

The Lord's Supper



**Sombre self-INTROSPECTION, or
Christ-centred CELEBRATION?**

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Sombre Self-Introspection, or Christ-Centred Celebration?

The most detailed account of the Lord's Supper, outside the Gospels, is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church (Chapter 11:18-34). Common teachings today about the Lord's Supper tend to revolve around Paul's recount of Jesus' initiation of the Supper (vv. 23-26), and then to focus on the sobering verses that follow it (vv. 27-34):

“Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep...” (vv. 27-30)

The stress is often put on the “**examination**” of oneself and the necessity of moral “**worthiness**” in the participation of the bread and wine, leading to a sombre and painfully *self*-focused time of introspection. This is terribly sad because the Lord's Supper is meant to be just the opposite! *The Lord's Supper is the place of acceptance, where we joyfully focus on the Lord; what He has done for us, and what He is still going to do!*

The Lord's Supper in the Early Church...

First it is important to recapture what the Lord's Supper was in the early church. Too often today it is a symbolic “little” meal consisting of a “wafer and a sip” performed by clergy, which we receive once in a while. *In the early church, the Lord's Supper was a substantial meal; a time of eating and fellowship in which the bread and wine formed a vital part of God's people inviting His Presence, celebrating His grace and all participating in the ministry of His Spirit.*

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the *context of the meal* He enjoyed with His disciples on the night of His betrayal. A common thought amongst ancient people was that sharing a meal in the presence of their god was to enjoy fellowship with it (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17). Certainly the Hebrews had enjoyed the truth of this very principle in celebrating Jehovah's Presence upon them in the Passover meal; a foreshadowing of the Lamb of God. *The early church continued as a meal that which Jesus instituted as a meal.*

Furthermore, the early church not only shared the Lord's Supper as a meal to remember what Jesus had accomplished, but also did so *anticipating His second coming*. **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes”** (1 Corinthians 11:26). With the revelation of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9) – the awesome consummation of Jesus' ultimate victory – the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper as a foretaste of that great event.

In other words, though the Lord's Supper does inspire reflection on the incredible sacrificial love of Jesus' sacrifice, it is more about celebrating Christ's victory than self-introspection. Towards the end of the first century, the Lord's Supper became known as the **“Love Feast”** (Jude 12). It was indeed a feast; a bring-and-share meal in which the bread and wine were central elements for the redeemed to remember their covenant with God, and their covenant with one another. Jesus was not only their Staple-Diet, but their Shared-Life. This is the backdrop for Paul's writing to the church at Corinth.

Paul's counsel to Corinth...

The key to understanding any passage in the Bible is context. This may sound like a superfluous statement, but it is amazing how many people draw conclusions from the verses following Paul's recount of Jesus' instruction (vv. 27-34), but fail to consider the verses preceding them – which, in fact, give us the context:

“Now in giving these instructions I do praise you... For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you... Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating, each one takes his supper ahead of others, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! ... Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.” (vv. 17-22).

Paul, in this passage, was bringing correction to the errors and excesses of the Corinthians' assembly as a church in sharing the Lord's Supper. Two problems existed in the Corinthian church. First of all, there were **“divisions”** among them (v. 17). When they gathered in the Name of the Lord, they gathered in their cliques, the richer believers discriminating against the poorer believers; a common problem in Corinth, a city made up predominantly of slaves with a small class of very wealthy people. The fact that they shared the Lord's Supper – the very symbol of love and unity – yet entertained division, and such clear prejudice at that, was inconceivable to Paul. It was in direct contradiction to the oneness Christ's love makes available.

Secondly, their participation in the Lord's Supper deteriorated into indulgence and excess: rather than their meetings being focused on Jesus and His glorification, many of them ended drunk! There was too much feasting and too little love in their love feasts! Again, this abuse of the Lord's Supper contradicted its very heart. Paul's counsel to the Corinthian church was aimed at correcting these two errors.

An unworthy manner...

