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The Lord's Table, the Lord's People: 1 Cor 11:17-34*

TIM KELLEY

I am compelled to begin by telling you how deeply indebted I am to this University—a point I need not stress since three of our children are presently enrolled! The truth is, though, that Pepperdine University has made that possible. Though our children will have trouble seeing light at the end of the tunnel, the financial debts will soon enough be gone. There is a more joyous debt that cannot be repaid.

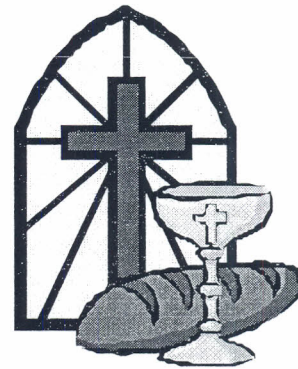
In God's mysterious way, debts often come from the very things in life we view as unfortunate and at times even tragic. Above all, there stands the cross where an innocent man was tortured to death. As a result, we now live with an incalculable, glorious debt we call grace. Think also how much poorer our New Testaments might be if Paul had never been thrown in prison. If that unknown writer had been able to come in person to deliver his powerful "word of exhortation" to his beloved church, we might not have Hebrews. Then there are the Corinthians! How much we would lose if they hadn't had so much trouble living out the implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified. These texts are ours because these Christians were divided, sexually immoral, suing each other, strutting their spiritual gifts like peacocks, denying the bodily resurrection, and so abusing the Lord's Supper that Paul concludes that it wasn't the Lord's Supper at all. Strange debts we owe to our Corinthian forebears in the faith!

Their abuse of the Lord's Supper has given us our earliest and one of our most beloved accounts of the Last Supper as well as our most important text speaking of the meaning and purpose of the supper.

The sad truth is that as indebted as we are for this text, a text designed to bring the church together around the Lord's Table, it has itself been used in a seemingly endless list of divisive arguments about the Lord's Supper. In addition to the weightier issue of how the Lord is present in the bread and wine, Christians have fought over:

- how often the church should celebrate the supper
- whether the bread should be leavened or unleavened
- whether we should serve wine or grape juice
- whether we can partake of the supper on a day other than "the first day of the week"
- whether we can use multiple cups or just one ... or perhaps two
- whether we can take the supper on the ground floor or only in an "upper room"
- whether the emblems must be on a cloth or covered by a cloth

While some of these seem laughable, the division of the church is not funny, and you will recognize some of these divisive issues as a sad part of our own heritage.



As we look over our history in the Restoration movement and see divisions springing up around the Lord's Table, the irony is that at the foundation of the Restoration movement the Lord's Supper or "communion" played a crucial role. Read the words of Barton Stone as he recalls the events leading up to the Caneridge revival, which began the movement referred to as the Stone wing of the Restoration movement:

In the spring of 1801, the Lord visited his people in the north of Kentucky. In Fleming, and in Concord, one of my congregations, the same strange and mighty works were seen and experienced. On the fourth Lord's day in May, we had an appointment for **a communion** at Concord. Various causes collected an unusual multitude of people together at this time—between five and six thousands, of various sects, and many preachers. The house could not contain them, and we repaired to the woods. Worship commenced on Friday, and continued without intermission day and night, for four or five days. From this meeting, the flame spread all around, and increased till the ever-memorable meeting at Caneridge, in August following.

Eight years later, twenty-one year old Alexander Campbell was in Glasgow, Scotland and separated from his father, Thomas, by the Atlantic Ocean. In the second week of May, the Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church held its semi-annual communion service. At this moment in his life, Campbell was torn. His loyalty to the church of his family pulled strongly on him simply to take this communion as always. But their closed communion highlighted the restrictive and exclusive practices of this fellowship. Only the right people could take of the bread and wine. Since his family was from Ireland, not Scotland, the church needed to be satisfied that the Campbells were among the elect and worthy to partake. They were examined to see if they were fit. Young Alexander was deemed fit and given a lead token to prove his worthiness and to gain admittance. But Campbell had seen and was drawn toward a broader vision of the church and a very different vision of communion in all that it meant. One by one, as lone supplicants before God, each member walked to a table where the communion was served. One by one they showed their tokens and one by one they were served the bread and wine in a private experience before God. But Campbell was also aware of the excluded, those deemed unworthy, who were kept from the table. Could he participate in a service where so many who confessed the same Lord and Savior were barred from the fellowship of the saints and the Table of the Lord? Campbell waited, hoping to resolve the conflict before walking to the table. The conflict lingered unresolved, and as the last came to the table, he had no more time to wrestle with the issue; the moment was upon him. Campbell's biographer, Robert Richardson, describes the moment:

...he threw his token upon the plate handed round, and when the elements were passed along the table, declined to partake with the rest. It was at this moment that the struggle in his mind was completed, and the ring of the token, falling upon the plate, announced the instant at which he renounced Presbyterianism for ever—the leaden voucher becoming thus a token not of communion but of separation.

