

The Imperfect Church – 21  
The Remembering Church  
1 Corinthians 11:17-34

### Introduction

There's a wonderful story by Isak Dinesen called *Babette's Feast*, about a strict, dour, fundamentalist community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette's dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her austere employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because, they say, Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village. At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they relent, "As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it. Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.

Finally, the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine: *Veuve Cliquot 1860*, the finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, love one another?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

TS - Can you hear the Gospel whisper? I know of another who gave his all to make us a loving community through the gift of a meal. That is the heart of this next section in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 - <sup>17</sup> But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. <sup>18</sup> First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup> But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized!

<sup>20</sup> When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. <sup>21</sup> For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. <sup>22</sup> What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!

<sup>23</sup> For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread <sup>24</sup> and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it." <sup>26</sup> For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

<sup>27</sup> So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. <sup>29</sup> For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

<sup>31</sup> But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way. <sup>32</sup> Yet when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

<sup>33</sup> So, my dear brothers and sisters, when you gather for the Lord's Supper, wait for each other. <sup>34</sup> If you are really hungry, eat at home so you won't bring judgment upon yourselves when you meet together. I'll give you instructions about the other matters after I arrive.

3 sections here that teach us what we need to know:

1. THE SITUATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (V. 17-22)
2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (V. 23-26)
3. THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (V. 27-34)

## 1. THE SITUATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

The first century church participated in the Lord's Supper/Communion quite differently than we do today. The time of remembrance, focusing on the sacrifice of Jesus with bread and wine, was done at the end of a large communal meal (think potluck dinner). After all the feasting and drinking were finished, they would take the bread and wine and celebrate what we know of today as Communion.

Though Paul praised them in 11:2, he cannot praise them here for their practices. When they come together as the Church, they aren't actually helping, they are harming others with the way they do communion. What were they doing that was so bad? Their divisiveness is rearing its ugly head once again. This is a church that has divided over pretty much everything, as we've seen throughout the letter. William Barclay sums up their harmful practices this way: "The rich did not share their food but ate it in little exclusive groups by themselves, hurrying through it in case they had to share, while the poor had next to nothing. The result was that the meal at which the social differences between members of the church should have been obliterated only succeeded in aggravating these same differences. Unhesitatingly and unsparingly, Paul rebukes this."<sup>1</sup>

Remember, this church met in homes, not in a church building like this one. The wealthy, who don't have to adhere to strict work schedules like others, arrive earlier than others, bringing the choicest of food and wine. The poor, and the slaves who had no control over their schedule, arrive after work or later. Since they don't have much, they don't bring much to the dinner, if they bring anything at all. Instead of the wealthy waiting and sharing, they greedily and gluttonously devour up their own food and wine. By the time the poor arrive, the food is gone and the wealthy are drunk. Church, a place where Jesus invites all people to come to him equally, has highlighted the social structures, not removed them.

Barclay continues: "The early Church was the one place in all the ancient world where the barriers were down. That world was very rigidly divided: there were the free men and the slaves; there were the Greeks and the barbarians—the people who did not speak Greek; there were the Jews and the Gentiles; there were the Roman citizens and those considered to be outside the law; there were the cultured and the ignorant. The Church was the one place where all groups could and did come together...A church where

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 118.

social and class distinctions exist is no true church at all. A real church is a body of men and women united to each other because all are united to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

These practices are so un-Christian that Paul tells them that if they are going to act this way, just stay home. Eat your fill and drink to your hearts content...at home, not at Church. Because by dividing up like this, they are disgracing God's Church (he owns it, not them), and humiliating the poor. Instead of the Church being a place where the poor are equally valued and equally helped, and the wealthy show generosity and compassion, it is nothing more than any other gathering of people...they are no different from the world around them. And with that, Paul continues beating that same drum about the purity of the Church and how the Church is to be different than the world. Paul is so bothered by their practices, he tells them that whatever it is they are doing, it is not the Lord's Supper, because it does not reflect the Lord or acknowledge him at all.