Division and drunkenness are obviously completely opposite attitudes and behaviours to the worship experience inspired by the Lord's Supper. When Paul warned the Corinthians to not participate in the Lord's Supper in an “**unworthy manner**” (vv. 27-29), he was not referring at all to a sense of moral worthiness. By “**unworthy manner**” he was referring to the “**divisions**” they held against one another, and the excessive abuse of the wine.

If a person struggles in their assurance of salvation, feeling “unworthy” to come before God, the Lord's Supper is the very place they should run to! Incorrect teachings from this text, focusing on self-introspection, simply add to the pile of guilt and condemnation a person may feel, rather than providing the very acceptance and connection with God the Lord's Supper actually offers!

Celebration and examination...

As we celebrate the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) – celebrating what He has done for us – we also celebrate in anticipation of the victorious Kingdom He will set up at His return (1 Timothy 4:1). In the light of this awesome expectation – Christ's victory on the cross heralding His triumphant return – we are drawn to His majesty and holiness. We cannot celebrate in truth if we do not take the time to reflect on our life in Him, and any shortcomings we have. *We are to examine ourselves in the glory of celebrating Him.*

When we draw near to His beauty and perfection, our hearts long for more of Him. We ask ourselves: “Can the Lord have His way in me?”, “Is there anything in my heart that is displeasing to Him?”, “Do I have anything against a brother?”. However, it must again be stressed, our focus is to be centred on Christ, as we allow Him to refresh, revive and restore us.

After Paul reminded the Corinthian church that the focus of the Lord's Supper was Jesus, His victory on the cross and His triumphant return to come (vv. 24-26), he calls them to a renewed reverence for the Presence of God in their meetings (v. 29) and to embrace a fresh spirit of unity in their fellowship (v. 33).

A devotion to the Lord's Supper...

The early church “**continued steadfastly in,**” among other things, “**the breaking of bread**” (Acts 2:42). The Lord's Supper, or “**breaking bread,**” was a regular practice of the early church, a frequent expression of their attitude of grateful worship. This is an important point. As much as this article aims to restore our understanding of the celebratory feast intended in the Lord's Supper, we also want to recapture the *creative spirit of worship* intended by the practice of it.

The “**breaking of bread**” was without doubt a far more meaningful experience of worship for the early church than we can ever imagine for us today. Having seen Jesus crucified before their own eyes, or having it graphically explained by those who did, the early church broke bread with a great sense of revelation of what Jesus had done for them on the cross, enhanced by the promise of His return still ringing triumphantly in their ears.

It is interesting to note that when Paul wrote his epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians in Asia Minor, he makes no mention of the Lord's Supper; rather, he refers to singing “**psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**” (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), indicative of the means deployed by these churches to worship the Lord. This is not to imply that they did not break bread; only that these Gentile based churches, with limited understanding of the Passover meal and distanced from the crucifixion event by time, also used other means to worship the Lord in their midst*.

In other words, the early church's devotion to the Lord's Supper was more a devotion to an expression of worship than just a devotion to the practice of “**breaking bread**”. So in our desire to recapture both a devotion to the practice and purpose of the Lord's Supper, we should ask: what was its unique power?

*Worship is not a musical experience, although music can certainly aid the worship experience. And the wise use of music can assist in fulfilling the goals intended by the practice of the Lord's Supper. The phrase – “**psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**” – from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, refers to:

- “**Psalms**” – singing out passages from the book of Psalms in the Bible.
- “**Hymns**” – colloquial, modern day songs written during the time of the early church; Jude 24, 25 may be an example. This is not a reference to hymns as we know today; those long-worded songs written in the 16th century. Rather “**hymns**” refers to our modern day praise or worship songs.
- “**Spiritual songs**” – spontaneous “**new songs**” (Psalm 144:9) prompted by the Spirit.

The Power of the Lord's Supper...

The power of the Lord's Supper as a means to **worship** the Lord lies in two things:

(1) The acute awareness of Jesus created by the focus on Him.

