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The Snack We Call Supper

At the last church that I pastored, I required that our ushers wear a coat and tie on those once-a-month Sundays when we celebrated the Lord's Supper. It seemed to me that those who distributed the elements of Jesus' body and blood should demonstrate at least that much respect in performing their sacred duty.

On one of those Communion Sundays, while an usher was driving his family to the church, his five-year-old son noticed that he was wearing a coat and tie. He innocently asked, "Dad, is this the Sunday that we all eat God's holy snack?"

When his father later recounted that story to me, it was an emperor's-new-clothes moment of revelation. I had stood in front of congregations hundreds of times and said, "Let us prepare our hearts to receive the Lord's Supper," and then proceeded to pass out a miniscule cracker and a thimble-sized sip of grape juice. And nobody ever questioned it! And what we were doing had been done in millions of churches for hundreds of years! A five-year-old boy had exposed centuries of blind tradition---the snack we call supper.

The Way Things Were

Of course, just about everyone knows that the original Lord's Supper was a full meal, a Passover meal, shared by intimate friends who believed in Jesus. And anyone who reads the relevant passages from the New Testament can ascertain in minutes that in the early church, the Lord's *Supper* was indeed a *supper*---a full meal---shared by people who loved each other like family. So when and why did the Lord's Supper become a holy snack? And what difference does it make if we celebrate the Lord's Supper as did the

early church?

Before we tackle those questions, let's first take a look at Paul's words to the Corinthian Christians regarding the Lord's Supper. That will help us begin to understand what many of us have been missing.

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed 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." In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment (1 Cor. 11:20-34).

From looking at the first and last verses of that passage, one often-overlooked fact stands out. *Clearly, eating the Lord's Supper was a primary reason that the early Christians assembled.* At least some of their gatherings revolved around a common meal, and that meal they called "the Lord's Supper." Take another look at those first and last verses to see for yourself:

Therefore *when you meet together*, it is not to eat *the Lord's Supper*, for in your eating each one takes his *own supper* first [that is, you say you are gathering to eat the Lord's Supper, but the way you are doing it reveals something else]; and one is hungry and another is drunk...So then, my brethren, *when you come together to eat...* (1 Cor. 11:20, 34, emphasis added).

It is also obvious from these two verses that the Lord's Supper was an actual meal. Once that is settled, a few other scriptures that describe early church life seem to take on new meaning. For example, Luke describes four activities that characterized the first Christians, one of which was eating common meals:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, *to the breaking of bread* and to prayer (Acts 2:42, emphasis added).

And just a few verses later, Luke again highlights those common meals:

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, praising God and having favor with all the people (Acts 2:46-47, emphasis added).

Although Luke doesn't specifically refer to these meals as being the Lord's Supper, they certainly are similar to Paul's description of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:20-34. And we might ask, If the Lord's Supper is a common meal, what would be the major difference between a common meal that is *not* the Lord's Supper and a common meal that *is* the Lord's Supper, especially when bread and wine were the most common elements of an average meal in that day? (We might even go further and ask, Because Jesus said "Do this, *as often as your drink it*, in remembrance of Me," is it possible that He wanted them to remember Him *every time* they drank the most common beverage of their day?)

Paul and Luke's descriptions of early church life expose the vast difference between what was typical then and now. The Lord's Supper is generally not the reason that we meet today. Rather, the modern version of the Lord's Supper is tagged on near the end of a Sunday service. Moreover, it is not a supper at all, but a little snack. (Actually, the "pot-luck dinners" that some modern churches occasionally enjoy are closer to what the Lord's Supper looked like in the New Testament.)

The Agapé Meal

It seems safe to conclude that Jude also referred to common Christian meals in his little epistle, calling them "love feasts" (see Jude 1:12). Those common meals were indeed a feast of love, a meal at which those who could brought food to share with the poor among them, which is precisely what Paul described in 1 Corinthians 11:20-23:

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and *one is hungry and another is drunk*. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and *shame those who have nothing*? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you (1 Cor. 11:20-23).