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

David Garland writes, "Paul views these divisions as nullifying the very purpose for gathering together for worship in the name of Christ. It contradicts what the Lord's Supper proclaims as the foundation of the church: Christ's sacrificial giving of his life for others."<sup>3</sup>

This section of the text is one of the most well-known texts in the entire NT. It is regularly read at communion time to remind us what we are about to do. Paul lays it out here to remind the Corinthians, and us today, of what it is we are actually doing when we take communion together. This bread isn't just any bread...it is a reminder of Christ's body sacrificed on the cross. This juice isn't just any juice...it is a reminder of Christ's blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Though there is nothing inherently special about the bread and juice themselves (as some faith groups claim), they point us to the most important truth in the history of the world: God loves sinners and Jesus has died for us. This is what we are to remember, to call to mind every time we gather. This refocuses us on what is to be the centerpiece of our lives and of the Church: Jesus Christ and him crucified, the very thing Paul said was the content of his preaching in chapter 2.

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 120.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 537.

Our memory is a strange tool, isn't it? We have the capacity to remember song lyrics from decades ago (I know every word to Paradise by the Dashboard Light by Meatloaf). We remember dance moves without having practiced them (watch people at a wedding reception do the Electric Slide for the first time since they were in high school). Yet, at times, we forget the most important things...names, important dates, sometimes even why we walked into a room. God knows this about us. We tend to be forgetful people. Therefore, God has instituted this regular practice of the Lord's Supper to ensure we keep him at the forefront.

v. 26 - **26 For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.**

Though communion is about remembering, it is also more than that. We are "announcing" the Lord's death. That word for 'announcing' is one of the Greek words for 'preaching.' It means 'to proclaim or herald.' The Lord has given to the Church two sacraments, two great dramas, that both communicate the glorious truths of the Gospel. The first is baptism: according to Romans 6, it is a picture of uniting with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection. The second is communion. We are proclaiming the truth and reality of Jesus' sacrificial death for the purpose of saving sinners like us. Friends, the greatest sermon in the world is preached every single Sunday in this room. Not by me, but by you. Not from this pulpit, but from every chair occupied by a Christian.

And this sermon we all preach together is a sermon of Hope. We proclaim the Lord's death "until he comes again." Our communion sermon is based on the historical reality of Jesus' death and resurrection, and looks forward to his return. We are people who are defined and driven by Hope, and we preach about that every single time we gather together.

### **3. THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER**

Since that is what Communion is all about, Paul's next sentence makes perfect sense: v. 27 - **27 So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.**

If the Church gets communion wrong, if you get it wrong, it is a sin against the very Lord who gave his life for you. What could be worse than dishonoring the sacrifice of Jesus? But the key issue is this: how would one go about doing that? What does taking communion "unworthily" look like?

Typically, what we do to ensure we take communion in a worthy manner is have a time of serious introspection beforehand. This is one of the reasons we like to put communion after the sermon. We've had a long introduction into it. Hopefully we've had ample time to look at the condition of our souls. Then when we lead right into communion, typically it is quiet, with a little background music to help set the serious mood. Most people will have their eyes closed, many are praying, others are doing a spiritual inventory. These are all helpful practices.

Bob Russell of Southeast Christian Church once said that there were four situations when you shouldn't take communion, because it would be done in an unworthy manner. Let me run through those very quickly. First of all, you shouldn't partake in communion if you haven't accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and been baptized into His name. Communion is a time for believers to remember. Communion has no meaning or significance for you if you haven't put your trust in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we should let the communion tray pass by without participating if we have sin on our calendar. Let me explain that. If you are sitting in church on a Sunday and have a sin planned for the week, don't take communion. If you're sitting in Sunday service, and you're going to pad your expense account on Monday, or if you know you're going to lie about something on Wednesday, don't partake in communion. If you're sitting here on Sunday and you know that sometime during the week you're going to commit sexual immorality, don't take communion. If you're not going to bother to obey Christ, then don't salute Him as He goes by. Honoring Christ now in communion does not create freedom to dishonor him later. However, that's not to say that you have to be perfect to be able to take communion. We all gather around the table guilty of sin. One of the purposes of communion is to remind us of our sin and how much we need the body and blood of Jesus to clean us up.

