). The main purpose of the Supper is to draw the participants’ attention to the centrality of Christ’s saving work on their behalf. Christ is to be honored as the Savior and Lord of the church. The importance of this motif for Paul is evident from the fact that Paul alone reported these

words of Jesus, and in that he repeated the motif three times in this context (11:24,25,26).

11:26. Paul closed his account of the original institution of the Supper with an explanation (**for**) of his unique repetition of the **remembrance** of Christ (11:24,25). Why should eating and drinking in the Lord's Supper focus on the remembrance of Christ? It is because **whenever** the church participates in this Supper, a sacred event takes place. In the Supper, Christians **proclaim the Lord's death until he comes**. The expression **proclaim** (*katangelo*) occurs many times in the New Testament to describe the ministry of the church to the unbelieving world (Acts 4:2; 13:5,38; 15:36; 16:17,21; 17:3,13,23; 26:23; 1 Cor. 2:1; 9:14; Phil. 1:17,18). It is the prophetic announcement to those outside the church that Christ is the only way of salvation. When the world sees the church eating and drinking in order to remember the significance of Christ's body and blood, the word of the gospel is made visible. The expression **the Lord's death** represents the whole of Christ's saving ministry on behalf of the church: his life; death; resurrection; and ascension (compare Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 1:17,18; 8:11; Gal. 2:21; 5:11; 6:12,14; Eph. 2:16; Phil. 3:18; Col. 1:20; 1 Pet. 3:18). One of the central purposes of observing the Lord's Supper is to **proclaim** the centrality of these events **until he comes** again to bring judgment and eternal salvation to the world.

TAKE GREAT CARE (11:27-34)

Having pointed to the remembrance and proclamation of Christ as the center of observing the Lord's Supper, Paul next explained (**therefore** [11:27]) the practical implications of this center. Specifically, he taught that in the Supper Christians must show regard for those for whom Christ gave his body and shed his blood. To mistreat the brethren in the Supper was to show contempt for Christ's death, to malign the gospel, and to tempt the judgment of God.

11:27. Paul introduced this portion of his argument with a general statement. Whenever people participate in the Supper **in an unworthy manner**, they are actually **guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord**. To participate in the Lord's Supper in an **unworthy manner** has traditionally been interpreted very broadly to mean to participate while having unconfessed sin. This may be due in part to a misinterpretation that understands "**unworthy**" as describing the sinner rather than the manner of partaking. To be sure, it is valuable for believers to confess their sins (1 John 1:9), and appropriate to prepare for worship by doing so, but Paul's focus in this passage was much narrower. As he explained both before this verse (11:18-22) and after (11:33-34), the unworthiness he had in mind was participating in the Supper in a way that failed to exhibit the unity of the church in Christ. That this was his meaning can be seen quite clearly in his exhortation in 11:33-34. To prevent unworthy eating and subsequent judgment, he did not advise the Corinthians to confess their sin, or even to recognize Christ's presence in the elements, but rather to wait for one another and to eat at home.

The Corinthians' unworthy observance was no small matter. One can imagine them thinking that they had merely been inconsiderate of their poor brothers and sisters in Christ. That much was true enough. Yet, Paul insisted that something much worse was happening as well. Because remembering and proclaiming Christ is the purpose of the Supper, violators actually sin **against the body and blood of the Lord** (11:27). That is to say, their offense violates the central, sacred purpose of the Supper: honoring Christ for his work of salvation. To sin against **the body and blood** is to sin against the very hope of salvation. It is a very serious offense (compare Heb. 10:29). Also, they sinned **against the body and blood of the Lord** by sinning against Christ's church, or more particularly, against the poor Christians who were not granted admission to the Supper. As Paul had already asserted in this letter (8:11-12), to sin against those for whom Christ shed his blood and gave his body is to sin against Christ himself.

11:28-29. To avoid such serious offenses, every believer **ought to examine himself**. Christians must scrutinize their motives and actions to see that they accord with the significance of the Supper. This self-examination is to take place **before** eating and drinking. The reason (**for**) for taking time for self-examination is evident — he who participates **without recognizing the body of the Lord** brings divine **judgment on himself**.

This verse does not say that the Supper should generally be observed introspectively, with participants focusing mainly on their own hearts. Rather, Paul offered this instruction as a corrective for a specific problem. In general, the Supper should be a time of celebration in which Christians focus on Christ's honor, the church's unity, and the proclamation of the gospel. The focus should be on others, not on the self. It is only in the preparation for the Supper (**before**) that individuals must turn their attention inward.

