

The Lord's Supper: The Great Equalizer

- I. We always interpret the Bible in light of our own experience.
 - A. We therefore interpret First century church life in light of our 20th century experience.
 - B. If you are over the age of 50, you probably can't imagine a church that does not have a Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening meeting. You never think that these are specific cultural adaptations of general Biblical principles.
 1. Then you visit another country and find the midweek meeting or Tuesday or the Sunday service at 1:00 p.m. and you have ask if that is that okay?
 - C. You are used to our worship, then you visit the congregation in Buckie, Scotland, on the North Sea.
 1. They ask you if you are baptized, because the Lord's Supper will only be served to baptized believers.
 2. Non members are not even encouraged to attend the morning service, for that is for the church.
 3. The women in your party are told that they must wear something on their head.
 4. Communion consists of one chalice of red wine and one very large unleavened wafer.
 5. As to the evening worship, well that was held on Saturday night, and was the gospel meeting for the non-member. There is no Sunday night meeting since the men have all gone back to sea to catch their livelihood: fish.
 6. You stop and think and ask, is this okay. It is foreign to my experience.
 - D. You visit Nigeria.
 1. There you find church starts sometime and ends when it is over. It goes on all day. There is no clock on the wall, no watches on wrists, and the few who have clocks don't pay any attention to what they say anyway.
 2. The service has some singing, some lecture, a break, more singing, another sermon, lunch, more sermon, more singing. Etc. There does not seem to be an order of service, just whatever the elders think should happen next.
 3. The elders sit on chairs on a raised platform at the front of the building, overseeing the flock.
 4. People enter the open shelter of a building, stay a while and leave. They may listen to one sermon, or three. They may go away, then come back.
 5. Outside the children play games in the church yard. The primary restriction is not to play too loud, since there are no windows to shield the sound.
 6. Two stickmen stand at the back of the meeting room with long bamboo poles in the hands, ready to reach across rows of worshippers to give a tap of rebuke to any who whisper or who start to nod off.
 7. They took a collection and paid me with a case of cokes for preaching for them.
 - E. Such gatherings are foreign to our experience, therefore foreign to our interpretation of the text.
- II. We have very few descriptions of first century church gatherings.
 - A. 1 Cor. 11-14 and Acts 20 are the best.
 - B. Acts 20 gives a description of an assembly at Troas. (My reconstruction)
 1. Sunday was a work day. There were no "blue laws" back then so people worked while there was light.

2. At dusk, the church began to gathered in the home or homes of members. At the meeting described in Troas, they had a large 2nd floor room where the open windows would catch some of the breeze and avoid the dust of main floor traffic.
 3. The room was illuminated by oil lamps. But the heat from the oil lamps and the large numbers of people made the room very warm.
 4. They did not think in terms of starting at 6, being over by 7:00. Their lives were not so compartmentalized. They gathered when they could get free, and stayed until they had to leave, sort of like Nigeria.
 5. When they came, they brought food to share, if they had food to share. Since this particular assembly lasted 8-10 hours, there would be times for breaks and food, and, of course, the specific remembering of the Lord. For the poor in the congregation, this would be the best meal of the week as the wealthy provided food the poor could not afford.
 6. Paul spoke a long time, until midnight at one point, then more in the wee hours of the morning. There was lecture, there was dialogue, there was fellowship, there was food. It was less structured that we might expect.
 7. The assembly lasted until dawn the next day.
 8. Now this was a special assembly, special is that the Apostle was passing through and the people probably stayed longer since it was a unique opportunity.
- C. The biblical text mentions two primary settings for church assemblies:
1. Church buildings, buildings dedicated to the assembly of the church, do not occur until much later, most of them after Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the state church. At least during part of the first few centuries, the church was an underground movement, outlawed and persecuted, so they did not erect a building and post a sign outside.
 2. Synagogue: A Jewish pattern
 - a) Because Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism, the urban Christian groups obviously had the synagogue at the nearest and most natural model.
 - b) 10 mature males were required to have a synagogue, so we might think it terms of a minimum of 30 people.
 - c) The word synagogue means “assembly” and is used interchangeable with “ecclesia,” the Greek for church.
 - d) Early synagogues met in homes, and the earliest synagogue building were converted homes.
 - e) By the time of Paul’s ministry, many town had their own special purpose synagogue buildings. But remember, since the synagogue was the people, not the building, Paul could write of visiting a synagogue without having any reference to a building at all.
 - f) Many people think that the Temple was for worship in Jerusalem, and the synagogue for the Jews outside of Jerusalem. That is only partly true.
 - (1) There were several hundred synagogues in Jerusalem in the first Century, some meeting in the temple grounds.
 - (2) Temple was for sacrifices and grand annual ceremonies.
 - (3) Synagogue was the place to read the word, study it, have worship, common meals, and build community. They had singing, but it would be more like our rap music than western harmony.

