

Whose supper is it anyway? - gospel etiquette for the communion table

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[0 : 00] I wonder what's the most memorable meal you've ever had? How about this for a menu? For starters, potage à la tortue, turtle soup, followed by blinis demidoff, buckwheat pancakes with caviar and sour cream, followed by kales et sarcophage, quail in puff pastry shell with foie gras and truffle sauce.

This followed by an endive salad with comte cheese, apples and walnut, followed by a dessert of savarain or rum sponge cake with figs and candied cherries, and finally assorted cheeses and fruits.

In case you're wondering, this isn't the next taster menu for Six by Nico, or somewhere like that, but the menu from one of cinema's most celebrated foodie movies. *Babette's Feast*.

It probably goes without saying that you shouldn't try this one at home. There are many reasons why it wouldn't be a good idea. Many reasons, financial, environmental, moral and health reasons, why it wouldn't be a great idea to attempt to recreate this feast for yourselves.

And apart from anything else, turtle is a protected species, and you're not going to find that in any fishmonger around here. But for those of us who are unfamiliar with 1980s Danish language films, the story of *Babette's Feast* centers around a single splendid meal.

[1 : 39] Babette is a French woman, a former chef who, escaping the French Revolution, finds herself washed up in a pious religious community on the Danish coast, working for years as a servant of two elderly spinsters.

To thank the women and the villagers for their hospitality and providing refuge for her, Babette prepares an extravagant meal with all sorts of fancy ingredients.

So she buys in a live turtle, a block of ice, game birds like quail, amazing fruit and veg, cheeses and wines, and hires all this amazing glassware and crockery.

But the meal is memorable, not so much for its menu, though costly and extravagant in all sorts of ways, it most certainly is.

But it's memorable, rather, for the extraordinary way that over the course of a meal, a dysfunctional and divided community is brought together. And by the end of a meal, all their rifts are healed and disagreements forgotten.

[2 : 45] Sometimes meals are memorable for the food, but very often it's the people that make it memorable. The company we share the meal with. The Lord's Supper in Corinth, and the way it's practiced in the church there, is memorable for all the wrong reasons that caused Paul to write to them about it.

And for that we can be grateful because Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11 help us understand the nature and significance of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a tangible proclamation of the gospel made by those who embrace the gospel, those whose identity is shaped and formed by the gospel.

The problem in Corinth is that their abuse of the Lord's Supper achieves the very opposite of what it's supposed to.

It divides where it's supposed to unite. And so in these verses, Paul addresses Corinthian error with Christian gospel.

We're going to look at the passage under the following two headings. A dinner that divides, firstly. And secondly, a supper that unites.

[4 : 06] And then following that, we'll briefly consider a couple of implications that Paul lays out for us. So firstly, then, a dinner that divides.

It's a strongly worded assessment, isn't it? Paul doesn't hold back. This first section in verses 17 to 22 is bookended by his scolding verdict on the Corinthian church.

In verse 17, Paul writes, In what follows, I have no praise for you. Then in verse 22, he closes the section with these rhetorical questions.

What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter. That's a bit of a dressing down. In fact, it's quite shocking what Paul's saying when you think about it.

Imagine if I'd come up here this morning and said, I'd like to add my welcome to Simon's. Well, actually, it would have been better if some of you had stayed at home. Our Sunday mornings do more harm than good.

[5 : 08] That's pretty strong language. But pretty strong language of the days. Perhaps the most shocking of all is Paul's statement in verse 20 that when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat.

You think it's the Lord's Supper. It looks like the Lord's Supper, at least superficially, but it's not the Lord's Supper. So what's going on in Corinth?

Well, picture the scene. If we can imagine arriving at the Corinthian villa of one of the wealthier members of the community, whoever's got a big enough home basically for the weekly gathering. Some have come straight from the market. Some have come in from the bathhouse. Others will get there later whenever they can. There's familiar faces as you're led through the porticoed entrance and into the shaded apartments around the inner atrium.

There's prayer. There's praise. Somebody reads out loud a passage from Scripture. And all this in the context of eating a meal, a Mediterranean buffet. And at some point the host passes around the bread and the cup of wine and recites words in remembrance of Jesus.

[6 : 23] So far, so good. But the problem, Paul says, is twofold. In the first place, they are divided. As we see in verse 18, when the believers gather together as a church, there are divisions that surface among them.

