

Breaking of Bread

Paul now comes to deal with one of the assembly gatherings at Corinth, indeed the most important gathering of all – the breaking of bread. It is this meeting which has distinguished the assembly from all other groups of Christians. Many preach the gospel, many baptize believers, many meet for prayer and teaching, but only amongst us is so much prominence given to the Lord's supper or the breaking of bread.

Paul had taught the Corinthians to keep this and other ordinances, while he was yet with them. He praises them for their observance of them in verse 2.

2 Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.

But in verse 17, Paul gives them not praise but criticism for how they were behaving during the breaking of bread:

17 Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse.

Every assembly gathering should do us good. We should feel the better for having gathered. But Paul has to say here that they were coming together "for the worse". Why was this so? The Corinthians could well argue, "But we come together on the first day of the week. We set a table before us and on this table we set the bread and the cup, and we remember the Lord as you have taught us". What did Paul have to criticise? In verse 20, Paul goes even further. Yes they were gathering as they had been instructed, but Paul writes:

20 When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper.

As we go down the verses, we hear of various conditions that were prevailing at Corinth which nullified the whole purpose of their gathering. The Lord's supper is the highest expression of the assembly's fellowship, but this was far from true at Corinth.

18 For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it.

Paul has dealt with divisions already in chapter 1:

12 Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

They were aligning themselves up behind men, and so creating divisions amongst themselves. The fault lay, not with the men themselves, but with the carnal spirit of the Corinthians. These divisions had been reported to him by the house of Chloe. Now in chapter 11, Paul says "I hear". This also had been reported to him – some new divisions which were coming to light at the Lord's supper.

The proof of the divisions lay in the fact that they which were approved were being made manifest among them. Not all the saints in Corinth were behaving in an unruly manner. Some were "approved". Those who were holding on to the truth were standing out amongst them. We might think, "Is it not a good thing that the "approved" were being manifested". There was a faithful and obedient remnant in Corinth. Remnants are often lovely in the scripture. In the book of Malachi, there were those who feared the Lord and gathered together to think upon His name. God honoured them by recording their deeds in a book of remembrance. We see a little remnant also in Luke chapters 1 and 2 – Zacharias and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna. They stood out against the darkness all around them. But remnants are always an indication of general failure, and the fact that the "approved" stood out at Corinth was the evidence of the failure of the majority.

But some might argue the case that in any assembly, at any given time, there are always those who are more mature than others. I believe Paul has made allowances for that, for in Philippians 3, he writes of his own personal ambition, "To know Him, and the power of His resurrection etc ". Paul seeks to have others share in the same ambition. "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect (or mature) be thus minded. But he makes allowances for the less mature or those who had not yet come to this point in their spiritual experience:

But if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you". Paul had such confidence in his God and in the Philippians that he was certain they would soon all be of the same mind. The problem at Corinth was carnality and not just immaturity.

What other problems did they have at Corinth? There were social distinctions being manifest between the rich and the poor:

21 For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.

22 What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not.

The early church apparently held a social gathering known as the AGAPE or love feast. It was a common meal held for the assembly as an expression of love and fellowship. It would seem to be at such a meal at Antioch that Paul had to rebuke Peter for withdrawing from the Gentiles to sit with the Jews at the table.

It would appear at Corinth that the distinction between the love feast and the Lord's supper had all but disappeared. Better to do without the love feast altogether than continue as they were. What had gone wrong? The rich came with their rich provision, while the poor looked on hungry. The poor were made to feel their condition.

In the assembly today, there is no place for social distinctions. The gospel is a great leveller. All have sinned and come short. Those who have been saved have been saved by the grace of God. Yet I am sure we all know of men who have been given a more prominent place in the assembly than their gift would warrant, and all because of wealth. This was failure number three at Corinth.

In verse 23, Paul now comes to the Lord's supper itself:

23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:

Note how Paul begins – "I have received of the Lord". When Paul was saved in Acts chapter 9, the assembly was already established – Acts chapter 2 tells us that they were already taking part in the breaking of bread. So why did Paul get a special revelation from the Lord regarding what was already in vogue. I believe for the same reason that in chapter 15, he speaks of how he delivered to the Corinthians that gospel which he had received. Galatians chapter 1 goes further he did not receive the gospel from men, neither was he taught it. He received it "by revelation of Jesus Christ". Paul had to defend the gospel at Antioch and in Jerusalem against the Judaisers who were insisting on the Gentiles being circumcised. He had to defend it too against the Galatians who were returning to the Law. How was Paul so sure of himself in Acts 15? Because he received the gospel directly from the Lord – not second hand from others.

