

Working Paper on 1 Corinthians 11.26

(For the Report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission concerning Fellowship meals for the proclamation of Christ's death : December 2014.)

The key text in any discussion of the appropriateness of having 'fellowship meals for the proclamation of Christ's death' is 1 Corinthians 11.26: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' While Paul was clearly not prescribing the only way in which believers may 'proclaim the Lord's death' (see 1 Corinthians 2:2), it is instructive to consider what kind of occasion he had in mind here.

The logic of the passage is as follows:

Verses 17-22: When the Corinthians gathered as a church and ate together, their conduct during the meal was disgraceful. Stemming possibly from the divisions and factions among them, some were eating and drinking to excess, while others went hungry.

Verses 23-26: Paul says that he cannot commend this behaviour because (*gar*) he had already passed onto them what Jesus had done and said on the night of his betrayal — a tradition that had relevance to the situation at hand because ('for' v. 26) their own eating and drinking was a proclamation of the Lord's death.

Verses 27-32: Given this connection between their church meal and the death of Jesus, anyone who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner (i.e. as described earlier in vv. 20-22) is guilty of profaning the Lord's death and liable to the disciplinary judgement of the Lord. This makes pre-emptive self-examination a dire necessity (vv. 28, 31).

Verses 33-34: The conclusion is that when they come together to eat, they should be considerate and 'wait for one another', and so not bring judgement upon themselves.

With respect to verse 26, what constitutes the proclamation of the Lord's death? Two options present themselves:

- a. The remembrance and proclamation were linked to a specific eating and drinking that involved a symbolic repetition or re-enactment of Jesus' words and actions at the Last Supper, in obedience to Jesus' words, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'
- b. The Corinthian church meals were by their very nature a memorial to and proclamation of the saving power of Jesus' death, because they brought together disparate, forgiven people into table fellowship on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice.

These understandings are outlined below.

Option A

1. Paul's thought in vv. 23-27 may be paraphrased as follows: 'The reason why your treatment of one another at your meals is worthy of the strongest condemnation is (1) *because (gar)*, as I have previously told you, Jesus commanded us to break and eat bread symbolic of his body given and to drink from a cup symbolic of his blood shed in remembrance of him (vv. 23-25), and (2) *because (gar)* whenever you do these things you are proclaiming his death until he comes (v. 26). *Therefore (hoste)*, if anyone engages in such a proclamation but neglects and despises others in the process (as some of you are in fact doing), they are guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord himself (v. 27).'
2. Support for this interpretation is found in the particular designations 'eat *this bread* and drink *the cup*' (v. 26) and the further description of the cup as 'the cup *of the Lord*' (v. 27), which link the actions of the Corinthians with bread and cup to the specific actions of Jesus at the beginning and end of the Last Supper. Indeed, the word 'for' at the beginning of v. 26 explains how the Corinthians' later eating of 'this bread' and drinking 'the cup' perform the remembrance function which Jesus' commanded: to break and eat 'this bread' with an understanding that it is symbolic of Jesus' body given for us, and to drink from 'the cup' with an understanding that it is symbolic of the new covenant in Jesus' blood, is to proclaim his death. Consequently, it is not the case that simply sharing a common meal proclaims the Lord's death (in the sense that Paul here uses the language of 'proclamation'). Rather it is the sharing of a meal that includes the breaking of bread (most likely at the beginning of the meal) in conscious remembrance of Jesus' body given for us, and the sharing of a cup (most likely at the end of the meal) in conscious remembrance of Jesus' blood poured out for our redemption.
3. Paul's purpose in quoting Jesus' 'words of institution', then, is not, in the first instance, to highlight the Corinthians' selfishness by reminding them of Christ's self-sacrifice. Indeed if this was his primary purpose it is difficult to see why he should recount Jesus' actions and words at such length and in

such detail, and why, in particular, he should invoke the language of 'tradition': 'For what I received (*parelabon*) from the Lord I also passed on (*paredoka*) to you' (v. 23). Such language ties this verse to the beginning of the chapter, where Paul praises the Corinthians for keeping of the traditions (*paredoka*) he had passed on (*paradoseis*) to them (11:2). It also makes clear that Jesus' words, 'do this as often as you drink it (and eat it) in remembrance of me' were among the 'traditions' that the Corinthians had received and were maintaining. In light of this, vv. 23-25 serve to remind the Corinthians *why* they 'eat this bread and drink the cup' at their meals, and v. 26 explains *what* these particular actions amount to; i.e., a corporate proclamation of the Lord's death.

