

## **The Celebration**

1 Cor. 11:23-32

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*23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 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." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

*27 Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32 When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.*

Paul writes this corrective letter to the Corinthian church while he is in Ephesus around 55 AD. As with most of Paul's letters, he is addressing a specific issue or issues within this church to get them back on track. The church in Corinth is a rather unique mix of cultures, classes, and occupations. The city of Corinth was located on the isthmus between two major seas and was visited by merchants, military personnel, Roman officials, business people, and sailors. It was a wealthy shipbuilding and industrial center, and also known for its architecture and arts. The original city was destroyed by Rome in 146 BC, but rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 46 BC, and now a thriving focal point city in the Empire. The original converts in Corinth were Jews, but soon gentile believers of various walks of life became a part of this church. This diversity gave way to many attitudes and factions even within the church. Paul, in this letter, is dealing with these divisions and how they effect several areas of church life and worship. His correction is stern, but leaves room for God's grace and forgiveness to restore their relationship with each other and with the Lord.

Let's look at Paul's words found right before our passage ...

## **1 Cor 11:17-22**

***17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!***

In order to understand Paul's strong admonition to this church, we will spend some time reviewing the early celebration of the Lord's Supper (as Paul refers to it here). I want to drift off into a little early church history lesson regarding the celebration of communion in the worship service.

Our western approach to worship gears everything toward the preaching of the Word of God. All other aspects of our worship services are all structured to bring the focus of the service to the "message." However, this was not the case in the early church, which carried through for many centuries. The main focus of the gathering was the celebration of Communion together. Actually, the original believers would gather in the Temple or synagogue for the formal worship time or hearing the Scriptures and prayer, but they would gather in homes to eat together and then celebrate the Lord's Supper. As the church grew and developed, so did their approach to the worship service, but not their focus on communion.

As Christians began to have their own cemeteries (usually in the catacombs), Christian art began to emerge. The first and most common artwork also focused on the celebration of communion (art of bread and wine, the gathering of the twelve at the Last Supper, etc.). In fact, they celebrated communion at the cemeteries. They believed that communion joined both the living and the dead into the Body of Christ.

The early church knew nothing about evangelism, since they came together to celebrate communion. People were won to Christ in the work place, the market place, and homes. Converts were made by the witness of the church members, often by their martyrdom. In fact the word "martyr" originally meant, "witness." Some were won to the Lord by wonders and miraculous signs that were performed by the Holy Spirit through believers. Last week Pastor Jerry spoke about the power to be witnesses for Jesus that was given through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Power to speak about Jesus in this period of history, or even become a martyr for the faith came directly from the Holy Spirit. Some Christians were imprisoned, some were exiled, some were simply merchants or slaves, but all were witnesses for Jesus and the faith by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit of God Who saw to it that the Gospel was spread, a gospel that focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and was celebrated every Sunday by taking communion together.

The earliest worship gatherings were held on Sunday, the resurrection day, to break bread together. The original apostles established this. So the gathering was a time of joy and excitement because Jesus had risen from the dead sealing the promise of God. They ate a meal together, praised God together for the hope promised, prayed, and shared communion together.

#### **Acts 2:42-47**

***42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.***

The Communion celebration did not focus on the dreadful events of Good Friday, but rather, on the victorious event of the resurrection. Communion was the highest act of worship. It was a true celebration, with joy and gratitude to God. They would have a “bring & share” meal together as a church, and after the meal, they would celebrate communion together. Special prayers were offered over the bread and wine. Even after time when the celebration became more symbolic, the tone of joy remained.

By the second century the worship service included:

- Commented reading of Scripture
- Prayers                      - singing of hymns
- Communion proper – beginning with the kiss of peace, then the consecration of the bread and wine
- Testimony about the saving acts of God recounted
- The Holy Spirit's power was then invoked over the elements (God's grace and unifying power)
- Benediction

Only baptized believers were admitted into the service. Today we don't really distinguish who is allowed into our church services, but they were very protective then. If someone acknowledged Jesus as Lord, they would be admitted to the early part of the service, but they were escorted out before the celebration of communion. Unity of the Body was extremely important!

Baptism was the second great event of Christian worship. The earliest believers were baptized when they believed, but as more and more gentiles believed, they were required to be properly trained in the doctrines of Christianity since they came from pagan backgrounds. This training process lasted three years and then they could be baptized. Baptism service was held on Easter Sunday before the regular worship service, so the newly baptized could receive Holy Communion for the first time. They were baptized naked (men and women separated), and given white robes to signify their new life. They were then given water to drink signifying both an inward and outward cleansing. Once baptized, they were full participating members of the church. This meant they could be a part of the communion celebration that was the focus of each week's gathering.

So what was Paul's beef with the Corinthian church? Remember how the unity of the Body was so important to the early church? In fact, the celebration of communion was the recognition of the unity of the Body as the congregation reflected on what Jesus did to unite all believers into His Body, the church.

Remember how the Corinthian church was a diverse mix of people, classes, and cultures? This all played a part in their sin against the body and blood of our Lord. When they came together for the meal or love feasts (as was the practice), the rich or upper class could arrive earlier and bring abundance, while the slaves or lower classes arrived later and hardly brought anything to the feast. Those who arrived early would jump right in and eat and drink leaving little for those who arrived later. So the rich were sinning against the poor. All were united as part of the Body of Christ and equal in God's sight (as we still are today). Therefore, they were sinning against the Body of the Lord whose blood was shed to bring this unity and make all this possible. By not preferring one another and waiting for each other to eat together, they were guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord.

This had both physical and spiritual consequences and might explain the sickness and death they were experiencing as a congregation. The Lord disciplines those He loves, and he will get our attention so that we might not perish as those who are not believers at all. God's mercy shines through, and His grace is available during this time of communion. Holy Communion is a means of God's grace for all who believe. If we approach this sacrament in the right manner or frame of mind and spirit, we can receive the Lord's grace and be renewed in our membership to His Body, the church, which He sacrificed His own life to provide for all participants.

For the Corinthian church, true love for each other in Christ was being neglected during their worship services. For this reason, they were participating in Holy Communion in an unworthy manner. So, how does this relate to us today?

I was driving home on July 4<sup>th</sup> and noticed all the fireworks going up into the sky. Suddenly I realized that all this celebration is taking place for the sake of the fireworks, but how many are really thinking of what it cost in terms of lives and sacrifice for this holiday to come into being in the first place? How many lives were lost and what impact did the Revolutionary War have on us? This country was founded on the results of that war granting us religious and political freedom. Do we consider the bloodshed that paid for our freedom? Do we really think about all this on July 4<sup>th</sup> or do people just use this occasion to light off fireworks and have a party? Do we even consider the actual reason for the celebration?

What about Holy Communion? Do we take part in this sacrament because it's the first Sunday of the month and that's what we're supposed to do? Do we really consider the bloodshed that paid for our freedom? Do we remember that Jesus not only died for our sins but was also raised from the dead in victory and power? Isn't this really a time for celebration like the early church insisted on? What is the Spirit of God speaking to you today as we prepare to celebrate Holy Communion together today? I would like to participate today like the early church – in full recognition of what Jesus did for us so we can *celebrate* together this great sacrament and praise our God for His love and grace that was paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ.