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ORDINANCES:

Lord's Supper

Introduction:

The Lord's Supper for some is a mysterious sacrament of the church. For others, it is an ordinance which Christ gave the church as a remembrance of His death on the cross. As one considers both extremes and those views which lie in between, he needs only to study the various passages which speak about this event to come to a proper understanding of it.

In each of the gospels, the last Passover that Jesus spent with His disciples is recorded (Mat. 26:19-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38; John 13:1-17:26). However it is only in the synoptic gospels that the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup is recorded (Mat. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20). This was the occasion when the Lord's Supper was established. These accounts give the reader an understanding as to why Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. He did it as a remembrance of His death for the forgiveness of sins. His death was the beginning of the new covenant which was made to the nation of Israel; it finding its complete fulfillment in the millennial kingdom (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:6-13; 9:15; 12:22-24). Yet it is in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 where one comes to better understand the meaning of this ordinance. Therefore 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 will be the main focus of this article.



Discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34:

The book of 1 Corinthians is a book of correction, and in this portion of the book Paul continually corrected his readers. In the case of the Lord's Supper, Paul began by telling them that when they came together for their love feasts, at which time they shared communion, they did so in a manner which was unbecoming for the occasion (vs. 17). He could not praise such behavior (vs. 17) because when they came together there was division (vs. 18) and ungodly behavior (vss. 21-22) among them. Their ungodly behavior consisted of some of the church members acting selfishly, eating too much of the food and not leaving any for others; who as a result went hungry (vs. 21). Some were even drinking wine to excess and getting drunk (vs. 21). In so doing, Paul said that those who were guilty of such excesses were "shaming" the poor of the church (vs. 22). They were humiliating them by this behavior be-

cause they were not considering and discerning the other believers' needs. This was very tragic and hypocritical as they had come together to remember an act of absolute selflessness that Jesus had done for mankind; and yet, they were doing it in an incredibly selfish manner. They were not concerned for their brothers and sisters in Christ as Jesus had been for them. This is why Paul ends the verse with the statement that he will not praise them, because what they were doing was so very wrong.

Following his rebuke, Paul then reminded the Corinthians of the words of Jesus which He spoke to His disciples at His last Passover with them (vss. 23-25). These same words Jesus had personally spoken to Paul as well, and Paul on a previous occasion had told them to the Corinthians (vs. 23). It is then that Paul stated in verse 26 that as often as this ordinance was practiced, the church will be proclaiming Christ's death until He comes (at the rapture of the church, John 14:1-3). Therefore this is a practice for the church which proclaims the most significant event in all of history.

Next, Paul warned them about their conduct in association with the Lord's Supper. He told them that if they participated in it in an unworthy manner, they "shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." In other words, they will be liable or answerable ("guilty") for their actions, that of showing disrespect to Christ and for His sacrifice on the cross by their unacceptable treatment of fellow believers during love feasts. Paul continues this argument in verse 29: "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly." Whereas in verse 27 he talks about the guilt of the person who does this, in verse 29 Paul talks about the judgment a person brings upon himself for this action. Therefore, in the context of these verses, it is clear that the "body" Paul is referring to in verse 29 is the same one spoken of in verse 27 -- Christ's own body which He gave for sin (1 Pet. 3:18). So according to verse 29, when a person does not "judge" or "discern" (NIV) Christ's sacrifice rightly -- not carefully evaluating its significance -- this person brings judgment to himself.

So that the Corinthians would not bring judgment upon themselves, Paul admonishes them in verse 28: "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Paul told his readers to examine themselves first before partaking of the communion elements. In doing this, they would not again be guilty of repeating their previous actions toward their fellow believers in Christ (cf. vss. 18-21). Therefore since some of the Corinthians had not properly examined themselves or properly discerned the body and blood of Christ, some were weak, sick, or had died (vs. 30) because they had been judged by God (vs. 32). So when believers do "judge" themselves rightly (considering their behavior and acting appropriately; this being the end result of self-examination), Paul said that they will not be judged (vs. 31). Paul then concluded this section in verses 33 and 34 with the proper way in which believers are to care for their fellow believers in Christ at the love feasts. Simply, they were to show them love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:5) and put them first, just as Christ did for mankind (cf. Php. 2:3-4).

Application of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34:

This principle does not only apply to the communion service, but to all church life. If believers are not properly taking others into consideration, God will deal with

them appropriately. Since many churches do not practice love feasts, the sin that Paul discussed would not occur. It could be possible though if during a communion service believers were disrespectful to one another and/or to the gathering of believers as a whole, or disrespectful in regards to the ordinance itself, that the sin Paul discussed would occur. But can this principle be applied to church dinners or picnics? Possibly, though if the Lord's Supper is not a part of these functions, I do not believe that the discipline of God would be as severe. In the love feasts, Christ's death was proclaimed (vss. 26-27), and it was the central and main focus of the event. That would not be the case during a church pot luck or picnic. (See the article titled, "Lord's Supper: Related Issues" in the Appendix).

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:



1. How is your church characterized -- as a church of unity and peace, or one of disunity and division?
2. If your church is one of disunity and division as was the Corinthian church, what might be the cause of this condition within your church?
3. What was the main problem that took place in the Corinthian love feasts that Paul had to correct?
4. Since most churches do not practice love feasts today, what might be a similar offense that could bring God's discipline upon a believer in the communion service?
5. When should a new believer be allowed to partake of the communion service? Please explain your answer with Scripture.
6. Should any believer be allowed to partake of communion, or just people from your church? If only people from your church, then please explain using Scripture.
7. What should be the guideline for determining at what age a person is allowed to partake of communion? Please explain using Scripture.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES AND CHURCH PLANTERS:

1. Below write a policy on the Lord's Supper which your church will follow. In this policy, incorporate the issues raised in application questions 5, 6 and 7 above. Also state in this policy other issues which you believe are important to the Lord's Supper, always validating what you say with the Word of God.
2. What explanation will you give to your congregation as to why they should examine themselves before receiving communion? Please keep in mind the reason Paul gave the Corinthians for why they should examine themselves. Be sure that your explanation is accurate according to Scripture.