4. The specific link between Jesus' actions with bread and cup and the Corinthians' actions with bread and cup is further strengthened by Paul's repetition of the words 'as often as' (*hosakis*) in the narrative of the Last Supper (v. 25) and again in reference to the Corinthians' supper (v. 26). That is, Jesus said, 'Do this, as *often* as you drink it, in remembrance of me' (v. 25), and so Paul concludes, 'For as *often* as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (v. 26). This suggests that Paul understands the Corinthians' eating and drinking of the bread and cup as an instance of what Jesus, at the Last Supper, instructed his disciples to do – i.e., to continue breaking bread (symbolic of his body given) and sharing a cup (symbolic of his blood shed) in order to remember him (Luke 22:19-20).
5. Whilst the expression 'eat and drink' can refer to the two main components of a meal (e.g., Luke 5:30, 17:8; 22:30; 1 Cor. 10:7; 11:22; 15:32), Paul's referents in 1 Corinthians 11:26-29 are quite specific and closely connected; i.e., 'eats and drinks' (in v. 29) refers to 'eat of the bread and drink of the cup' (in v. 28), 'eats the bread' and 'drinks the cup of the Lord' (in v. 27) and 'eats this bread and drinks the cup' (in v. 26). In 1 Corinthians 10, these 'elements' are spoken of as 'the bread that we break' (v. 16) and 'the one bread' (v. 17 twice), and 'the cup of blessing that we bless' (v. 16). Behind all of this lie Jesus' words and actions with bread and cup at the Last Supper, to which Paul refers explicitly in 11:23-25. These links militate against the view that Paul is simply using 'bread' and 'cup' as metonyms for the two main components of the Corinthians' meals. He has in mind a particular 'bread' rite and a particular 'cup' rite, which frame the common meal.
6. Paul is clearly outraged by the Corinthians' selfish and divisive behaviour at their meals. But there is something especially significant about eating 'this bread' and drinking 'the cup of the Lord' that is vital to his indictment of them. Certainly, Paul's quotation of Jesus' words explains why he cannot commend them (v. 22) and likewise sets up for the indictment that is coming in vv. 27ff (hence the 'for' at the beginning of v. 23). But Jesus' words themselves are not the indictment. The indictment comes in v. 27, and follows on quite naturally and logically from what has gone before (hence the 'therefore' at the beginning of the verse): to engage in such a proclamation in an unworthy manner (in this case, by despising the body that is the church) is to be found 'guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord' (i.e., to be liable to judgement for sinning against the Lord's body and blood, symbolised by the bread and cup). In other words, the indictment is not simply that the Corinthians were acting *selfishly*; it's much worse than that. Because they were acting *selfishly* (failing to discern the body), while they were eating 'this bread' and drinking 'the cup of the Lord', they were acting *sacrilegiously* (dishonouring the Lord himself). This makes their outward observance of the 'tradition' highly hypocritical and deserving of the strongest condemnation.
7. To sum up: Paul will not commend the Corinthians' behaviour at their church meals because they are dividing and despising the church of God, by neglecting and humiliating those who have nothing (vv. 17-22). What's more, this is happening at a meal that is suppose to be a remembrance meal in honour of the Lord himself. It is little wonder that some of them have experienced the Lord's discipline as a consequence (vv. 30-32). The Corinthians should have known the significance of this meal, for Paul had handed on to them the tradition he had received 'from the Lord', which instructed them to repeat certain of his actions at the Last Supper in order that, at their meals, they might recall and proclaim his death 'until he comes' (v. 26). Therefore, whilst all Christian meals are inherently significant, and no doubt constitute some kind of general 'proclamation' of the power of the Lord's death, it is the repetition of Jesus' actions of breaking and eating bread symbolic of his body given and sharing a cup symbolic of his blood shed ('Do this') that are the key to remembering him in the way that he has instructed ('in remembrance of me') and are, therefore, an essential part of the 'proclamation' that Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 11:26.