- (4) The synagogue was primarily a teaching institution. It was the place where most Jewish children received their public as well as their religious education.
 - (5) Synagogues were led by elders and frequently had a minister, the ruler of the synagogue, who directed synagogue life and led synagogue meetings.
 - (6) It should not surprise us that some NT churches are Christianized synagogues.
3. Private homes: A Gentile pattern.
- a) Many examples of House churches
 - (1) It was in a house that the apostles gathered to worship when the Holy Spirit fell on them, Acts 2.
 - (2) Acts 2 describes how the early Christians were constantly in each other's homes.
 - (3) (Acts 8:3 NRSV) *But Saul was ravaging the church by entering **house** after **house**; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.*
 - (4) When released from prison, Peter went to the (Acts 12:12 NRSV) ***house** of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many had gathered and were praying.* He "went to church."
 - (5) Acts 16 infers that the young church in Philippi met in Lydia's home.
 - (6) In Thessalonica, the church began in Jason's house, so when persecution arose, the authorities went to Jason's house in search of the church, Acts 17.
 - (7) Rom. 16 greets a number of people in Rome, including:
 - (a) The house church of Aquilla and Priscilla
 - (b) That same house church sends greetings to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians.
 - (8) Col. 4 mentions the church in Laodicea that met in Nympha's house.
 - (9) In Philemon, Paul greets the church that meets in his house.
 - (10) Scholars are agreed that the house church was the nucleus for early Gentile Christianity.
 - (a) Individuals normally met in house churches on Sunday.
 - (b) There may have been multiple house churches in any city.
 - (c) The house church members probably had some connection to the home owner: a blood relation, slave, employee, acquaintance, neighbor, business acquaintance.
 - (d) The householder may have become the elder of the house church, the overseer of the group. He would have been the primary teacher for the group.
 - (e) On special occasions, the house churches of a given city or area may have come together for a larger meeting, or the elders of the house churches meet for instructions from someone, like the Ephesian elders meeting Paul at Millets.
 - (11) Many of you are familiar with small group ministries. It appears that this was the standard way of looking at the first century Gentile church.

- b) Houses of wealthy Romans included a dining room called a *triclinium*. They on average were about 18' square, quite large by our standards. However, when you picture people reclining on low couches, instead of sitting in chairs, that limits the number who could gather around a table to 9-12.
 - (1) Immediately outside the *triclinium* was usually found an *atrium*, which was the center of the house with an open ceiling. We might call it a courtyard, and it could probably seat 30-50 guests.
 - (2) Therefore if you had a house where the church gathered to worship and eat, you were limited to 40-60 people max., and this involving two rooms.
- 4. Voluntary associations also influenced Christianity, and Christian groups were often referred to in the same context.
 - a) The Roman Empire witnessed a luxuriant growth of clubs, guilds, and associations of all sorts.
 - b) Again these were frequently house based groups that met around a common interest, like any club you might be a member of today.
 - c) They usually had a patron God, therefore a religious component.
 - d) They frequently had common meals.
 - e) The government of these associations was commonly led by a board of "deacons" and a president who was called a "bishop."
 - f) One unique thing that set Christian Associations apart from others was the wide social strata. Most voluntary Associations tended to be socially homogeneous.
- D. I want to add one other observation to our background study.
 - 1. (Acts 2:42, 46 NRSV) *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers....⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,*
 - 2. There is much discussion about exactly what this passage means.
 - a) The term breaking of bread is used interchangeable of common meals and of the Lord's Supper.
 - b) It is impossible to say with certainty that the daily breaking of bread in vs. 46 is neighborly eating while the breaking of bread in vs. 42 is Lord's Supper.
 - c) It appears that the new Christians did not make such distinctions. To them, it was Christ who bound them together in any kind of table fellowship, therefore every meal that crossed social lines was celebrating the Lord.
 - 3. It has also been suggested that these daily meals together was beginning of the benevolent outreach of the church. It was common for the haves to feed the have nots, a tremendous demonstration of solidarity.
- III. With this background, let's look at 1 Cor. 11.
 - A. Here we see a church gathering, very possibly a house church.
 - B. But there is a problem.
 - 1. Vs. 18, *when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you*
 - 2. vs. 21 *each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else*
 - 3. vs. 22, *do you ... humiliate those who have nothing?*
 - 4. Vs 33 *So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other*

