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**GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS**

#28

**SURVIVING THE SUPPER?**

**1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34**

**[PART 1]**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Apostle Paul is in the middle of correcting the Corinthians' behavior in their public worship gatherings. He began by addressing the proper roles of men and women in corporate, public worship. Now Paul turns to address other matters which were so grave that he says their abuses actually cause their corporate gatherings to do more harm than good (v17). Specifically, he must correct their abuses of the Lord's Table. The passage which follows (vv17-34) contains some stern warnings for those who follow the Corinthians' example. In fact these warnings have caused some to nearly avoid coming to the Lord's Table altogether. In the history of the church, this Supper came to be feared as much as celebrated. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, believers would pray, fast and meditate throughout the night prior to taking communion. Many churches, before taking communion, would hold special services for the sole purpose of self-examination and confession of sin. That sounds great, but the end result was that many Christians came away from those services feeling so overwhelmed by their sin, they refused to take the very Lord's Supper which they had been preparing to eat. In some churches, it was not uncommon to discover that the church was comprised of a congregation of whom only a few had ever participated in the Lord's Supper. Walter Marshall in his work The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification wrote, *Many account it the safest way wholly to abstain from such a dangerous ordinance, or at least, that one a year is enough to sun so great a hazard...Instead of striving to receive Christ and His salvation therein, they account themselves to have succeeded well if they come off without the sentence of damnation.* To summarize such an understanding of the Lord's Supper; many Christians could not properly celebrate the Supper because they were simply trying to survive the Supper!

But is surviving the Supper really what Paul has in mind in this text? The answer is no! In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul says, *Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?* This Supper is given to bless us with the grace of God. We come to this Table with the expectation of blessing, not the fear of a curse.

Nevertheless, it is possible to abuse the good gift of Communion in such a way that we turn God's blessing into a curse. This is precisely what the Corinthians did and this accounts for the severity of Paul's warnings.

**1. THE ABUSE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (11:17-22)**

The abuse of the Lord's Supper taking place within the Corinthian church revolved around self-centeredness and divisions within the congregation, particularly along socioeconomic lines. Regarding their self-centeredness, Calvin writes, *everyone was so much taken up with his own interest, that he was not prepared to accommodate himself to others.* Divisions naturally result from such self-centeredness (v18). [As an aside, Paul notes that divisions within the Church serve one

good purpose in God's providence; they distinguish true believers from false believers. When division occurs, people must choose sides. True believers will side with the Gospel and the false believers will be seen for what they really are (v19)].

Verses 20-22 get to the heart of the matter. In Corinth, the Lord's Supper would have been celebrated in the context of a larger meal, most likely in a church member's home. These meals were known as agape feasts or love feasts. Most likely, the wealthy members would have larger homes to accommodate a significant number of participants. What seems to have happened is that the wealthy members would come early to the feast and essentially hold a private meal (vv20-21). By the time the poorer members arrived from work, the wealthy members had eaten the food and some were even drunk from the wine (v21). In effect, the rich were destroying the unity of the church by holding these private meals which essentially excluded the poor Christians. At some level, they did not recognize the poor as equal participants in the body of Christ and they *despised the church of God and shame those who have nothing* (v22).

## **2. CORRECTING THE ABUSE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (11:23-26)**

Paul must correct such abuses because the Gospel is at stake. So he returns to the fundamentals of the Supper. How does a Christian properly celebrate the Lord's Supper? We can learn how to observe the Lord's Supper from Paul's emphasis on remembrance, self-examination and correctly judging the body. Today we will focus on what it means to eat and drink in remembrance of Jesus and next week, we will consider self-examination and how we are to correctly discern the body of Christ.

### **A CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF REMEMBRANCE (11:23-26)**

To properly observe the Supper we must thankfully eat bread and drink from the cup as a memorial to the Lord Jesus; specifically a memorial to His broken body and shed blood. The most common way to understand this command is that we are to mentally recall the death of Jesus as we contemplate its benefits. In a very real sense, this is a good understanding of *do this in remembrance of Me [as my memorial]*. But perhaps there is a better, more Christ-centered way we can understand this command. Perhaps there is a way of understanding the blessedness of this Supper in a way that does not depend so much on our mental state and ability to concentrate. When we eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of Jesus, we are calling on God the Father to remember the sacrificial death of Jesus and to again extend the benefits of His death to us, His elect.

