

The Body Broken

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Imagine you're part of a South Pole expedition. Your team's especially chosen so it has one member from each continent.

- From North America, you have Barack Obama.
- From South America, you have Diego Maradona.
- From Europe, an Italian farmer is selected.
- From Asia, a peasant from outside Calcutta.
- From Africa, a black Zambian revolutionary.
- From Australia, you drew the short straw.

You each trained separately in your own country – fully sponsored by the United Nations. You were each transported to the Antarctic.

You now sit down to your first meal together at the base camp. Steaming plates are placed before each member of the expedition. The covers are lifted.

- Barack Obama has a thick, juicy, sirloin steak.
- The peasant from Calcutta has two tablespoons of rice.

Would this effectively bring the six of you together as a working team? Would this meal be a unifying experience? Will it help you trust one another as you face the difficult challenges of the expedition?

The Problem in Corinth

That's something like the problem Paul sees in Corinth. It's to do with the church coming together and what's done with the food. Some got plenty; others went hungry. Verse 21:

For as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry,

another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

Verse 33:

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together, it may not result in judgment.

The exact logistics aren't clear to us. We must remember the early church didn't have special church buildings to meet in. They met in homes – places not designed as churches with large halls to seat a big group and large kitchens to prepare a meal for everyone.

Some suggest everyone wouldn't fit in the same room. So they think the church meal was split into two or more rooms in the house.

- The upper-class people met in one room and had a sumptuous upper-class meal that more than filled their stomachs.
- The middle-class people met in another room and had an adequate middle-class meal to satisfy their hunger.
- The lower-class people met in another room and had a few scraps that left them hungry.

Maybe they even rationalised it by saying it wouldn't be healthy or helpful for the lower classes to enjoy upper-class meals. The sudden exposure to rich food may make them sick or they may learn to covet what they can't normally get.

Others suggest the church meal began in the middle of the afternoon. The food's on the tables and available to

all present. The problem is it's only the upper classes present at that time. Slaves were still working. So, the upper classes enjoy the food while they wait for the rest of the church to gather. By the time the slaves arrive in the evening, all the food's gone and they go hungry. Sure it's a bit disconcerting to hear their stomachs grumble during prayer, but it's far more important they enjoy the rich spiritual food of the teaching session than the delicious physical food of the afternoon.

They're two suggestions – and there are others. We don't know the exact situation. I think the various suggestions are useful, because they help put some flesh on the situation behind these verses – but they are only suggestions.

Yet, even though we don't know the exact situation, the real problem's still plain. These people serve themselves rather than one another. They follow self-interest rather than putting that aside for the sake of others. Their sole concern is what they can get for themselves. They aren't acting as the team they're supposed to be.

The Context

It's important to remember that. Many words in tonight's passage are familiar to us. We hear them often at the Lord's Table. Yet, I suspect we often hear them without reference to their context. In their context, they're part of what Paul says as he deals with this problem in the Corinthian church – a problem where they focused on their self-interest.

That may well lead you to ask: What's the Lord's Table have to do with that particular problem? Two things.

First, this meal the Corinthian church was having – the meal behind this passage – involved the communion service. Our modern version's a bit sanitised. We have a small bit of bread and a very small cup of juice. From our communion service you'll go away hungry every time.

That wasn't the case when Jesus originally instituted this commemoration. It's part of the Passover meal. That's a meal to satisfy the stomach and prepare the body for a long journey. It involved consuming an entire lamb, as well as quantities of other food. Jesus took two elements of that and interpreted them in significant new ways. But He didn't remove those elements from the meal itself.

This Corinthian meal was tied up with the communion service. That's clear from what Paul says in verses 27 to 32. It's highly unlikely it's a Passover meal as such – that was a Jewish tradition, not a Gentile one. Yet, it's still a substantial meal. That Paul speaks of some going hungry indicates some didn't. The exact connection between the meal and the communion service is unclear:

- Perhaps they considered the whole meal to be the communion service.
- Perhaps the communion service was only part of a larger meal.

So, that's the first reason Paul introduces the communion service into his discussion of this problem. The problem itself centres on their behaviour at the communion table. When they acted self-centredly, they acted self-centredly in relation to the communion table.

The **second** reason is that the meaning of the communion

service itself provides the answer to their problem. Paul hints at this as early as verse 18:

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you ...