Keep in mind that when Paul wrote, "Or do you despise the church of God?," he wasn't

talking about despising a building where the Christians went to church. He was talking about the Christians *themselves*. Getting drunk and hogging all the food at a gathering of the saints is a sure way to expose how lightly one esteems God's children, the church. By so doing, one "despises the church of God." Perhaps those food hogs were the types of people Jude had in mind when he wrote, "These are men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves" (Jude 1:12).

But let's return to Paul's words. The Corinthian Christians could not rightfully call their common meal *the Lord's Supper* because selfishness pervaded rather than love. Everyone who was able brought food and wine to the meal, but not all arrived at the same time. The earliest arrivals were eating without waiting for the others, and by the time the rest arrived---who were apparently sometimes so poor that they were unable to bring any food---everything had already been consumed. Some of the earlier arrivals were even inebriated from drinking all the wine, while late-comers left hungrier than when they arrived. Not much of a "love feast"!

This is why Paul admonished the Corinthians in a concluding sentence,

So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home (1 Cor. 11:33-34).

A Unique Gathering

Clearly, the Lord's Supper in the early church was a gathering of Christians from different social and economic classes, something that made it absolutely unique on planet Earth, a veritable foretaste of the marriage feast of the Lamb. *Caring for the poor is part and parcel of what Christianity is intended to be, so much so that it was a component of the Lord's sacred Supper that was regularly and frequently enjoyed by the early Christians.*

By means of the Lord's Supper, the first believers fulfilled a commandment of Christ that seems to be virtually ignored today:

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

Surely such a dinner would truly be a "love feast"!

But back to the Corinthians. They were, *in part*, fulfilling the commandment of Christ that we just read. They *invited* the poor among them to a common meal. However, before the poor arrived, they were eating all the food! And by so doing, they were setting

themselves up for God's judgment:

If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, *so that you will not come together for judgment* (1 Cor. 11:34, emphasis added).

Paul elaborated more specifically on that judgment in the preceding verses:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

The judgment/discipline that some Corinthians were suffering was weakness, sickness, and even premature death. Those judgments fell upon them not simply for the act of hogging all the food or getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. Those were but symptoms of a larger heart-issue, what Paul referred to as "not judging the body rightly" (11:29).

Perhaps Paul was speaking of the need for each person to properly regard *the body of Christ*, the body of believers, lest anyone, as he said earlier, "despise the church of God" (11:22)---an attitude that was revealed, for example, when they ignored or mistreated the poor among them at the Lord's Supper. The very act of eating all the bread with no concern for hungry late-comers made a mockery of what is represented by partaking of the single loaf---our unity with Christ and each other (see 1 Cor. 10:16-17).

The only other possibility is that Paul was speaking of each person judging his own selfish fleshy nature, again, something that was revealed by the inconsiderate behavior of many at the Lord's Supper.

Both interpretations yield the same conclusion: Partaking of the Lord's Supper---what is supposed to be a remembrance of Jesus' amazing love for us and an expression of our love for one another---can be deadly if done in "an unworthy manner" (11:27), that is, selfishly. Selfishness as a tacit denial of everything the Lord's Supper represents. Imagine a few people hogging all the food and drink at the Lord's Supper so that some of the "least of these" among Christ's brethren went home hungrier than when they arrived! When that happens, the sheep look no different than the goats. And we know how God feels about the goats! (If not, see Matt. 25:31-46).

Thus you can then understand why God disciplined such goat-like sheep at Corinth. Amazingly, even *that* was an act of His mercy, as Paul wrote, "When we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world" (11:32). The world will one day be condemned to hell, but God disciplines us to call us

back to the narrow path to eternal life. We can avoid His judgment if we, as Paul wrote, "judged ourselves rightly" (1 Cor. 11:31). That means to confess and forsake our selfishness.

I hope you are beginning to see that the little ritual we rehearse in our churches is a far cry from what the Lord originally intended for His special supper of love. And I hope no one thinks I'm calling for nothing more than a relocation of the Lord's Supper from church buildings to homes, along with an increase in the portion sizes of the food! The greater issue is our love for one another.