Scripture often speaks of God *remembering* His covenants with His people. For example, Genesis 9:9-17 records a covenant between God and Noah. It is here that we get a sense of how God uses visual symbols to express His remembrance of a covenant. 9"*Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you;10and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. 11*"I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth." 12God said, "*This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; 13I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. 14*"It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, 15*and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. 16*"When the bow is in the cloud,

*then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." 17And God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

Again we find a similar concept of God remembering His promises [covenants] to His people in Genesis 19:24-29, *24Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, 25and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. 26But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. 27Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the LORD; 28and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace. 29Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived.* Notice that God remembered Abraham and because of His promise to Abraham, He saved Lot. This helps us understand how communion works; we eat and drink this covenantal meal and in response to our worship, God the Father remembers Jesus, specifically His sacrifice for us and God saves us for Jesus' sake.

We now understand that communion is not simply a time to personally stir up thoughts about Jesus to increase our own resolve to obey Him. Instead, this is our corporate confession that God's saves us as He remembers Jesus' life, death and resurrection. With this understanding, this is truly a proclamation of the Lord's death; it is a showing forth of Jesus' death and we are to do this *until He comes* (vv26-27).

In response to this corporate proclamation, the Lord comes near to His people. The Holy Spirit feeds us and nourishes us with the body and blood of Jesus. In other words, this Supper is a living link with the absent Lord, a channel whereby His presence is ministered to those who partake in faith. As we enjoy Christ's abiding presence, we experience in a unique way all those saving benefits and blessings that Christ's body and blood obtained for us.

Christ is not present at this Table in the bread and cup, but He is here. We worship Him through eating and drinking just as He commanded. Like Paul, we must acknowledge the mystery of Christ's presence among us and by faith; we must eat and drink believing that these faithful, simple acts of obedience bind us together with the living Lord. Through this simple covenant meal, the Holy Spirit lifts us into the heavens and He imparts to us spiritual strength and joy that come from communing with Jesus.

This also helps us understand why Jesus chose bread and wine as memorial symbols of this covenant meal. Bread is a source of strength. In Scripture, bread is often associated with life itself. That is why Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread and Jesus responds by saying that His Father can keep Him alive apart from bread if He so chooses [*man lives not by bread alone*]. Appropriately, when Jesus describes His ability to give eternal life, He calls Himself the bread of life [John 6:35, 40]. The Holy Spirit strengthens us at the Lord's Table by feeding us the Bread of Life. Therefore, bread is a wonderful symbol of what transpires at the Table. Likewise, wine is a fitting symbol of the joy that the Holy Spirit gives. Psalm 104:15 says that wine makes man's heart glad. Wine was commonly associated with the coming of the Messiah and His gracious reign [Isaiah 25:5-7]. Wine has such a potent effect that Scripture repeatedly warns us not to become intoxicated by it [Ephesians 5:18]. In fact, the good effect of wine in gladdening the heart can be compared to the Holy Spirit's work in producing joy in the heart of a believer. This is why the unbeliever can attempt to use wine to escape the misery of his soul and yet the Spirit is the

only lasting solution for man's misery [Ephesians 5:18-21]. Nevertheless, wine is associated with joy. So bread and wine are simple and adequate symbols of what else should be present at the Lord's Table: strength and joy.

### **CONCLUSION**

Every time we eat this covenant meal, we are calling upon God to fulfill His promises purchased for us by Jesus. In this meal, God offers us the all the promises of the New Covenant. The central promises of this Covenant include the forgiveness of sins and the giving of the Holy Spirit to indwell all who believe. This meal preaches forgiveness that comes only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This meal is designed to strengthen our faith in Jesus and His work on our behalf. Additionally, the Spirit is present to fill us with joy as we eat and drink in faith. These are the blessings contained in the cup of blessing (1 Corinthians 10:16). Jesus is present in this gathering and commands us to worship Him through eating and drinking. May the Spirit enable us to eat and drink in faith so that we most powerfully proclaim the Gospel until Jesus returns.