The Lord’s Supper (11:17-34)

In dealing with the Lord’s Supper, Paul discusses three matters: first, the problem of believers making a mockery of the Supper because of abuses practiced at the agape—the love feast or dinner accompanying the Supper (vv.17-22); second, the necessity of taking the Lord’s Supper seriously through rehearsing its institution as given by the Lord (vv.23-26); and third, the warning about partaking of the Supper unworthily (vv.27-34).

17-19 Regarding the meal that evidently preceded the communion service, the apostle condemns the conduct of the believers as harmful (v.17) and degrading to the communion (see v.20). Their actions at the common agape meal were betraying the divisions, including class distinctions between the rich and the poor. Though he might discount part of what he heard, Paul felt he had to believe some of it (v.18). Knowing human nature, he assumes some such divisions are inevitable even among Christians, so that those who act worthy of God’s approval might be evident (v.19). The word haireseis must mean “fractions” here, not “heresies” or “heretical sects” as the word can also mean.

20 “It is not the Lord’s Supper you eat” may be interpreted in two ways—either by supplying the word “it” as in NIV, or by taking the verb estin (“to be”) followed by the infinitive to mean “can.” Thus the rendering may be, “You cannot eat [or celebrate] the Lord’s Supper” (Hodge). Either translation fits the context. What Paul means is that in acting the way he is about to describe, they were not approaching the Lord’s Supper in the right manner but were nullifying its spiritual meaning.

21, 22 The Christian common meal or agape feast apparently followed the pattern of public sacred feasting among the Jews and Greeks. Following Greek custom, the food was brought together for all to share (cf. the modern church’s “potluck” or “bring-and-share” supper), with the rich bringing more and the poor less. As Paul described it, however, cliques were established and the food was divided inequitably. The rich took their “lion’s” share and became gluttons and the poor remained empty. So they were despising or bringing contempt on the church of God and humiliating the poor.

23, 24 The chief reason why Paul cannot commend their actions is that they do not agree with the spirit of the Lord’s Supper as he had received it. Using technical words relating to “receiving” and “passing on” the tradition, he says he “received” (parelabon) the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper from (apo) the Lord. Some (e.g., Hodge) have felt that he received it from Christ directly. But the preposition apo (“from”) does not prove that Paul means he received the message directly from the Lord; in that case the preposition para (“from,” “from beside”) would have been appropriate (G.G. Findlay, EGT, in loc.). Yet some have thought that when Jesus appeared to Paul (Acts 9:4-6 et al.), he could have given him this message also. The preferred interpretation, however, is probably that Paul received (parelabon) the words of the institution of the Supper through its being passed on through others just as he then passed them on (paredoka) to the Corinthians—i.e., through a process of repetition. (Observe the similarity of Paul’s words about the Supper with Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20.)

Since the Supper was celebrated in connection with the Passover (according to Matt 26:17-29; Luke 22:7-20), we assume that the bread that was available was unleavened. Jesus gave thanks (eucharistesas—cf. Eucharist). This was the Jewish practice at a meal. The breaking of the bread (also in the Synoptics) was symbolic of Christ’s bruised and broken body (Isa 53:5). The better MSS, reflected in NIV and other newer versions, read, “This is my body which is for you” without the addition “broken” (KJV), which, however, is implied from the context. The word “this” most naturally means in the context “this bread” that Christ held in his hand as a symbol to represent his body, not Christ’s body itself, as some hold (cf. somewhat similar figures in
25, 26 That the Lord’s Supper was connected with the Passover meal is clear in the phrase “after the supper,” meaning, as the synoptic Gospels show, “after the Passover Supper.” This cup was the third of the Passover cups, as C.E.B. Cranfield, shows in “St. Mark” in The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, C.F.D. Moule, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 426. The word “cup,” used metonymously for its contents, symbolizes the covenant in Jesus’ blood (Luke 22:20). The covenant (diatheke) idea is that of God’s sealing his agreement of salvation with his people through Christ’s blood. It is a new covenant in being the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God in the OT exemplified in the sacrificial system (cf. Eph 2:12). In the ceremony Jesus does not say how often the communion was to be held but indicates that it is to be periodic—“whenever you eat ... and drink”—and it is to be continued to the Second Advent—“until he comes” (v.26). The statement “you proclaim” involves the personal application of the meaning of the Lord’s death in the believer’s testimony.

27 Participating “in an unworthy manner” entails coming to the table in an irreverent and sinful way and so sinning against the body and blood of Christ. This is what some of the Corinthians had been doing (vv.20-22). (Of course, any other sinful approach to the table would be unworthy also.) The apostle does not teach that in eating and drinking the elements Christians are physically eating of Christ. The supper is a memorial feast (v.24) and a means of grace.

28-30 Now Paul shows how to guard against unworthy partaking of the Lord’s Supper. “To examine [oneself]” is to put oneself to the test as to the attitude of his heart, his outward conduct, and his understanding of the true nature and purpose of the Supper. This is making the Supper a means of spiritual grace. By self-examination the believer guards against eating and drinking to his own judgment through not recognizing the importance of this Supper that commemorates the death of Christ. That Paul is not speaking about God’s eternal judgment is seen by the lack of the article with krima. It is “judgment,” not “the judgment.” Examples of such judgment are in sickness and death.

31, 32 The purpose of self-examination is to come to the table prepared in heart. Paul’s teaching justifies the wholesome practice of some churches in having a communion preparatory service that affords opportunity for such self-examination. Here he quickly adds that even when a Christian is judged by the Lord, this judgment is not punitive to destruction, but a form of fatherly discipline (Heb 12:5) to bring God’s child to repentance, so that he will not be finally and totally judged with the unsaved world (Rev 20:12-15).

33, 34 Paul now deals positively with the agape meal. In eating it, the Corinthians should show respect for their brothers’ physical as well as spiritual needs by waiting for each other and eating together. If they come only to satisfy their physical craving and not for communion with the Lord and his people, then they should eat their meal at home, for otherwise God will judge them in some way.

Verse 34b suggests that there were other irregularities regarding worship and the Lord’s Supper but they were not sufficiently urgent for the apostle to deal with them here.