

ABUSING THE LORD'S TABLE IN WORSHIP
1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 33-34
March 5, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

You may have seen the headline in Wednesday's *Birmingham News*, "Tradition Catching on with Baptists." Any time I see the word "tradition" alongside "Baptist" I usually take the time to read what follows. The topic was how Protestants have begun to take part in Ash Wednesday for its theological lessons. The article centered on three local Baptist churches, two of them Southern Baptist, that participated in an ecumenical Ash Wednesday service at Our Lady of the Universe Catholic Church. The justification for their participation is seen in the following comments from one of the pastors of these churches. "For us to go to the Catholic church, that's something new as Baptists. It unites us as the bigger church, and with a larger tradition... It's being part of a sacred story that belongs to all of us. It's important for us to take the opportunity to confess our sin." On the rubbing and wearing of ashes on the forehead, this pastor continued, "It's the outward, visible symbol of something that's happening internally."

Another Baptist church in the area observed Ash Wednesday on its own. Their pastor was quoted, "It's an appreciation for the symbols of our faith, an opportunity to see, feel, and touch these symbols. We do emphasize that our relationship with Christ is through faith alone, and the Reformers wanted to avoid the appearance that we can gain acceptance with God through rituals and symbols. *Now, people can understand the difference.* These symbols come alongside as reminders" (emphasis mine). So this pastor's justification is based upon our knowledge and understanding of the symbol, which changes the significance and meaning of the symbol itself. A symbol, I might add, that is nowhere to be found in Scripture.

While I am sure that the Roman Catholic tradition of Ash Wednesday began with a noble intent, the practice is not founded upon Scripture. It marks the beginning of the 40 days of Lent, which is a preparation for Easter. As one of the Baptist pastor's that participated with the Catholics in this celebration put it, "It's a good way of putting the congregation in the right mindset to prepare for Easter." One theologian stated how significant this is in the life of a believer, citing the life of Christ as an example. "Jesus goes into the wilderness for 40 days and disciplines himself with fasting and prayer." Hence, the 40 days of Lent.

Do any of these practices seem out of place to you? We can see how easily one can be led astray from Christian doctrine and practice when they wrongly interpret Scripture - in this case what we call *eisogesis*, adding to the Word of God. It is the opposite of what we do in *exegesis*, drawing out of God's Word the truths that He has given to us in Scripture. Further, when one misinterprets Scripture in this way, they misinterpret Christ in relation to both His person and His work. So, much is done in the Church today in the name of Christ that is not really Christian at all.

This was what was happening at the First Church of Corinth. Paul has addressed many issues in this letter to this point, and, as we saw a few weeks ago, in chapters 11-14 he addresses the topic of worship in this church. He began with a reminder of the role that men and women have in public worship as a creation ordinance of God. The man is to lead; the woman is to submit. We will return to this subject in chapter 14 in addressing the woman's proper place in worship. Today, with the Lord's Table as the backdrop, we see what happens when a church, much like the churches described earlier, loses their spiritual sense of God and Christ alone as the focal point of all of their corporate worship. It will serve as a good reminder for us as we prepare our hearts to partake of the Lord's Supper together.

1. The Importance of Right Worship (11:17)

Paul begins with some very somber words for this church, **“But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you.”** His tone changes from what we see in v. 2, where he offers praise where praise could be offered. Now comes rebuke. Paul chastises them for what they were doing when they came together corporately as a church. **“Come together”** or some variant of the root word in the Greek is repeated 5 times in these verses (17, 18, 20, 33, 34). And in verse 17, we see Paul's indictment, **“But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.”**

I can think of nothing harsher than to be told that when you come together as a church, you are tearing down rather than building up. The Corinthians certainly did not expect this. After all, the church was growing. To the leadership, people seemed content and happy in the church. Surely, they thought, we must be doing something right. But nothing was further from the truth. Their gathering was **“not for the better but for the worse.”** What was wrong?

Before we get into what was wrong at Corinth, it will be helpful to see what the church should have looked like, or what any church that is healthy will look like when they worship God as He has prescribed in Scripture. For this we need to look at Acts 2.

Acts 2:37-43 – Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” ³⁸ Peter *said* to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” ⁴⁰ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” ⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴² *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* ⁴³ **Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe;** and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

This “sense of awe” is worship! We must “fear God,” have a holy reverence for God, in our worship. Every element of our time together must be to God and for God. When I preach, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When you hear, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When we sing, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When we pray, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When we read Scripture, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When we tithe, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When we confess our sins, it must be with a “sense of awe.” When we partake of the Lord's Supper, it must be with a “sense of awe.”

This “sense of awe” does not begin when we come together. It must start beforehand by preparing our hearts for worship. Then, when we leave this place, this “sense of awe” should spill over into every aspect of our lives, both personally and corporately. Notice this again in Acts 2.

Acts 2:44-47 – ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Our fellowship must have this “sense of awe.” Our missions and evangelism must have this “sense of awe.” Our motive for all of our service to Christ must be grounded in and flow from a “sense of awe” for God and Christ. This “sense of awe” should define who we are as the people of God, just as it did these early Christians in Acts 2.

I think you get the picture. The Corinthians had lost this “sense of awe.” When they came together, in this instance around the Lord’s Table, they glorified self instead of God. Their worship was self-centered, not God-centered. There was no fear of God. We have seen this born out time and again in this letter. Their worship was all about them and for them and lacked little if anything of God’s prescribed way of worship.