The precise meaning of **recognizing the body of the Lord** is a bit difficult to discern here. It should be noted that most of the best and earliest manuscripts do not contain the expression "of the Lord" (compare "the body" NASB, NRSV), but this has little bearing on the interpretive options regarding what Paul meant by "**the body**."

At least two outlooks seem reasonable.

1) "**The body**" may refer to the church. Paul had already employed this language with reference to the Lord's Supper (10:17), and immediately after the passage at hand he extensively employed "body" as a metaphor for "church" (12:12-31). If this is the proper reading, Paul warned participants to treat their fellow members in the body with proper regard while participating. This interpretation agrees with Paul's explicit instructions in 11:33-34 that the Corinthians should treat one another well in the Supper in order to avoid judgment.

2) **“The body”** may also be an abbreviation for “the body and blood.” The proximity of 11:24-27, in which “body” and “blood” refer to Christ’s physical body and blood, supports this reading. If Paul intended this, he was warning participants to give proper consideration to the sanctity of Christ’s body and blood, the focal points of the Supper. By implication he also would have meant that partakers should recognize and honor the church for whom Christ gave his body and shed his blood. In either case, Paul pointed once again to the seriousness of violating the Supper. Those who did so would not escape God’s **judgment**.

11:30. Paul continued explaining the seriousness of violating the Supper by pointing out (**that is why**) the judgment the Corinthians were experiencing as a result of their failure to observe the Supper properly. He remarked that the judgment of God mentioned in 11:29 demonstrated itself in two ways. First, he wrote, **“Many among you are weak and sick.”** Paul probably received information about illnesses in the church from messengers sent to him (1:11; 16:17). Second, he even remarked, **“A number of you have fallen asleep.”** Some in the church had died as a result of God’s judgment against them due to their sin against the body of Christ (11:27). To be sure, sickness and death do not always directly result from personal sin. They come to believers and unbelievers alike for many reasons (Gen. 25:8; 35:17-18; Deut. 19:4-5; Judg. 11:30-40; 1 Kgs. 3:19; 1 Chr. 29:28; Job 1:6-19; 2:1-7; Luke 21:16-17; John 9:2-3; 11:4; Acts 7:52; Rom. 8:36; 1 John 3:12). In this situation, however, Paul had special apostolic authority to support his pronouncement.

It is likely that Paul received some direction in this matter from an account of a similar situation in 2 Chronicles 30:1-27. At Hezekiah’s Passover celebration, many participants from the northern tribes had failed to purify themselves through ritual washings. As a result, many became ill. In much the same way, the Corinthians were ill and dying because they participated in the New Testament Passover, i.e. the Lord’s Supper, in an unworthy way. The New Testament mentions several situations in which death was a direct judgment against a personal sin (Luke 19:41-44; Acts 5:1-11; 12:23; 1 John 5:16).

11:31-32. To press his outlook on the Corinthians, Paul added the comment that if they **judged** themselves, they **would not come under judgment**. In other words, if the Corinthians took time to evaluate themselves before the Lord’s Supper, and appropriately altered their actions based on that evaluation, God would not judge them with sickness and death.

The mention of such severe judgment from God against his church raises a serious question. In what sense and for what purpose does God judge those whom he loves? After all, Christ died in the place of believers precisely so that they might escape God’s judgment. But Paul had a different kind of judgment in mind, a judgment that actually saves. He said that the Corinthians were **being disciplined**, or taught, by God. Much like the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 12:5-11), Paul saw the severe judgment coming against the Corinthian church as designed to train believers in the path of

righteousness. In fact, God corrects the church **so that it will not be condemned with the world** (compare 5:5). He will eternally judge the world of people who rebel against him. Similarly, everyone in the church who turns away from Christ will be judged along with the world. God disciplines his church so that the true believers will take notice and turn back to Christ in repentance.

In speaking this way, Paul encouraged the Corinthians not to see the judgment of sickness and death (11:30) as God's utter condemnation of the entire church. On the contrary, God responded with temporal and physical judgments in order to keep his true believers in the church from turning to the ways of the world.