The whole idea of church is that it's an expression of our fellowship with one another. Fellowship isn't a warm, fuzzy-feeling, enjoyable time, sort of word. Fellowship refers to what we have in common. In the church, we have a common experience of being sinners saved by God's grace through Jesus' death for our sins. We all have that in common.

These Corinthians also had that in common. That's why they met together for this meal. Perhaps they had other reasons as well, but this was fundamental. Yet, their behaviour at the meal denied their fellowship. The way they shared out the food spoke of divisions, not oneness. And so, Paul says in verse 20:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.

They eat with their focus on themselves, not their Lord.

Paul then recites the tradition about the institution of the communion service. He summarises that in verse 26:

For whenever you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Again, Jesus' death is central to our fellowship – to what we have in common.

- Jesus' death's central to what happened to us in the past – at our conversion. It's through His death that we're forgiven and become part of the church.
- Jesus' death is central to what happens to us now. As His death is applied to our lives – especially as it's applied to our self-interest – so we learn to live

in godliness.

- Jesus' death is central to our hope for the future. It's because He died for us that we'll enter heaven.

Thus, although Paul doesn't state it specifically, Jesus' death is the great leveller in the church. There may be all sorts of divisions before people come into the church – class, skin colour, wealth, power, wisdom, social standing. But in the church those divisions mean absolutely nothing – or they should mean nothing. In the church, we're all equal: sinners forgiven through Jesus' death.

Thus, Paul draws his conclusion in verse 27:

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

What's meant by *unworthy manner*?

- Does it mean not dressed in an appropriate manner?
- Does it mean not bowing your head sufficiently low when you go forward to the communion rail?
- Does it mean not kneeling?
- Does it mean not having the proper pious expression on your face?
- Does it mean not having done sufficient ministry for the church in the past week?

In the context, it must mean without having proper regard for my brothers and sisters in the church. An unworthy manner is when I put my interests ahead of theirs. That's what happened in Corinth. Some selfishly enjoyed the party and happily filled their own stomachs while others went hungry. They're not really in it together.

That's also the thrust of verse 29:

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

This verse is interpreted in all sorts of ways – not helped by the existence of some textual variations in the Greek manuscripts.

- The Roman Catholics have interpreted it in terms of their doctrine of transubstantiation – that the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. They say it means if you don't recognise this bread as transubstantiated into Jesus' body, then you drink judgment on yourself.
- Others interpret it in terms of failing to reflect properly on Jesus' body given in death when you eat the element of the bread.

Yet, in context, I don't think it refers to Jesus' physical body – it refers to the church. Back in 10:17, Paul wrote:

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

It's the same thought behind verse 29, but it's extended to include the context of this problem of their behaviour. If you eat and drink without properly taking into account your brothers and sisters in the church – then you eat and drink judgment on yourself.

Thus, the communion service in itself should point them away from pursuing their own self-interest. Their focus should be on their fellow brothers and sisters, not on meeting their own needs and desires.

Communion Today

Is it relevant to the way we celebrate the Lord's Supper today? Our service is very egalitarian, isn't it?

- Each person gets a bit of bread.
- Each person gets the same size cup.

You could pull off a bigger bit of bread than others. But, in terms of satisfying your hunger, it really won't make that much difference, will it? So, perhaps we've found the ideal solution to this problem in Corinth. We treat everyone equally. It shows the truth that each of us is equally saved through the death of Jesus.

But, before we start slapping each other on the back, let me raise a couple of questions. **First**, could it be that in our sanitisation of the service we've lost something of the fellowship dimension to the meal? Have we turned it into some form of private devotions we do in public? Sure, some communal elements remain:

- We do it together. It's part of our public gathering. And we all wait till the same time. It isn't that some come up during the songs and some during the sermon.
- We keep the cup until everyone's served and drink it together as an expression of our oneness.
- We symbolise our oneness by having one loaf from which each person breaks off a bit to eat.
- We talk about our common experience – that we're all sinners saved through Jesus' death for us.
- Sometimes we spend time praying for one another as a part of the communion service.

But I wonder how much of that sinks in. As we participate in the communion service, where's our main focus? Is it simply on my own personal relationship with God? Is it simply an opportunity to catch up on my private devotions? Do I use it mainly to reaffirm my personal commitment to God because I forgot my quiet time for

the past week? If that's all there is to it, could it be that I've somehow failed to properly discern the body?