22.1. – The light of nature shows that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. *But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.*

22.2. – Religious worship is to be given to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creatures; and since the fall, not without a mediator, nor in the mediation of any other but Christ alone.

God is the audience!

John 4:26 – Worship in spirit and in truth

2. The Result of Wrong Worship (11:18-19)

Well, if the church at Corinth did not demonstrate an Acts 2 church, then what did it look like? What happens when a church loses its “sense of awe?” Paul writes, “**For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you.**” This is a paradoxical statement. “When you *come together*, there are *divisions*.” This hearkens back to the report that Paul received from Chloe that we read about in chapter 1. There Paul brings to light the division that occurred around baptism and how some were following Peter, some Apollos, some Cephas, and some even arrogantly claimed to be of Christ. There existed these schisms and sects based upon who baptized them. The same thing happened here when they came together at the Lord’s Table. It is interesting that the division Paul notes is around the very ordinances that should have promoted unity in the church, their baptism into the body of Christ and their partaking of the Lord’s Supper that symbolized the body of Christ, of which Christ is the Head.

This division is the very reason that Paul wrote this letter. He pleads with them to truly “come together.” In 1 Cor. 1:10, Paul wrote, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment”. Because of these divisions, Paul said, “I could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). These divisions led to quarrelling in the congregation (1 Cor. 1:11). Paul knew how disruptive and destructive divisions in the church could be. John MacArthur captures the seriousness of division as well.

One of the most fearful things in the church is division, because it is one of the first and surest signs of spiritual sickness. One of the first symptoms of worldliness and backsliding, often before it shows up in compromised doctrine or life-style, is dissension within the congregation. [1 *Corinthians*, 268]

So Paul offers some stern words of rebuke throughout the letter. Notice how these divisions played out in the church at Corinth. In v. 21, Paul writes, **“in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.”** In partaking of the fellowship feast, the rich and influential brought their meal and selfishly gorged themselves before the poorer and lesser-known members arrived. Therefore, they were full of food and wine while the others were left out. Does this sound at all like Acts 2:44-46? “And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were *sharing* them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals *together* with gladness and sincerity of heart.” And when it came to partaking at the Lord's Table, some even did so while drunk.

So the problem that occurred when the Corinthians came together was that they sought to fulfill their physical hunger and thirst but they were not hungering and thirsting after God. They were satisfied with the temporal while their spiritual needs went unmet. They were content with the meat and drink of the feast. Since they did not hunger and thirst for God, the Lord's Table had little if any effect in them spiritually. Here we see the significance of this as it relates to worship. What you truly worship, your real “sense of awe,” will drive your practice. What is on the inside will come out.

What was Paul's assessment of their actions? After already telling them that their practice together was **“not for the better but for the worse,”** Paul gives his apostolic appraisal of the situation, **“Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.”** Translation, “When you come together for worship, it is not really worship at all. You might be going through the motions, but this really has nothing to do with what the Lord instituted for His church.” As we saw in Acts 2, the Lord's Supper was practiced every time they came together. It was a vital part of their congregational worship. The Supper was preceded by a time of fellowship known as “the agape feast,” a time when they should have come together to fellowship *as one* in the body of Christ, celebrating the commonness they shared as being the children of God. The feast ended with each partaking of the Lord's Supper, remembering the body and the blood that was given for them, all of them who knew Christ. It was a time to remember not only what Christ had accomplished on their behalf personally, but corporately as the very body of Christ. It should have been a time where their *unity in Christ* was emphasized as Paul had written earlier in 1 Cor. 10:16-17, “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.” However, notice what happened when they took their eyes off of “Christ crucified.” As MacArthur rightly attests, “They had the ceremony but not the reality. They had the form but not the substance” [269]. They made a mockery out of both the feast and the Lord's Table to the point where the feast, which was always associated with the Lord's Supper in the early church, was finally separated from it altogether in an effort to protect the sanctity of the Supper. So the rich and influential went away fulfilled, but in the wrong way, and the others went away empty, both physically and spiritually.

Paul then closes with a series of rhetorical questions to emphasize his rebuke of their actions. **“What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?”** If the Corinthians wanted to engage in this gluttonous practice then they needed to do so in their own homes. Paul says this straightforwardly in v. 34, “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment.” Judgment? Why would there be judgment?

Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? Their actions constituted an insult to the church of Christ. By their actions they spurned both the church and the poor. Notice the connection between the church and the poor. Who did Jesus say would inherit the kingdom of heaven? (Matt. 5:3).

What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? The answer is obvious. Paul could not condone their contemptuous practice. **“In this I will not praise you.”** Although he knew that the Corinthians had homes and did not intend to destroy the church or shame the poor, Paul tells them they are not deserving of any approval from him regarding their behavior at the love feast and the Lord's Table.

Conclusion

The Corinthians had it all wrong and we have seen why. They did not focus on “Christ crucified” and they had no “sense of awe” when they came together. What we do when we come together is important. As we come to this time of the Lord's Supper this morning, do you approach the Table with wonder and amazement for God and Christ? As a church, when one from outside the fellowship of Grace Covenant looks at us, do they see a church that has a fear of God and a mutual love and respect for every person in the body? As we partake together this morning, may we remember the unity that we have in Christ and Him crucified, in His body and His blood.