We all know how easy it is to sing worship songs about God only for our mind to wander off to the latest pressing issue at our work or in our family. But there is something about the Lord's Supper – with its direct connection to Jesus' extravagant expression of sacrificial love for us – that occupies our thoughts in worship more than anything else. ***The Lord's Supper focuses us intimately and honestly on Jesus, opening our hearts to His voice as we once again surrender to Him.*** And this is true for an individual breaking bread in the privacy of his bedroom or for a community of believers breaking bread together in a home or an auditorium.

There is no more powerful means for a gathering of believers to ***invite and respond to the Presence of the Lord***, as when every heart and mind is collectively focused on **“Jesus Christ and Him crucified”** (1 Corinthians 2:2). It is as we become intimately aware that He is present ***in our midst*** that the spontaneous life and dynamic manifestation of the Spirit freely flows (Matthew 18:20).

(2) The participatory involvement of all, as all eat bread and drink from the cup.

The active nature of participating in the Lord's Supper, as the early church originally enjoyed it, breaks any audience-mentality that hinges on one or two individuals leading the meeting. It is in this participatory setting that the **“each of you”** invitation is extended (1 Corinthians 14:26); where each person feels the liberty and security to contribute as led by the Spirit. We must not miss the importance of this point. The power of the Lord's Supper facilitated the priesthood of all believers, and we must not allow anything of form and ritual to ever rob us of this treasure.

To have a “worship team” lead “worship” has its place in the larger celebration meeting where the audience enjoys the power of corporate worship as gifted musicians and vocalists use their gifts to raise the roof! These times are truly blessed experiences as we touch God, but they should be the “cherry-on-the-top” meeting, not the staple diet. Too many large-scale celebration “praise & worship” times teach people to be increasingly dependent on an audience-bound form of worship. A more regular practice of worship, facilitated best within home church life, should be creative expressions of worship that encourage all to participate led by the Spirit.

Other means of worship... (suggestions)

- Enjoy the Lord's Supper as a substantial meal together, opening the meal time by breaking bread and inviting the Lord's Presence. Trust to entertain His Presence throughout the meal time, looking out for moments when God wants to speak or act in His marvellous ways. Close the meal with sharing the cup together, and intercessory prayer.
- Share the Lord's Supper in a more intimate, focused time in which, through the breaking of bread and drinking of the cup, the group invites His Presence to minister in their midst.
- Read a psalm together, taking the time to wait on the Lord, praying back to God revelations received from the psalm read.
- Use a worship tape or CD wisely, encouraging people to either snuggle up intimately with God or to respond actively to the music played. In a home church setting with less than fifteen people, trying to have a mini-worship celebration in the lounge rarely ever works. However, encouraging personal responses and postures allows the freedom intended. Providing song words help people sing along if they want to. Others may prefer to mime or hum, while still others may rather allow the words to minister to them. Liberty is the key; personal participation and expression is the goal.
- Ask a musician in the group to play from time to time. If he/she is asked every meeting, it quickly becomes form and misses the dynamic point we seek. If he/she plays two or three songs, not seeking to run through the "song list," it can encourage others to interrupt with expressions of praise or prayers...and then allow the Lord to speak prophetically as He wills.
- If a group has a few confident singers, who can start in the right key, and who know how to hear the Lord, this can be a tremendous blessing. The guiding principle though is to sing songs that are simple and easily remembered by the others; unless, of course, the singer feels led to sing to or on behalf of the group.
- Encourage the group to write letters to the Lord, perhaps reading out their love-letter at some point. Take the time as a group to join in the words of love and praise to God. Encourage the group to then write what God may say in response.

Reviving the Lord's Supper...

Having urged a pursuit of alternative expressions of worship that capture the power of the Lord's Supper, we once again plead for the rediscovery of the Lord's Supper itself as a means of experiencing His Presence in our midst. Nothing is more powerful than sharing the Lord's Supper in...

- Planting a new church on the mission field.
- Birthing a new home church.
- Seasons of fresh repentance and surrender to the Lord.
- Times when there may be conflicts developing within a community.
- Seeking a miraculous breakthrough from God.
- Trusting for fresh release of the prophetic and other gifts of the Spirit.

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; *do this in remembrance of Me.*’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. *This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.*’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, *you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

**This article is part of a series entitled:
Worship the Father Seeks.**

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