

Study 18. 1 Cor 11:17-34

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Big idea: our gatherings should reflect the unity we have in Christ

Introduction

Tom Wright, a New Testament historian, told this story: 'The school groundsman was working to get the sports field read for the big match the next day. The same pitch had been used for both hockey and football, and he needed to be sure that it was now marked out afresh with the right lines for tomorrow's football game.

'But early on he made a small mistake and crossed from one line to the other. His eye was so firmly fixed on the ground ahead of him, marking the lines straight, that he didn't realise. Only when he had finished, and stood up and looked at the whole field, did he realise what he had done. He had rubbed out the lines he should have been drawing more clearly, and he had drawn more clearly the lines he should have rubbed out.'

Last week, we saw how the Corinthians had been blurring the lines between male and female which should have been clearly marked (11:2-16). This week, we see that they were marking out more clearly a line that should have been obliterated altogether.

Paul begins a new section of his letter to the church in Corinth with these words: 'In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good' (11:17). By 'meetings', Paul is referring to 'when you come together as a church' (v.18). In this section, from 11:17-14:39, Paul will describe a series of practices reflecting underlying beliefs that make gathering as church worse than skipping church altogether!

Observation and interpretation

Read Luke 22:1-30 & 1 Corinthians 10:14-17.

As you have read, Jesus chose to explain his death on the evening of the great Passover meal. The Passover was the high point of the Jewish calendar. It was the night the Jews celebrated God's rescue of the ancient people of Israel. When Jesus says in verse 20 that his 'blood' is being "poured out for you" he is using this ancient Jewish symbolism to describe his death as a new 'Passover'. His death, then, will be the way in which God's judgement 'passes over' men and women so that they can be forgiven not condemned.

This meal became the foundation for the 'Lord's Supper', also called the 'Holy Communion' or 'Eucharist' (which comes from the Greek eucharisto, to give thanks).

The Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argued that you can never tell whether a thing is good or bad unless you know its purpose (greek telos). In his book *After Virtue*, for example, he asks, how can you tell if a watch is a good or bad one? If I try to hammer a nail with my watch, and it breaks, should I complain that it is a 'bad watch'? Of course not. To determine if something is good or bad, helpful or harmful, you must first understand what it is for.

In these passages, the Lord's Supper is described as teaching vertical truths (our relationship with God in Christ) and horizontal truths (our relationship with one another in Christ). How would you express these truths? How are they related?

In 1 Cor 11:18, Paul says he has heard that their gatherings are marked by 'divisions' that are particularly visible during the Lord's Supper. These divisions don't seem quite the same as the earlier 'factions and splits' around leaders. Read vv.19-22. How would you describe the two groups? What do you think is going on?

Read vv.27-32. Paul says that there are serious consequences in the 'vertical' flowing out of a failure to live out the 'horizontal'. What are they? What is God doing through these consequences, and why?

Application / Implications

What preventative measures does Paul propose to help us avoid trampling on the horizontal in the Lord's Supper? What might that look like for you? And for your group?

David Garland, who has written a commentary on 1 Corinthians, suggests that "the Lord's Supper should accent and intensify group solidarity; the Corinthians' supper accented and intensified social differences." He then asks us to reflect on this question about our own churches: "Does what is done proclaim the Lord's death or does it advertise our selfishness?"

What is your answer? How could we better reflect the unity that Christ has won for us when we gather? What could your growth group do this Sunday?

Prayer ideas

- Pray that our church can express the unity we have in Christ.
- Pray for those churches currently experiencing division and turmoil.