Thirdly, we should let communion pass by if there is someone we haven't forgiven. When we take communion, as Paul says, we are not only declaring our fellowship with God, but our fellowship with each other. We should not share in the Lord's Supper with other believers if we have quarrels or outstanding disagreements with them. This is the same thing Jesus taught in Matthew 6, where He said that if anyone was at the altar ready to give a sacrifice, but there remembered that he had a quarrel with his brother, he needed to leave his sacrifice there and go be reconciled to his brother before he ever thought of leaving a sacrifice to the Father. If we want to be right vertically with God, we need to be right horizontally with fellow believers.

Finally, we should not take communion if we are completely distracted or agitated. Though it might be hard for us to control every thought that we have during communion, we must try to focus on the significance of the supper as we share in the emblems together.

Again, all those are helpful practices. They line up with what Paul says in v. 28 that to ensure we don't take communion unworthily, we should "examine" ourselves. However, that isn't really what Paul is talking about here. He is not calling on us to be reminded of our personal faith journey and personal worthiness before we take communion. This is a corporate command. Remember, the issue they are dealing with in Corinth is an ungodly practice of shaming and harming other believers. Paul clarifies in v. 29 - **29 For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself.**

If you take communion without honoring "the body of Christ," a clear description of the Church, you are inviting God's judgment. So when he says to examine yourself to ensure you are not taking communion unworthily, he isn't saying for you to close your eyes and focus on your personal sin and personal walk with Jesus. He is saying that you need to acknowledge the others around you, that you are in this faith thing together, and that they are to be helped, not harmed.

When he says we are to "honor" the body of Christ, that word literally translates as "discern or separate." So when we take communion we are to discern the Church, acknowledge our separateness from the world. Because that is, once again, his primary concern. The Church is to be the Church, God's called-out ones. When they were coming together (a phrase he uses 5x in v. 17,18,20,33,34) they were separating from the world, but then they were separating from one another. They were coming together as the Church, but they weren't "together" as the Church. And for them, it had very real consequences: sickness and even death. The rich were gluttons with rich food and wine, while the poor were left starving. Both of those practices were taking their toll and making people sick and even taking their life. Unity matters.

David Garland continues, "To eat the Lord's Supper worthily, one must recognize that all Christians, rich and poor, are joined together in Christ, share equally in his blessings, and should be treated worthily."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 551.

So what is the proposed solution? V. 33 – wait for each other. Don't hurry and eat up all your food and drink up all your wine. Wait for everyone else. This word "wait" has the implication of "welcome" to it. So the solution isn't just a matter of logistics, but of love. Wait for the others, those who are different, those who are in need, those who cannot personally benefit you, and welcome them. You are a family. These are all your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Here is my challenge to you today as we get ready to participate in the Lord's Supper together: instead of closing your eyes right before or during communion, take the bread and juice with your eyes open. Look around the room and "see" your brothers and sisters in Christ. In uniting with Jesus in baptism, you unite with them in communion. Maybe it'll be a bit awkward if you lock eyes with someone else...embrace that. Acknowledge them. Maybe pray for them. Invite them to lunch or over to your house for coffee sometime. The emphasis here is not only on our own sin and personal Savior. But on the Church and our Lord.

In his book *Doubting*, author Alister McGrath writes: An aunt of mine died some time ago, having lived to be 80 or so. She had never married. During the course of clearing out her possessions, we came across a battered old photograph of a young man. My aunt had, it turned out, fallen hopelessly in love as a young girl. It had ended tragically. She never loved anyone else and kept a photograph of the man she had loved for the remainder of her life.

Why? Partly to remind herself that she had once been loved by someone. As she had grown old, she knew that she would have difficulty believing that, at one point in her life, she really had meant something to someone—that someone had once cared for her and regarded her as his everything. It could all have seemed a dream, an illusion, something she had invented in her old age to console her in her declining years—except that the photograph gave the lie to that. It reminded her that it had not been invented; she really loved someone once and was loved in return. The photograph was her sole link to a world in which she had been valued.

"The communion bread and wine are like that photograph. They reassure us that something that seems too good to be true—something that we might even be suspected of having invented—really did happen."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alister McGrath, *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith* (IVP, 2006).