Naturally, a joyous meal in a home is a better opportunity to express our love for each other than is a two-minute snack that we swallow while staring at the back of someone else's head.

But more importantly, sharing some of our food with poor believers has a whole lot more to do with loving our neighbors as ourselves (a fairly important commandment) than piously participating in a church ritual that is based mostly on Roman Catholic tradition. I tend to think that no matter if we partake of the Lord's Supper as a snack in a church or as a full meal in a home, we are just as guilty as the Corinthians if we aren't caring for those in the body of Christ who have little or no food, even if they live in another nation. What a mockery is made of the Lord's Supper by professing Christians who sanctimoniously sip the wine yet who could care less about their brothers and sisters in Christ who are starving. They, like the Corinthians, are eating and drinking judgment upon themselves, and unless they repent, they too will be condemned along with the world, just as Christ promised in Matthew 25:31-46.

Spontaneous Lord's Suppers

I think it is quite possible that many of us have been enjoying the Lord's Supper to some degree without even knowing it, as we naturally have been drawn to share meals with those with whom we feel our relationships are sacred and spiritual. This occurs naturally when people are born again. As Paul wrote, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (1 Thes. 4:9). And John wrote, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14).

Love is part of the salvation package. Yet how many sincere pastors have discovered that many of the people in their churches have no genuine interest in meeting with other Christians in small spiritual groups, much less actually gathering in a home to share a meal together? Such people will attend a Sunday-morning show and even shake a few hands during the "fellowship minute." But they really don't love each other. As soon as they've put in their time, the goats are running for the parking lot.

Meanwhile, for the sheep, church often really begins *after* the benediction. They stand around for a long time talking, or head out for lunch where the real food is spiritual and the fellowship is filling. And of course, they don't do it because they feel obligated, but

because they really *want* to. The early Christians did not gather for common meals because they read something in the book of Acts about Christians sharing common meals and wanted to "get back to the biblical pattern." They did it because they wanted to do it! This principal is true for so much of what is truly the work of God. Any pastor who tries to motivate the goats to act like sheep is wasting his time. Rather, he needs to proclaim the true gospel until the goats run or repent. Those who repent God will turn into sheep. Then they'll start acting like sheep, naturally (or perhaps I should say, *supernaturally*).

True Orthodoxy

Christian history indicates that it wasn't until the end of the second century that the bread and wine began to be separated from the meal of the Lord's Supper. By the end of the fourth century, the love feast was actually prohibited by the Council of Carthage. In the centuries that followed, the Lord's Supper evolved into a somber and mystical ritual during which the bread and wine actually changed into Christ's body and blood---a holy sacrifice that could only be administered by an ordained priest in a sacred spot of a sacred building.

I've asked pastors all over the developing world, "*What would be your reaction if you heard that some of your church members were meeting in a private home to celebrate the Lord's Supper, without you or some other ordained minister being present to officiate and to bless and distribute the elements?*" Most of them confess that their gut reaction would be one of extreme alarm, because such a thing would seem to be heretical! I then usually chide them that they are really just Roman Catholic priests! They have been blindly following an unbiblical tradition that goes back more than 1,700 years! They may not believe that the bread and juice actually become Christ's literal body and blood, but just about everything else is the same.

The truth is, however, that the Lord's Supper as practiced by the early Christians never occurred in a special church building, but in homes. And it was never a little snack but always a full meal. And there was never an "ordained minister" present to "officiate," because there were no "ordained ministers" and Scripture leads us to believe that ordinary Christians enjoyed the Lord's Supper together. Moreover, at the Lord's Supper, the poor were fed. And every Bible scholar who has written about the Lord's Supper as it was practiced by the early church will affirm these things (if you don't trust me or the Bible!).

I wonder now, how many pastors reading this (there are hundreds on our e-mail list) will just keep doing it the same old *non-traditional* way, or how many will take steps to begin to educate their congregations in order to do it the Lord's way---the biblical way---the *orthodox* way? (If your church is nothing more than a gathering place for goats, get ready for a lot of "butts"!)