Option B

1. The first reason for doubting the existence of a symbolic or re-enactive aspect to the Corinthian meal is simply that there is no overt description or mention of this in the passage. When the Corinthian meal is described, it is simply as a 'dinner' (*deipnon* v. 20) and as 'coming together to eat' (v. 33). The presence of symbolic elements has to be assumed or inferred.

2. The words 'this bread' and 'the cup' and 'the cup of the Lord' in vv. 26-27 can be read quite naturally as referring to the bread and the cup of *this particular meal* (that is, this church meal that the Corinthians are engaged in as an act of fellowship in Christ, on the basis of his death). This would be consistent with Paul's language in chapter 10, where 'the cup of the Lord' is synonymous with the 'table of the Lord', and stands in stark contrast to the 'cup/table of demons' (10:21). In that passage (10:14-22), a meal is an act of fellowship or participation (*koinonia*)—whether in Christ and his death, or Israel and its altar, or the demons and their idols. This is why it is so grossly inconsistent for the Corinthians to fellowship with and in Christ (as they eat together), and at the same time to fellowship with demons by participating in their idolatrous feasts.
3. In much the same way, in chapter 11, it is grossly inconsistent for the church meal of the Corinthians to be an occasion of selfishness, factionalism and drunkenness, since it is an act of new covenant fellowship in Christ by his blood. To sully such an occasion with divisive, unworthy eating and drinking is to show contempt for the sacrifice of Christ, and for the church, which is his body.
4. Paul's repetition of the Last Supper tradition (vv. 22-25) emphasizes this link between the Corinthian church meals and the redeeming power of Jesus' death. At the Last Supper, Jesus recast the Passover meal to be a memorial feast that pointed no longer to the Exodus redemption, but to his imminent substitutionary death. In the same way, Paul is saying, all subsequent new covenant meals ('as often as you drink') function as memorials or monuments to the redeeming, unifying death of Jesus. And so Christ's words (as repeated by Paul) are not a command to institute a particular kind of symbolic meal, but a paradigmatic statement about the nature of all Christian fellowship meals.
5. Interestingly, Paul has additional words to Luke's version of the tradition. With respect to the cup, he adds 'as often as you drink' (nb. not 'as often as you drink *it*'), and also a second 'Do this in remembrance of me.' Why does Paul want to emphasize that whenever they drink, it is in remembrance of Jesus? And what is the connection between this emphasis on remembrance, and the subsequent conclusion that their meal is a proclamation of the Lord's death?
6. The answer lies in how we how we read *eis ten emen anamnesin* ('for my remembrance'). Perhaps because of our history, we tend to take this phrase as referring to each participant in the meal remembering Jesus' death as a personal stimulus to ongoing faith in him. But the texts (in Luke and 1 Corinthians) don't specify the subject of the remembering, only its object. It is not 'so that (each of) you may remember me' but the subject-less 'for the remembrance of me' (or as we might say in English, 'in memory of me', or 'as a reminder of me'; cf Heb 10:3). If the phrase is taken in this latter sense, it would explain why the emphasis on 'remembrance' in vv. 24-25 leads to 'proclamation' in v. 26. Whenever we eat together as a fellowship united by the blood of Jesus, it is a vivid reminder (to ourselves, each another and the world) of the powerful once-for-all sin-bearing death of Jesus.
7. To sum up: Paul will not commend the Corinthians' behaviour at their church meals *because* ('for' at the beginning of v. 23) he has already told them about the meal on the night Jesus was betrayed. That meal pointed to Jesus' substitutionary death for them, and anticipated subsequent meals ('as often as'), because whenever Christians gather in Christ and share table fellowship in his name they proclaim to one another and to the world the nature and power of Jesus' death. The Corinthian behaviour was unacceptable because of the significance of the fellowship meal itself, not because of a re-enactment of the Last Supper that took place at the time of the meal. The understanding presented here has the added advantage of accounting for the lack of clear reference to the practice of a meal based in some specific way on the Last Supper anywhere else in the New Testament.