5. ²⁹ *For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord brings condemnation.*
 - a) This can have reverence to the physical body of Jesus, as Paul has just mentioned bread as the body.
 - b) But remember the context:
 - (1) (1 Corinthians 10:16-17 NIV) *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*
 - (2) (1 Corinthians 12:12-27 NIV) *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink... there should be no division in the body,... ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*
6. (1 Cor 5:7-8 NRSV) *For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*
7. The problem is a problem that we have seen over and over with Corinth - a divided church. This time, the division is along socio/economic lines, the rich and the poor. There can be no class distinctions in the church.
- C. The picture we have of the assembly in Corinth is very much like the assembly in Troas.
 1. Evidently the main meeting is in the evening, as the wealthy seem able to arrive early and the poor come in later.
 2. The assembly includes a meal, and the Lord's Supper is a part of that meal time.
 - a) This should not surprise us, as this is exactly how the Lord instituted it.
- D. But Look at what is happening.
 1. The wealthy are arriving, bringing good food, then gorging themselves before the poor can arrive, leaving nothing or at best left-overs for the poor.
 2. In class conscious Roman Corinth, it would be sociologically natural for the wealthy to hang out together, but to have little to do in a face to face, hands on way, with the poor.
 3. They might give a handout to the poor, but you would not invite them to lay at your dinner table and eat on your good china.
 4. Nor would you, as a wealthy person, be inclined to accept their invitation to eat in their slum home or eat the inferior food that they eat every day.
 5. Possibly the church meets in the home of a wealthy member. He and his cronies meet in the afternoon, they eat and drink a fine meal, then they have the left overs available for those who come late.
 6. Possibly he invites the wealthy and influential of the congregation to eat at his table in the triclinium, while the others eat in the atrium.
 7. Whatever, the preferential treatment is condemned.
 8. Paul will not let them make such distinctions to the common meal of the believers, where Christ has made them all one, signified by their all eating of the one loaf and composing the one body.

9. The rich were in effect destroying the church as the one body in Christ, therefore destroying the gospel.
 10. Paul says, if you want to eat with your friends, do so at home. If you want your special menus, eat at home. But when you assemble, you are one, and you must not do anything that would indicate otherwise.
- IV. The solution Paul says, is remembering Christ.
- A. The life that this group now shares is the result of Christ's death.
 - B. It is Christ who adopted them and brought them into the family of God.
 - C. None of these individuals have done anything to claim the privilege of being at the Lord's Supper. It is the Lord's invitation.
 - D. They are the Lord's body.
- V. The Corinthians were not the only people to face this difficulty.
- A. Didache, written at the end of the first century, also talks about the Supper. "Having earlier confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure, come together each Lord's day of the Lord, break bread, and give thanks. No one who has a quarrel with his fellow is to meet with you until they are reconciled, in order that your sacrifice may not be defiled. For this is what was spoken by the Lord, 'In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice, because I am a great king, says the Lord, and my name is marvelous among the nations.'"
- VI. As I look at most Sunday morning church assemblies, there is a sense in which the fellowship dimension has been lost.
- A. Scholars are universally agreed that the Lord's Supper in the first century was in the context of a community meal.
 1. As we look at the second century, greater importance is placed on the person who oversees the Supper. As the concept of a ruling bishop developed, the bishops often taught that the Supper could not take place without their presence. It then became more formal, less frequent, and removed from a meal setting. Eventually, as it common in some churches today, the Bishop took the ceremonial wine in place of the people. It is a long way from first century practice to what we do today.
 2. Somewhere along the way, the supper became separate from the feast, which became known as the Agape Feast or the Love Feast. As the name suggests, it was an expression of and proof of brotherly feeling and mutual concern.
 3. We started sitting in neat rows in large buildings looking at the back of each other's heads instead of sitting around the living room looking at faces and sharing lives..
 4. We became passive hearers in an auditorium instead of active participants in a dinner table discussion.
 5. Moses Lard, a restoration leader in the last century, put large wooden tables down the aisle of his church to restore some of that feeling.
 6. Alexander Campbell refused to have a pulpit in his church, preferring rather a table to emphasize the need for Christian Community.
 - B. If you have Wednesday night dinners, I see those as most similar to what we have talked about this afternoon.
 1. On Wednesday night, we see various volunteer preparing food, others serving, others cleaning up.
 2. On Wednesday night we have a much more diverse group than we do this morning:
 - a) Black, white, Hispanic