I don't have all the answers to those questions. They're not easy questions to answer. Yet, one of the reasons they aren't easy is because of the church culture we've grown up in. It's adopted this value from our surrounding culture – the value of individualism. And in doing so, we have a tendency to neglect something of the communal aspect of the church. The communion service does celebrate our communion with Jesus – but it also has a communal aspect to it.

A second question: even though our behaviour at the Lord's Table may not deny the body, could it be that our attitude does? What's our attitude to one another as we bow our heads?

Do we, for example, maintain in our minds some form of class distinctions whereby we think of some are only second-rate citizens in the church? It happens in some churches, doesn't it? History's full of examples. It goes back to New Testament times. We looked at James 2 a few weeks back. James talks about two different people who come to church:

- The rich person gets the seat of honour and is fussed over considerably.
- The poor person's told to sit on the floor.

I have this religious cartoon booklet at home. One of them shows an African-American knocking on the door of a church in America. A deacon pokes his head out to answer. He says: No, you can't come in – but if you go back to Africa, we'll be glad to send you a missionary.

Or maybe it's not class or racial distinctions – maybe we make other distinctions. Some distinguish on the basis of what they perceive as spiritual experience.

- Some raise their hands, others don't.
- Some speak in tongues, others don't.
- Some have hour-long quiet times, others don't.

And so it goes on. Some use these sorts of things to distinguish between first-class citizens and second-class citizens. And it can vary from church to church. In some churches you're considered first-class if you raise your hands; in other churches you're considered first-class if you don't.

If we have these sorts of wrong attitudes towards each other as we participate in the communion service, isn't that a failure to properly discern the body? Isn't that bringing our genuine fellowship into question?

A third question: Don't the implications of this passage go far beyond the communion service itself? Paul treats this matter in that context here because that's the specific context in Corinth. Yet, it's wrong to conclude: well, as long as I think right and behave right at the Lord's Table, it doesn't matter how I treat my brothers and sisters at other times. That would follow the letter of this passage, while ignoring its spirit.

The basic problem behind this situation isn't their behaviour. If that were the case, Paul would just issue specific instructions about behaviour: things like the time the meal started and who got to eat what. Their behaviour's the symptom of a deeper problem – namely, their attitude. Their attitude's one of self-interest. Each one is

more interested in themselves than their brothers and sisters. The problem needs to be addressed at that level.

So it is with us also. In our church life, we're to discern the body. We aren't to insist on our own rights – rather, we're to discern the body. That then will flow out into our behaviour.

- Suppose I enjoy the cold weather, while the rest of the church doesn't. I come to church one winter morning and open all the windows to get a good breeze. Is that proper discernment of the body? Should I change churches because they're such a stuffy bunch who don't like fresh air?
- Suppose I want the church to buy a new computer while everyone else thinks the money should go to missions. Should I mark my weekly offerings "for the church computer"? Is that a proper discernment of the body?
- Suppose I know nasty secrets about Fred Smith's past and I start spreading them around the church so I can be elected deacon instead of Fred. Is that a proper discernment of the body?

And so it goes on.

This passage was much easier when we thought it simply talks about our attitude to the communion elements: as long as I have a right attitude to them, then I can go ahead and participate with confidence. That's quite simple, isn't it? Not too hard to get it right there. But that's not the focus. It has nothing to do with how we treat the bread and juice – what happens if we spill them or what you can do with the bits left over. It has to do with relationships. And when we put into that context, that's a different ball game altogether. It moves out of the mystical

and into the practical. That's so much more difficult.

The Judgment

Yet, it's important. For look what Paul says in verse 30:

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

Not all sickness and suffering is directly related to specific sin. But some is. Here's an occasion where God acts in judgment. Because they don't properly pay attention to their relationships at the Lord's Table, some became weak and ill. Some even fell asleep – that is, they died.

That was God's disciplinary judgment on the Corinthian church. It was no good simply leaving the church as it was. That wasn't a true expression of the gospel. That merely reflected the same divisions you could see anywhere else in the world. It didn't express their freedom and unity in Jesus.

How were they to avoid God's discipline? Verse 31:

But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

They were to examine themselves. They were to check that their relationships reflected the truth of the gospel. They were to put aside their self-interest for the sake of their brothers and sisters. And it remains the same for us today.