And Paul can well believe it. These divisions remind us of chapters 1 to 4, where Paul's already addressed the factions in the church over the various ministers. So if you flick back to verse 10 of chapter 1, it's the same word for divisions as in verse 18 of our chapter, schismata in the Greek, from which we get the word schism.

Paul has already appealed in chapter 1, verse 10, that in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, all of you should agree with one another, and there should be no divisions among you.

Here in chapter 11, the divisions are socioeconomic, but divisions and factions, whatever they are, are a sure way to destroy a church community.

We need to guard against it, because if we're not careful, cracks can start appearing, fissures and fractures over a whole range of different fault lines, different groups with different outlooks on any number of different things.

[7 : 50] Whether it's how we do music or kids ministry or whatever it may be, and I suppose we're especially vulnerable to that whenever there's major change.

And so we want to be guarding against any divisive spirit as we come to plant an additional morning service.

But it's a divisiveness in Corinth that issues from self-centeredness, secondly, as we can see from verse 21. In eating, some of you go ahead.

Or another translation has it even stronger. In eating, each of you go ahead with your own private suppers. One goes hungry while another gets drunk.

It might have been that the rich got there early and self-indulged before the slaves and the freedmen joined later. It might have been that they were there at the same time, but segregated with the host's highest status friends in the VIP dining room, being served better food and wine than the lower status guests outside.

[9 : 04] Either way, it's despising the church, Paul's saying. The way the Corinthians are doing it is the opposite of what the supper is meant to express.

Rather than portraying the need that is common to all, the need for the gospel, that levels all before God, the Corinthian observance is enacting the existing class distinctions in Roman culture.

Rather than displaying gospel unity, they are actually reinforcing and perpetuating secular division. So that's what Paul's saying in Corinth.

It's not the Lord's supper. It's an each to their own supper, a selfish supper, an M&S; dinner for one, a dinner that divides.

And so as he's been doing throughout the letter, Paul does so here. He addresses Corinthian error with Christian gospel. And this leads us on to the next verses, verse 23 and following, and on to our second main heading, a supper that unites.

[10:12] I recall sitting through a service of worship in Latvia some years ago in a Lutheran church, and everything seemed upside down to what I was used to at least.

We stood up when the Bible was read. We sat down when a hymn was sung. And to be perfectly frank, it was very long and boring. I didn't understand a word of it. But towards the end of the service, we were all invited to the front to share in the Lord's supper.

And though my understanding of what happens in the supper is different from the Lutheran teaching, I have to say it was a most moving experience. This bit I could understand.

To experience communion with Christ and unity with his body, the church, in such a tangible way, was powerful. In verses 23 and following, Paul restates in writing the tradition he had previously passed on to them in person, the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper.

From Paul's account of what Jesus said and did that night, what we're going to see is that he's helping them understand, firstly something of the monumental significance of the Lord's Supper, and secondly that this is enriched by layers of Old Testament meaning.

[11:36] Firstly, it's significant. It's a sign that signifies something. The Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. And after the supper, he took the cup saying, this is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.

The sign is the bread and the wine. The wine. They signify Christ's sacrifice. Visible, tangible, tasteable expressions of his dying love.

Now here we want to avoid errors of misunderstanding the significance of what Jesus says. At one end of the spectrum, there's the Roman Catholic error of confusing the sign with that which it signifies in the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Jesus is clearly speaking figuratively. The bread and the wine are signs that are distinct from, but correspond to, Christ's body and blood.

[12:58] At the other end of the spectrum, some Christians believe that the supper is nothing more than a memorial.

The bread and wine are simply to help us remember what Christ has done for us. Now, of course, it is at least that we're to do this in remembrance of him.

But in the previous chapter, in chapter 10, verse 16, we're told that the supper, through means of the bread and wine, is somehow a participation in Christ.

And a participation in each other. We, who are many, are one body. Now, Reformed Christians, following John Calvin, including Thomas Cranmer and Reformed Anglicans and Presbyterians and all sorts of other Christians, understand this participation in Christ to be a spiritual participation. We are united to Christ. We are united to Christ and other Christians through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So, Sinclair Ferguson, a Scottish theologian, puts it helpfully, I think.

[14:16] He writes, Christ is not localized in the bread and wine. That's the Roman Catholic view. Nor is he absent from the supper, as though our highest activity were remembering him.

The memorialist view. Rather, he is known through the elements by the Spirit. So, as we come to the Lord's Supper in faith, Christ enables us to enjoy his presence through the Spirit.

