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# Exegesis 10: Fellowship, Division and the Lord's Supper

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*Debates about the nature of Christ's presence at the Lord's Table, and who is fit to come, may have caused us to miss the main concern of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 which has to do with fellowship and relationships in the body of Christ.*

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**The problem at Corinth (vv 17-22).** Paul's fundamental concern was with the assemblies of the believers (11:17,18,34 cf 14:26), at which there was to be an 'eating together' (11:20-22) centering in participation in the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. This was meant to be the focus of the church's unity (10:17). Instead, it had become a forum for 'divisions' (11:18,19,21,22). These are not the same divisions as he refers to in 1:10, but sociological divisions between rich and poor. Although divisions are not a good thing in themselves, they are an inevitable aspect of the end times, separating true believers from false. Those who are truly tested and 'approved' (the word in v 19 is related to the word 'to examine' in v 28) are already manifest, in anticipation of the final judgement.

In 11:20,21, Paul emphasises that although the Corinthians were meeting together in assembly (v 20 could be translated 'when you gather together in assembly'), they did not truly eat the *Lord's Supper* — the meal that is uniquely his own. V 21 should be translated: 'For as you eat, each of you goes ahead with *his own supper*'.

In the early church, the Lord's Supper was eaten as, or in connection with, an ordinary meal (Acts 2:46; 20:11). Cultic meals were nearly always part of worship in the ancient world (10:16-22) and the abuse Paul is dealing with related to this meal aspect of the Lord's Supper. The meeting-meal was probably hosted by one of the richer Christians. The dining-room in such homes accommodated a few guests, usually from the host's own class and the majority would have eaten in the entry 'courtyard'. It is likely that the better-off Christians had simply transferred their regular social practice to the Lord's Supper. The rich were eating their own sumptuous private meals not sharing their food with the poor. Presumably the 'meal' of the latter consisted basically of the bread/wine for the remembrance of Christ. While the 'haves' over-indulged, the 'have-nots' went away 'hungry'.

In verse 22, Paul shows his indignation by a series of rhetorical questions. The very meaning of the church and the gospel were being undermined! Those who *must* indulge themselves, he says, should do so in their 'houses' (not 'homes', as NIV). That, however, is not the purpose of the Lord's Supper (see 11:23-26) and, in any case, an impossibility for the poor. The behaviour of these well-off Christians showed a contempt for the church as the community of God's people. They were degrading the Christians who had nothing.

As the people of the new age the old distinctions which divide human beings must disappear among us at the Lord's Table where we especially proclaim our unity in Christ. The distinction between poor and rich may not be too apparent in the way we conduct the Lord's Supper in our churches but what about distinctions between male and female? (See Gal 3:28).

**The institution of the Lord's Supper (vv 23-26).** Paul reminds them of the focus of the Lord's Supper on the death-by-crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus through which he had brought into being this last-age fellowship, that is, the church, his body. They were not acting consistently with this and were abusing *him*.

In v 23, Paul uses a form of words related to the transmission of traditional instruction. Here was one tradition they were *not* keeping (cf v 2). The Lord's Supper derives from the Last Supper that Jesus ate with his disciples, apparently a passover meal. Unlike the cultic meals of the mystery religions (with their timeless myths), the supper the Corinthians were to celebrate was rooted in history, even 'the night (the Lord Jesus) was betrayed'. In Jewish homes the meal began with the family-head breaking/distributing the bread with an appropriate prayer of blessing. At the Passover meal, this took place during the meal following the expression of the reasons for this meal, rooted in the history of salvation (cf Ex 13:8). Jesus re-interpreted this bread in terms of his own death (11:24).

The history of the church has been riddled with controversy over the words: 'this is my body, which is for you'. Given the Jewish background of the Last Supper, Jesus could *only* have meant something like, 'this (bread) *signifies* my body'. The full expression, as recorded by Luke-Paul, interprets Jesus' death in light of Isaiah 53 as on behalf of others — even in the place of those who eat at the Table.

The command, 'do this in remembrance of me', could be translated, 'do this for my memorial'. In OT thought, remembrance is a dynamic matter rather than a mere mental activity. It is not so much that the Lord's Supper is a commemoration of Christ's death as we think about the cross in taking the 'elements'. Rather, the actual *observation* of the Lord's Supper by the true Israel is a memorial of the salvation Jesus Christ has effected in creating one new community in which the old distinctions have disappeared.

The words 'after supper' (11:25) indicate that at the Last Supper the bread and cup symbolising Christ's death were separated by part of the meal itself. The repetition of the words here implies that this was so in the early church. They evidently did not think of them merely as a religious form. Here was active fellowship! The words of institution here recall the ratification of the old covenant (Ex 24:8) and the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the replacement of this covenant (Jer 31:31). The corporate concern is not absent for to partake of the symbol of the new covenant was to *be* the covenant community — the new Israel.