- b) Some speak only English, some only Spanish, some bi-lingual.
 - c) Some can pay, some pay more than is requested, some eat free.
 - d) We sit at tables, often times racially and linguistically mixed.
 - e) With the exception that we do not stop with bread and wine to remember Jesus, the whole of our Wednesday night meeting captures well the first century assembly flavor..
- C. Some of you still have difficulties when it comes to moving outside of your own socio-economic spectrum.
- 1. I want to encourage you to go back and spend time with Jesus in the Gospels.
 - 2. Humility is not just a word. It is the way you relate to others.
 - 3. We are called to be God's people, saved by the blood of Jesus, relating to others, mentoring one another, serving one another.
 - 4. It is not a matter of giving or receiving money - it is a matter of giving or receiving one another.
- VII. When we assemble, I hope we don't gather around the table as individuals unaware of the reconciled and reconciling community that God has created from us.
- A. As the local church is a microcosm of the church universal, the supper expressed universal unity. It is a demonstration of reconciliation. As such it is a healing antidote for guilt and estrangement. We receive forgiveness and acceptance from the Lord, and from one another.
 - B. I hope that by remembering Jesus, he can recreate the genuine love and unity that characterized first century fellowship.
 - C. This supper, even as a token of the first century observance, calls us to consider our brethren, or every social, economic, racial, sexual, and educational situation.
 - D. We are one. This supper is the great equalized.
 - E. Since the social setting of the common meal is no longer a part of our practice, let me encourage you to make it so in your private practice. Plan at least some of your gatherings with others to be outside your normal circles that our unity in Christ might have visible and practical application.
- VIII. One of the results of my sermon series has been the establishment of a small group in our church.
- A. We have a number of indigenous small groups in our congregation, none of them official, and they meet as often and at whatever time they choose.
 - B. This one meets once a month, Sunday night, and has seeks to try to restore the sense of 1st Century Lord's supper or Seder meal. They see three things necessary to do this:
 - 1. A communal meal.
 - 2. A time when everyone can participate.
 - 3. Full involvement of children.
 - C. So they meet in homes. They have a potluck meal. Somewhere in the meal, usually toward the end, someone brings up a thought for discussion and they eat the bread and wine together. They remain at the table in discussion, and close with desert.
 - D. Last month, for instance, they sang the song Tomorrow from the play Annie.
 - 1. The question was asked, what are you going to do tomorrow. Everyone in the group described their plan for tomorrow, most being a very routine day.
 - 2. Then the leader asked, what is a routine day? And they discussed that.

3. Then he brought their minds back to the upper room. It was for most at that Last Supper a typical seder and tomorrow would be routine. But for one of them, Jesus, tomorrow would be unique in all of history. And because his tomorrow would not be routine, none of our tomorrows need be routine.
 4. Much discussion about our call, what we have been called to do, who we have been called to be.
- E. Not a one man show, but a group participation. Emphasis on children's involvement. 30 minutes.
- F. At their first meeting they wanted to use what was already available at their meal,
1. First time used flour tortillas and tea
 2. Now have homemade bread and grape juice. They have a loaf, and eat the whole thing.
- G. Their purpose is to rediscover the fellowship of the table that existed in the first century.