

### *Communion in 1 Corinthians*

Paul discusses Communion (the Lord's Supper) only in *1 Corinthians*, and does so here due to the problems that need to be resolved. It is apparently not his first concern in writing, as he does not address it until later in the letter (11:17-34). Clearly the need for a precise doctrine regarding the significance and efficacy of the sacrament became more important to the church *after* Paul's day. Perhaps it was Paul's own sobering language about the illness and death of those partaking unworthily (11:29-30) that contributed to the later exaggerated view of the sacrament's awesome power to impart salvation or damnation and the miraculous transubstantiation of the elements.

Unwillingness to contribute to such an exaggerated understanding could perhaps explain John's complete omission of the bread and wine in his account of the Last Supper. John instead substitutes a story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, emphasizing his servanthood and commanding his disciples to follow his example (*John* 13:1-17). Perhaps by the later date of John's Gospel the author felt that the sacrament's meaning was sufficiently obscured, and that the foot-washing better demonstrated Jesus' humble and sacrificial servanthood—as he prepared to perform the ultimate service, provide the ultimate sacrifice, and bear the ultimate humiliation.

The qualification here must be that Paul's teaching in *1 Corinthians* 11 is surely not intended to provide a comprehensive doctrine of the Communion sacrament (centuries later the church provided one herself), but to respond specifically to the Corinthians' error and reaffirm the tradition as instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper.

The problems in Corinth regarding Communion stem from the divisions in the body that Paul has previously addressed (*1 Cor.* 11:18-19). The Corinthians are not coming with a sincere intention to honor the Lord in the sacrament (11:20). The earlier arrivals are not waiting for others to arrive so they can partake together as one body. Instead, they have already eaten and become drunk when later members arrive to find nothing left (11:21).

Paul's account of the Last Supper tradition is followed most closely in *Luke* 22:15-20, which emphasizes Jesus' command to do this in remembrance of him (though not *twice*, as in Paul). Luke does not include the aspect of proclaiming the Lord's death, perhaps because he recognized it as a Pauline interpretation, and not Jesus' teaching. Paul does not feature the reference by Jesus to his blood being poured out for many (*Mark* 14:24; *Matt.* 26:28) for the forgiveness of sins (*Matthew* 26:28), nor Jesus' reference to his future abstinence until the kingdom of God comes (*Luke* 22:16-18; *Mark* 14:25; *Matt.* 26:29 ).

Clearly Paul is using the traditional story specifically to focus on the importance of *remembering Jesus through the symbols of his body and blood*, to which Paul appends the testimonial aspect of *proclaiming the Lord's death* until the Parousia. What one remembers about an event is recalled in one's testimony. The Corinthians' testify against themselves that they do not recognize the Lord's body and blood in the sacrament. Their testimony proclaims their contempt both for the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus and for their brethren (who are also the body of Christ present in the sacrament).

The seriousness of this proclamation is such that Paul asserts the long-term results can include sickness and death (*1 Cor.* 11:30). Considering the case of Ananias and Sapphira, struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 5:1-11), the

seemingly gradual effects of this ongoing blasphemy do not seem so inappropriate—at least not from Paul's understanding of the sacramental meaning and the powerful, consequential personal statement of faith involved in the partaking of it.

The later church identified this awesome power more with the transubstantiated elements than the believer's proclamation of faith and recognition of the Lord's body. Complementing the sacrament's ability to bring condemnation, the church also concluded that the actual act of partaking imparted salvific power.

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