The addition 'whenever you drink it' implies that the Lord's Supper was to be a regularly repeated meal (unlike the annual Passover) in honour of the Lord. The use elsewhere of the word translated 'you proclaim' or 'declare' (v 26) suggests not that the meal itself is a proclamation, but that during the meal there is a verbal declaration of Jesus' death. This, as Paul has indicated, takes place in the two

sayings over the bread and cup. These point to Christ's death in the place of others and his confirmation of the new covenant between God and his people by his blood poured out in death. At the same time, the apostle does not view Christ's death as the end event. The Lord's Supper is to be eaten 'until he comes' (cf Mk 14:25). Christ's death has inaugurated the new age (the end-times) not completed it. They were to be reminded at this meal that they, together with all God's people, were the people of the age to come.

Is the Lord's Supper, as observed in our churches, a true memorial of salvation through Christ's death? In this respect, do we see ourselves as part of a new community of his people? Or do we think of the Table only in terms of the meeting of our own needs? All that Paul records in 11:23-26 speaks of a togetherness in participating in the Lord's meal, over against the self-gratifying individualism present at Corinth. Our church life might benefit if we were to take the bread/wine in conjunction with a fellowship meal.

**The remedy (vv 27-34).** What he now writes is designed to correct the specific error of the well-off going ahead with their own private portions to the detriment of the poor by warning them of the consequences of their failure to understand the true nature of the Supper.

Paul (v 27) picks up the language of vv 23-26 concerning eating/drinking and body/blood. His concern is with those who participate in the meal known as the Lord's Supper 'in an unworthy manner'. Unfortunately, the KJV translated this 'unworthily', and this, together with a narrow view of the 'sacrament' has led many Christians to be inward-looking about the Lord's Table. Some have an unhealthy fear of coming because of such factors as 'sin' in their lives.

However, the 'unworthy manner' Paul speaks of has been described in vv 17-22. It is a question of divisions; of abuse of other believers at the Lord's Table; of missing the point of the meal as a proclamation of salvation through Christ's death, a salvation which constituted Christ's new community where there is 'the unity of the Spirit'. None should be excluded because of sinful weakness or failure to be in a suitably spiritual frame. Should we stay away from the fountain because we are thirsty? This being said, to 'profane' the Lord's meal by such abuse of the brothers is extremely serious. It is (literally) to 'be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord'. It is to be liable for that very death that *should* be proclaimed as salvation at the Lord's Table so the Corinthians were to 'examine' themselves before eating (v 28). This, again, is not meant to lead to unhealthy introspection. It is a question of a right attitude to the Lord's Supper, especially right behaviour to those gathered at the Table (v 29). It is set in contrast to the divine examination which is the outcome of unworthy participation (vv 30-32). However, it does militate against casual participation.

Are you staying away from the Lord's Supper because of personal failure? You have no warrant to: it is a greater sin to stay away. On the other hand, is there too casual an approach to 'communion' in our churches? To participate properly is to be prepared to submit to the implications of the gospel that is there proclaimed.

The phrase 'without recognising (or discerning) the body' (a preferable reading to

'the body of the Lord') probably related to the church as the body of Christ. Although the term 'body' has emerged from the references to Christ's physical body given in death, represented by the bread (vv 23, 24 and 27), in the background are Paul's words in 10:17. Furthermore, the whole passage before us is concerned with the non-discerning of the body (the church) evidenced in the 'haves' abuse of the 'have-nots'. The Lord's Supper is not just any meal. With one loaf and a common cup we proclaim that through the death of Christ we are one body in Christ. It is not permissible to preserve the distinctions applicable in the world at this Table. Here, we must 'recognise' as distinct the one body of Christ in which we are all gifts to each other.

The apostle makes a prophetic pronouncement in v 30. There were evidently many current illnesses among the Corinthian Christians and a number of deaths had occurred. Paul sees that, *in this case*, the whole community has experienced judgement through the actions of some who are creating divisions in the one body of Christ. This insight into the specific situation of the Corinthians is not to be rashly applied in considering the situation of another church. Paul is not saying that sickness among Christians is normally to be viewed as present judgement. However, sins against fellowship are clearly a serious matter! If the Corinthians had been examining themselves in the sense of 'discerning the body' they would not have been experiencing judgement. However, even God's judgement towards believers is full of mercy! It is divine discipline in which a loving God corrects his children precisely so that they will not share the world's condemnation at the final judgement.

By way of direct application, Paul first tells the Corinthians that when they come together to eat they should 'wait for' each other because the well-off Christians were going ahead and eating their privileged portions to the detriment of the poor Christians (vv 21,22). The word translated 'wait for' may in fact have the sense 'receive' or 'welcome'. Secondly, if the wealthy wanted to eat the kind of sumptuous meals they normally ate together they should do this at home (v 34), apart from the Lord's meal. Paul is not forbidding participating in the symbols of Christ's death in connection with a fellowship meal. Rather, he implies that, in community, the well-off should eat what the others do rather than shaming them. (The 'hidden agenda' is that they should share what they have. See Rom 12:13. But his first concern is that the gospel and the unity proclaimed at this meal remain intact.)

Our gathering together at the Lord's Supper is, of course, to be rooted in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. However, we must remember the purpose of the salvation that these achieved and ensure that the Lord's Supper is the focus of the oneness of the new community. We must give proper attention, as we participate and *in the way* the Supper is conducted, to our relationships with each other. We are to receive and welcome one another as beneficiaries of Christ's death, participating anew in the benefit of that death precisely as we do so.

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