11:33-34. Paul closed this material with a general summation (**so then**), giving some final practical instructions. As he had on several prior occasions, he appealed to the Corinthians with familial affection by calling them his **brothers** (see also 1:10,11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15). Paul's heart opened toward the church at Corinth, yearning for them to turn from this serious sin. He told them that to avoid God's **judgment** they needed to do two things.

First, they needed to **wait for each other**. Instead of the rich eating first and the poor not eating at all, all participants in the feast were to eat at the same time. This would show proper honor to the poor, and thereby to Christ, and would help prevent their mistreatment.

Second, in order to eliminate any justification for not waiting for others, Paul added that **anyone** (*tis*) (literally "someone") who was **hungry should eat at home**. The love feast of the church, and the Supper of the Lord in particular, are not times for hunger to rule. When participants are hungry the temptation to neglect others can be great. So, Paul insisted that all those of means satisfy their hunger before coming to the Supper. In this, he did not chide the poor for coming to the Supper hungry (11:21-22) — they could not avoid it. The love feast presented an opportunity for the church to minister to its poor members by helping provide for their needs. Those of means who were hungry were to eat at home so that there would be enough food for the poor. The feast was a time when Christ could be honored through the honoring of his poor children, and when the gospel could be visibly demonstrated not only in the elements of bread and wine, but also in the loving treatment of the brethren.

Why should this practical advice be followed? If the church would gather for the Supper in harmony and mutual consideration, then their meetings would **not result in judgment**. The terrible discipline that God inflicting on the church would cease because the Corinthians would have begun to celebrate the Supper in a way that pleased God, honored Christ, respected the church's unity, and proclaimed the gospel.

Paul had touched on the most vital aspects of his teaching on the Lord's Supper, and this instruction sufficed for the moment. Even so, he knew that the Corinthians needed to learn much more about the matter. So, he told them that **when** he came to

visit, he would **give further instructions**. Paul had so many things to explain that he could not write them all. He told the Corinthians enough to avoid God's judgment, but left the rest for his visit.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Harm (11:17)

The word translated “harm” (*hesson*) generally means “less.” Here, the construction *eis to hesson* literally means “unto the less.” Rather than benefit the community, the Corinthian observance of the Lord's Supper was detrimental. Their fellowship was actually made less, or reduced, by their perverted Supper. Because their observance hindered rather than increased this important fellowship, it harmed the community.

B. Differences (11:19)

Forms of the word “differences” (*haireisis*) appear nine times in the New Testament. Six of these occurrences are in Acts (5:17; 15:5; 24:5,14; 26:5; 28:22) and carry no positive or negative connotation in and of themselves, referring merely to the different groups within Judaism (Pharisees, Sadducees, Nazarenes/The Way, etc.). On the only other occasion Paul used this word, he listed it as an act “of the sinful nature” without further description, as if he thought it could stand on its own to indicate an obvious sin (Gal. 5:19-20). Peter also used the word, modified by the adjective “destructive.” The NIV translates Peter's phrase “destructive heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1). In Peter's context it is unclear whether or not the word itself is negative or neutral. The negative force may come entirely from the modifying adjective, or it may also be implied by *haireisis*.

If the word had a negative connotation for Paul, then the verse at hand should certainly be read as sarcasm. On the other hand, if he saw it as neutral, the verse remains ambiguous.

C. Broke (11:24)

It has been common to see the breaking of the bread in the Lord's Supper as a symbolic action representing the breaking of Christ's body. This may be because the KJV quotes Jesus as saying, “This is my body, which is broken for you,” and the NKJV follows this tradition (“This is my body which is broken for you”). Some of the ancient texts indeed contain a Greek word that these versions translate as “broken” (*klao*). The best manuscripts, however, do not contain this word. Further, the New Testament contains fourteen occurrences of *klao*, not counting this disputed appearance, and in all of these *klao* takes some form of bread as its object. This rather strongly implies that *klao* specifically refers to the breaking of bread. According to Luke, when Jesus instituted the Supper, he did not say that his body was “broken,” but that it was “given” (*didomi*) (Luke 22:19). The alleged use of *klao* in 1 Corinthians 11:24 takes “body” as its object, not “bread.” Therefore, it is likely to be an interpolation by an ancient scribe

who was unfamiliar with the New Testament's use of the verb, but familiar with the close association between Christ's body and the broken bread.