But it was more than the renouncing of Presbyterianism, it was the embracing of a vision of a wider Christian fellowship around the table of Jesus that Campbell embraced in that moment, and lived the rest of his life to pursue. So Stone and Campbell, the two towering names of the Restoration movement, begin their commitments to call people to faith and to be one body in the context of the Lord's Supper.

So, whether on the fourth week of May in 1801, the second week of May in 1809, or the first week of May in 2001, we come to the Table and to this text and ask what it means to be at the Table of the Lord. Just as those moments with Stone and Campbell that gave rise to the Restoration movement of which we are heirs must be understood in their historical context, so too, the text before us must be understood in its context. Plucked from that context, we will miss the reason Paul wrote these words and miss its intended meaning for us. Here, we really must ask what it meant before we can ask what it means.

WHAT IT MEANT—WHY DOES PAUL WRITE ABOUT THE LORD'S SUPPER?

We certainly come to this text with our own images of the Lord's Supper. They are not the images of the Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church of 1809. Our Lord's Supper images are usually of an auditorium, pews, a table with the words "Do This in Remembrance of Me," men in suits, a plate with matzos, and small cups with grape juice. We also have our *potluck* images. These images are usually of a fellowship hall, long tables filled with food, a long line of hungry folks, and of everyone eventually eating and hoping for a piece of their favorite home-baked pecan pie. We cannot conceive of combining those images. Combining the quiet and solemnity of the auditorium with the bustle and noise of the fellowship hall would be like mixing oil and water. What then is Paul describing, for it is clear he is describing something very different from our experiences?

We need to begin the answer by understanding that the church in Corinth to whom Paul wrote—like all of the churches in the New Testament—did not have a separate building. Instead, they met in a home—most likely the home of a wealthy member. While most of the members were not wealthy and lived in tenement apartments (with the poorest living on the upper stories), some were wealthy and likely lived in spacious villas. It is most likely in one of these villas where the congregation would meet and where they would almost have to meet when the whole church assembled.

There are two rooms in these villas that are important for us to see. The first is the *atrium*, which is the large open room of the villa. Above was a hole in the roof to catch and use rain water and below was a fountain. Around the fountain were often statues of ancestors or gods. Depending upon its size, this room could hold between 30 and 50 people. The second room is the dining room (*triclinium*). It was a room that was typically 18 feet by 18 feet with a low table and couches on three sides. Here, typically about 9 and no more than 12 people could recline and eat.

It is also important that we understand that the Greco-Roman world in which these Christians lived was strongly stratified—your friends were those of your same class. Dealings across class lines were usually seen as dealings between patrons and clients, not friends. In the Roman culture, inequity at meals was well known. A poet named Martial wrote a stinging epigram denouncing such inequality:

So I am asked to dinner...why is the same dinner not served to me as to you?
 You take oysters fattened in the Lucrine Lake,
 I suck a mussel through a hole in the shell;
 You get mushrooms; I take hog funguses...
 Golden with fat, a turtledove gorges you with its bloated rump;
 There is set before me a magpie that has died in its cage!
 Why do I dine without you although, Ponticus, I am dining with you?

(Translation: Ponticus, why do you get filet mignon and I get road kill?)

These were the cultural values that the Corinthians brought to the supper, where the Lord's Supper was given in the context of a shared meal.

A few of the wealthy members, including the "patron" of the meal, were likely in the small dining room while the poorer members were in the atrium. The wealthy, who had leisure, brought their *private* meals and ate them either before the poorer members could arrive, or simply ate their *private* meals without sharing with those in the atrium. While this form of separating first class from coach was culturally acceptable, it was an unacceptable Christian practice. It was completely unacceptable in light of the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

What Paul condemns here is the eating of *private* meals in the assembly where there is to be the genuine sharing of *koinōnia*. Paul does not condemn them for having a meal, in the context of which the Lord's Supper was served, for the church did that for many years. What he condemns them for is *not sharing* the meal. The church is not where there are to be patrons and clients, upper and lower classes, administration

and faculty and staff. Rather, it is where there is neither “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” but one *diverse* and *united* body—Christ’s body.