Our understanding of the supper is shaped secondly when we consider the rich layers of Old Testament meaning. Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper on the night he was betrayed.

So, what was the Passover? Well, very briefly, back in the book of Exodus, the Lord God sent a final plague of judgment to kill every firstborn in Egypt.

God's people were to kill a lamb and smear its blood onto their doorposts. Seeing the sign of the blood on the doorpost, the Lord would pass over the homes covered by the blood before bringing his people through the parted waters of the Red Sea and providing them with nourishment, manna, bread from heaven on their way to the promised land.

[15:54] That Paul's word to the Corinthians that whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes, includes in Paul's words at least these thoughts.

Christ is the new Passover lamb. His blood covers us and takes away God's wrath. We are delivered in a new exodus, accomplished by Jesus' death and resurrection. By his blood, we enter into a new covenant. And as we journey through the wilderness towards the promised new creation, we are provided for along the way with the spiritual nourishment of the bread and wine.

So what are the implications? Well, Paul confronts what was happening in Corinth in two ways. The two so-then statements in verses 27 and 33. Verse 27, they're to celebrate the supper in a worthy manner.

[17 : 03] Doing so unworthily makes us guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ.

In fact, it's so serious that this is why, verse 30, many of the Corinthian community are weak and ill. And a number of them have died already. It's a serious matter then that requires self-examination. Let's note two things here. Firstly, eating in a worthy manner doesn't mean that we first need to be worthy in our own right.

Otherwise, none of us would ever be able to come to the table. Rather, it means acknowledging our sinfulness and trusting in Christ's merit on our behalf.

Secondly, it is rare in the New Testament for God to strike people down. In fact, there are only two recorded instances in our passage and in Acts chapter 5 in the story of Ananias and Sapphira deceiving the church.

[18 : 24] Both cases show how God desires unity and equality in the body of Christ. Both cases show how he hates it when people destroy this by putting themselves higher than others.

And when it comes to the Lord's Supper, we may be expected God to be more concerned about doctrinal error or the proper administration of the sacraments.

But this shows he's more concerned with how we relate to one another than whether we're using the right kind of wine or whatever else it may be.

We may be more concerned about the right kind of wine or the proper administration of the ritual.

We may be more concerned about the dramatization of the ritual than the dissent and division which threaten the unity of a church. So in the context of this passage, we are to examine ourselves to ensure that we are not the cause of division.

To ensure that we are in fellowship with other believers, that all our rifts are healed and disagreements forgotten. To ensure, therefore, that we are celebrating the supper in a worthy manner.

[19 : 32] And this lays the groundwork finally for the second. So then, in verse 33. So then, my brothers and sisters, when we gather, you should do so together.

At church, there's loads of ways that we're able to express our gospel unity. In the ways that we show hospitality to one another.

In the ways that we welcome the stranger and the newcomer. In the ways that we weep with whoever's weeping and rejoice with whoever's rejoicing in a spirit of unity and togetherness.

But in this specific instance of the Lord's Supper, we have an opportunity at St Silas to testify to the unifying power of the gospel.

Not least because we're coming to the communion table from all sorts of different backgrounds and traditions. So what would it look like to exercise our gospel freedom?

[20 : 31] Seeking not our own best interests, but the good of others around us. Seeking to promote not our own preferences about the Lord's Supper. Deeply held, though they may be.

For those of us who are new to the Anglican tradition, and maybe that looks like respecting the tradition that we've come into.

Learning more about its richness. Maybe I'd point us to the relevant articles of the 39 articles for us to examine and meditate on.

And for those of us who are already Anglican, and maybe it means thinking of ways that we can be accommodating and hospitable and loving towards those who are coming in from other Christian traditions and backgrounds.

In the Lord's Supper, we are proclaiming the extravagant costliness of Jesus' sacrifice. We're acknowledging that before a holy God, we don't have a leg to stand on apart from Christ.

[21 : 40] The gospel is a leveler of all, putting us all on an equal footing before God. And this humbling power of the gospel then enables us to live out the self-inconvenencing love for others modeled by Jesus.

What's the most memorable meal you'll ever eat? Well, each time we share the Lord's Supper, we have the opportunity to come together at the table to have something to eat and drink with the Lord Jesus and enjoy his presence.

What a foretaste of glory divine. The most expensive, lavish meal on earth cannot begin, cannot begin to compare with that.

Let's yeah remember all days to enjoy it. Does he want to giveoused his drink?