D. This is my body (11:24)

There are two predominant Protestant doctrines of the Lord's Supper that stem from the Reformers Calvin and Zwingli. Calvin believed that Christ was spiritually present in the Supper, while Zwingli believed that the Supper was merely a memorial. In fact, these two views share much in common. Today, the differences between these doctrines stem mostly from different understandings of 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, not from different interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 or of the gospel accounts.

Unlike Roman Catholics and Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwinglians believe that Christ's body and blood are not present in the Supper. In this sense, both interpret Christ's identification of the bread with his body and of the wine with his blood as metaphors. Likewise, both agree that the Supper is a memorial, and that it benefits believers only when they partake of it by faith. Both recognize the Supper as a visual portrayal of Christ's death, and thus understand that the ritual can strengthen the faith of those who take part in it, just as hearing the gospel preached may strengthen faith. Further, both believe that Christ would not have ordained the Supper if the things it symbolized (Christ's atonement [Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:19,20; 1 Cor. 11:24,25]; and the unity of the church [1 Cor. 10:17]) were not true.

E. Cup (11:25)

The gospel writers recorded that Christ instituted the Lord's Supper at a Passover dinner (Matt. 26:17-19; Mark 14:14-16; Luke 22:7-15). Each different gospel writer presented different portions of and perspectives on the Passover ritual, which involved drinking four different cups of wine. The third cup was known as "the cup of thanksgiving" (10:16). By this reference, Paul indicated that the Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ's sharing of this third cup with his disciples. The church celebrated the Lord's Supper frequently, not just on Passover, and the love feasts did not replicate the Passover dinner. Still, the Lord's Supper being instituted on Passover, the Supper was innately associated with Passover, and the cup of the Supper even maintained the name of the third Passover cup.

F. Disciplined, Condemned (11:32)

In the New Testament, the word *paideuo* (here translated "**disciplined**") may mean either "punish" (Luke 23:16,22; 2 Cor. 6:9) or "correct/instruct" (Acts 7:22; 22:3; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 2:12; Heb. 12:6,7,10; Rev. 3:19). Even in those instances in which it means, "punish," it is not clear that the punishment is a just desert or judgment. In 11:23, it clearly means "correct/instruct" as opposed to "punish," especially since the lesson is to be learned by the entire community while only some are sick or dead.

Moreover, the act of discipline is most certainly not an act of condemnation. Discipline is applied to those one wishes to correct, to mold, and is for the purposes of improving the character of those disciplined. To condemn (*katakrino*), in turn, is to

attribute guilt, generally with the understanding that vengeance will follow, not discipline. All occurrences of *katakrino* in the New Testament follow this understanding, several of them referring to the ultimate condemnation of the final judgment (Matt. 12:41,42; Mark 16:16; Luke 11:31,32). Where God is concerned, condemnation is a just act of wrath with punitive intent, but discipline is a loving act intended to sanctify.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do we celebrate the Lord's Supper? Of what does the Lord's Supper consist? What is the significance of its elements? What is the significance of its observance?
2. Does your church's theology of the Lord's Supper match more closely with the Roman Catholic view, the Lutheran view, the Calvinist view, or the Zwinglian view? Which do you think is most biblical? Why?
3. When you celebrate the Lord's Supper in your church, do you focus more on personal introspection and confession, or more on the unity and loving fellowship of the church? How do you do this? Could your church could change the way it observes the Supper to make it more meaningful and biblical?
4. Are there divisions in your church of the type Paul mentioned? Are there other types of divisions that get in the way of corporate fellowship? Do these divisions affect the way your church worships, whether during the Lord's Supper or otherwise? What can you personally do to help reconcile these divisions?
5. Is your church in danger of discipline? Has it perhaps experienced discipline that no one has recognized yet?
6. What is the difference between discipline and condemnation? What is the purpose of discipline and of condemnation? Can Christians be condemned?
7. As you consider your own heart, do you find that you have a deep love for your brothers and sisters in Christ, or do you think of them more like unknown masses who happen to be on your side of the religious fence? Do you find yourself forgetting that the way you treat other Christians is the way you treat Christ and the church he loves?
8. What are the most important things to keep in mind about proper observance of the Lord's Supper? What are the three important principles of worship that Paul brought out in this section of Scripture? Can you see these same interests

represented in the prior passage on head coverings? Do you see these issues in the next chapters on spiritual gifts? Where else in this letter do you see these issues emphasized?

9. What literary connections do you see between this passage and the material that surrounds it in the letter? What is the connection between the sections? How does this chapter contribute to the argument of the letter as a whole?