It is in this setting that Paul recalls the tradition he heard from the Lord and passed on wherever the church met to celebrate the supper. They were to remember Jesus. The meal was itself a proclamation of the death of Jesus and one that looked forward to his coming. They could not make that proclamation while divided by rank. Instead, they were to remember the one who said, “. . . When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:12 –13). To ignore the poor was to sin against “the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27).

It is in this context that Paul calls them to “discern the body.” Here “the body” is both the crucified body of Jesus and the church as his living body, for they are finally inseparable. To treat the church with disdain is to do so to the Lord of the church. Paul’s answer was not that they should remove the supper from the context of a *shared* meal but rather from a *private* meal. Paul is speaking directly to the dining room group when he says, “Don’t you have your own homes?” for the poor didn’t own their own homes. It is the *extreme individualism* that certain members brought to the *communion* that had to change.

WHAT IT MEANS

The early church did not *fix* the problem by disconnecting the Lord’s Supper from a *shared* meal, for the shared meal was never the problem. The church of the fourth century did not *fix* the problem when they moved from houses to basilicas and brought into those former Roman courthouses all the cultural baggage of the Empire.

In our own history, we did not *fix* the problem when in years past African American brothers and sisters were first forced into the balconies and then out to their own churches. We do not *fix* the problem today when our fellowship is so divided by race and culture that it is hard to call us one church. I understand the difficulties of bringing culturally diverse people together but that is exactly what the Lord’s Supper calls us to do. Can we not at least weep about these divisions today? Will we be content to live as though separation by race, language, social status, and gender is simply the way it must be? If we come to the Lord’s Table content that we are not one church, we have not heard this text.

We do not *fix* the problem when we flee the impoverished inner cities or rural neighborhoods and rush to the suburbs where we are conveniently middle class.

The answer for us is not in whether or not a *full* meal is shared as part of the Lord’s Supper. It is whether we share ourselves as we take the Lord’s Supper. It is to ask ourselves whether the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind truly are welcomed to the table. It is to see our life as a church through the eyes of those on the outside. It is to see our stairs and steps through the eyes of the disabled. It is to see our unspoken dress codes through the eyes of the poor. It is to welcome to the *Table of Remembrance* those we remember Jesus welcomed.

Not unlike the Corinthians, we live in an age of radical individualism and consumerism where the most important criterion for the church shopper is “finding a church that meets my needs.” Too often the Lord’s Supper has been the centerpiece of such *individual piety*. We tell ourselves to remove all else but the crucified body of Jesus from our minds and we close ourselves into our private worlds. In those self-created isolation booths it is hard for the words of this text to break through. This is *communion* and we must see beyond the crucified body of Jesus to his living body sitting around us.

**This is much more,
however, than how we take
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and as the body of Christ.**

We are as much creatures of our architecture as were the earliest Christians meeting in houses. Our theater style auditoriums promote individualism as much as the *tricliniums* and *atriums* promoted class distinctions. But the Spirit of God must lead us, not architecture or local custom. This text calls upon us to share the supper. We can begin by examining ourselves in light of the church we are to discern. With whom can I share the supper today? Who is lonely and isolated? Who is hurting? With whom do I need to reconcile? These are questions *I* need to ask. Do I really share the supper?

Can we consider breaking the silence of the supper to tell the person with whom we are sharing that supper that we love them? Can we, at least once and awhile, stand and face each other as we share the supper? Can we pass on the words of Jesus as we pass the supper to each other? Perhaps we can occasionally say to one another, "Here is the bread that Jesus said was his body, let us remember him as we take it together." Then say to each other, "Here is the cup that Jesus said was the new covenant in his blood." Here I would say that we would do well to let the words of Jesus stand as they were spoken, with all of their mystery and ambiguity. While I certainly would not add that the bread and wine become the literal, physical body and blood of Jesus, neither would I add that they represent his body and blood, for we are tempted to hear that as "they *merely* represent his body and blood." This is a mystery that should be left undefined and uncontrolled, only embraced and believed.

This is much more, however, than how we take the Lord's Supper. It is how we live as the people of God and as the body of Christ. If we embrace each other as a living church, we will find ways to share the Supper of the Lord and proclaim his death until he comes.

How do we live with this strange debt we owe to our Corinthian forebears? We learn from their struggle to be a faithful church. We do them the honor of not seeing ourselves as radically different from them, for we are not. And we honor them by listening to this corrective text as though Paul wrote it for us. Paul has said much more in this text than I can address. But I am convinced that he has said this much: may our memory of the Savior's love experienced in the supper call us to be the one body of Christ.

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NOTES

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