Now he finds himself with the Corinthians having to defend the Lord's Supper – how is so sure of himself? He received it of the Lord. And what Paul received, he had faithfully delivered to the church at Corinth. Paul follows on from what we read of the supper in Luke's gospel – it is the apostolic approval for the continuation of the supper on a regular basis.

We are reminded of when the truth was first brought out by the Lord Jesus. It was the night in which He was betrayed. He could not have taught it any earlier nor taught it any

later for it was His last occasion speaking to the disciples.

24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

The bread is a reminder of the body of the Lord Jesus. It is in this body that He lived and so the bread would remind us of the life He lived – the days of His flesh. The AV inserts the word “broken” into this verse but most commentators and translators omit it. His body was not broken as we read of in John 19. A soldier was sent to break the legs of all three victims in order to hasten their death. He did indeed break the legs of the two thieves, but when he came to the Lord Jesus, he had no need for He was already dead. The soldier need not have taken any further action, but in an apparently random act of cruelty, he lays aside his blunt instrument and instead takes up a spear and thrusts it into His side. A random act? Not one bit. He laid aside the cudgel, that Exodus 12 might be fulfilled, “A bone of him shall not be broken”, but instead he thrust in the spear because another scripture says in Zechariah, “They shall look upon Him whom they pierced”.

Why is the supper to continue? “This do in remembrance of Me”. It is not lest we forget Him. The words “Lest we forget” often appear at the bottom of our war memorials, and indeed we need to be reminded of those who have died in conflict.

But there are many Christians who do not observe the Lord’s Supper at all, or perhaps only four times a year. So what is the idea behind the word “remembrance”? It is a calling to mind of Himself. We take time to reflect upon His life – His words and His works. And that reflection leads to worship.

The next verse moves on to the giving of thanks for the cup:

25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.

The new testament or covenant was sealed in His blood. For a testament to come into force, it required the death of the testator. Hebrews chapter 9 tells us :

16 For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator.

17 For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.

What comes to mind when we give thanks for the cup? It is the New Covenant in His blood. It is a much debated point, but I believe that this New Covenant has not been made with the Church but with Israel. Why do I believe this? Hebrews chapter 8, quoted from Jeremiah 31, tells me:

10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:

11 And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.

12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

Am I depriving the Christian of something today by saying the New Covenant is not with us? I believe that while the covenant is not with us but will be ratified with a restored Israel one day, I also believe that the Church today is enjoying the four main blessings of the Covenant

0. I will put my laws into their mind
1. I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people
2. All shall know Me from the least to the greatest
3. Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

We have the Spirit of truth dwelling within us to bring the truth of God to our hearts and minds. We also have fellowship with the Father and the Son. The Lord said to Mary Magdalene in John chapter 20:

I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

Thirdly, we have the capacity to get to know God. Apart from the Spirit, we also have eternal life, that we might get to know both the Father and the Son. And last of all, we are already enjoying the forgiveness of sins, through faith in the Lord Jesus.

So we remember His life, we remember the New Covenant blessings. What else results from the Lord's Supper?

26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.

Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we show the Lord's death till He come. The verb "show" is commonly translated "to preach". We preach or declare that the man who died on the centre cross was no impostor or deceiver. He is the Lord. In what way do we declare Him? It is not in a public way, but rather we are maintaining a testimony on earth to the fact that He is Lord. There are two ways to interpret "till He come". If it means the Rapture, then the breaking of bread will continue to be kept by His saints until that day and then it will cease. Or if it means His appearing in glory, it means the testimony of the Church to His Lordship will be expressed until the whole world will know Him as Lord when He returns to earth. As we have read in Hebrews chapter 8, "No man shall say, "Know the Lord", for all shall know Him, from the least to the greatest".

We return again in verse 27 to the failures of the Corinthians at the supper:

27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

Unless he is under discipline, every Christian is worthy to take part in the supper, but here we read of those who ate it in an unworthy manner. There were moral issues in their lives that were not in keeping with the Supper. They are said to be "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord".

28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.

We have looked at carnal divisions, spiritual distinctions, and social divisions. I think we are now in the realm of moral divisions. But here each is advised to examine himself – not so as to find fault with himself and then stay away, but to examine and judge himself, and then to eat. If a man cannot examine himself then the Lord will judge him.

Some at Corinth had failed to do so and had come under the judgement of the Lord. Some amongst them were weak and sickly, and some even had fallen asleep ie had died.

Our condition then, as we present ourselves at the Lord's table, is a most important one. The Lord does not take lightly to those who do not come in a fit condition.