

Last month, a government minister in the UK came under fire because of his recent travel itinerary. Over the past seven months, Mr Alok Sharma has visited more than 30 different countries on government business.

For some this was a problem because of the pandemic and the fact that many of these countries have been on the UK's red list, and Mr Sharma did not self-isolate when he returned from there.

But the other reason for this criticism is that Mr Sharma is actually the president of COP26 - the United Nations climate change conference due to take place in Glasgow in November.

And so to many people, it seemed a bit ridiculous that the man who will bring together the world's leaders to talk about how we can reduce our impact on our environment has been himself taking all these flights which is seen as a major contributor to the problem.

Now I don't know if those trips were a necessary part of his role or not. It is not for me to judge. But it doesn't ever look good to be saying one thing while doing the other. At the very least, it sends a mixed message.

In a sense, this is what the church in Corinth were doing when they met together for worship. They claimed that they were sharing communion together, which should have celebrated the selfless sacrifice of Christ to unite them together in the church. But in actual fact, they were doing this in such a self-indulgent way that it instead highlighted and deepened the divisions that existed between them.

And so in our next section of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul called this church to get back to celebrating the Lord's Supper!

1 Corinthians 11:17-34: "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.

¹⁸In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. ²²Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. ³²When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

³³So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. ³⁴If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions."

1. The Situation in Corinth

The situation in this church was really bad. In fact, it was so messed up that Paul said that "Your meetings do more harm than good." 1 Corinthians 11:17. Instead of building up and encouraging them, their times of worship and fellowship were actually tearing them apart. They went away in a worse state than when they arrived.

And the reason for this was because "When you come together as a church, there are divisions among you." 1 Corinthians 11:18 As we've seen before in this letter, this church was deeply divided.

- They were divided over their favourite celebrity leaders. Remember how some followed Paul, others followed Apollos, and others Peter.
- They were also divided over legal issues. Remember how they were suing each other in the local court.
- And more recently we read how they were divided over their different attitudes to food that had been sacrificed to idols.

a) The Wrong Meal

But this church was also divided over economic differences – over how much money they had. As a result Paul said that “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat.” 1 Corinthians 11:20

The Lord’s Supper is another name for our communion service, when we break bread and drink from the cup together. And in the early church, it seems that this usually took place as part of a meal.

Just like we used to do in those good old days before Covid, they shared a meal together as an expression of love. And then as part of that meal, they would break bread and drink from the cup. This was possibly because Jesus instituted communion during the Passover Meal on the night before he went to the cross.

But what this church was doing was not the Lord’s Supper. It was not an expression of love and commitment to each other and it was not a celebration of Christ’s loving sacrifice. “For as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.” 1 Corinthians 11:21

People weren’t sharing their food with each other. The wealthier people were coming with lots of food and drink – and without waiting on others to arrive, they were stuffing their faces and getting drunk. And so when those who were poorer arrived, they had nothing to eat or drink.

b) A Lack of Love

And so Paul challenged them: “Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” 1 Corinthians 11:22

This was not a fellowship meal. This was not a time to focus on Christ. This was nothing more than an expression of self-indulgence and greed. And they were doing all of this at the cost of weakening the community of God’s people and humiliating their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ.

2. The Seriousness of Their Abuse

But there were other serious consequences to their actions. “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.” 1 Corinthians 11:30

Now we need to be really careful with this.

- Paul was not saying that everyone who was ill or who had died in this church was suffering the consequences of their sin in how they took communion.
- Neither was he saying that everyone who does take communion wrongly will experience illness or death.
- And neither was he suggesting that some of these people had lost their salvation. Jesus promised: “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” John 5:24 If we’ve trusted in Jesus, then our salvation is secure.

But what Paul was saying was that some people in this church experienced illness or death because they ate the bread and drank the cup in an unworthy manner. This was the serious consequences of their sin!

a) Sinning Against Christ

That’s because, Paul said that they were “Guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.” 1 Corinthians 11:27. By despising the poorer members of that church and having no concern about how their brothers and sisters in Christ were impacted by their actions, they were showing a complete disregard for what Jesus had accomplished for them on the cross.

Yes, they were eating the bread and drinking the cup that as we’ll see in a minute was supposed to help them remember and worship the Lord. But by their lack of love and consideration of those for whom Christ died, they were showing that they really did not value his sacrifice at all.

b) Sinning Against the Church

This is what Paul meant by eating the bread or drinking the cup “in an unworthy manner.” 1 Corinthians 11:27. This is not about our worthiness to take part in this fellowship meal with Christ. None of us are worthy of that. We can only do this as a gift of God’s grace.

Instead, eating and drinking in an unworthy manner, is taking part in communion in a way that is inconsistent with what Jesus has done. It is claiming to be in fellowship with Christ while at the same time acting in a way that is divisive and destructive to the fellowship of his church.

And it was this lack of love for God's people that brought such serious judgement from God on this local church. ["For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."](#) 1 Corinthians 11:29

This is how much Christ identifies with his church. It is his body. So we can't claim to love him, if we do not love his people. We can't honour him as our Saviour and Lord, if we're not willing to honour each other as our brothers and sisters in Christ!

This was the disastrous situation in Corinth. Their meetings were so far from what they should've been, that their spiritual, community and even physical health was being impacted!

3. The Symbolism Of The Meal

But what's amazing here, is how Paul responded to this church. It was in a mess, but he didn't give up on them. He didn't wash his hands of them and walk away. He didn't tell them to close the church down.

Instead he believed that God was at work in them to transform them, to help them to change. That's what he believed the purpose of God's judgement was. ["When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world."](#) 1 Corinthians 11:32

This judgement was not God rejecting them. Instead it was God disciplining them. He loved them and wanted them to be trained by this, to grow into the worshipping and loving community that he'd called them to be.

And so Paul responded to this situation and these serious consequences, by teaching them again about the beautiful symbolism of the meal.

He said, ["For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you."](#) 1 Corinthians 11:23. We don't know how Paul received this teaching. He wasn't there when Jesus instituted this meal. But the Lord had taught this to Paul, and he wanted to remind these Christians and us, what it all meant.

a) Look Back

First of all, he told them to look back. ["The Lord Jesus, on the night 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."](#) 1 Corinthians 11:24

The night before he went to the cross, as he ate with his disciples in that upper room, Jesus took an ordinary piece of bread, and he broke and he shared it with his disciples and told them to eat it together.

And as we mentioned a few weeks ago, this was not to pay for sins. This was not to be a continuation or repetition of the sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross a few hours later. Jesus' sacrifice was a once off event. It paid our debt in full!

Instead this was to be done in remembrance of him. The broken bread was to be a symbol to help us to remember Jesus – to remember that his body was broken under the weight of our sin, that he died for us, in our place, to pay the price that should have been ours.

["In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."](#) 1 Corinthians 11:25

Again this cup does not take away our sins. Rather it is a symbol of the new covenant, the new agreement or contract with God that we've been brought into through the blood, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

And so as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we look back and remember what Jesus accomplished for us. And so

- We're humbled to see again in Christ's suffering the depth of our sin, the awful consequence of our rebellion against God as ["He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."](#) 1 Peter 2:24.
- But we're also amazed to see again the depth of God love for us as ["God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."](#) Romans 5:8
- And we're also filled with joy as we see again the power of God's salvation as, ["He was pierced for our transgression, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."](#) Isaiah 53:5

And so communion is first of all, a remembrance feast. It is God's gift to us, to help us to look back and remember all that he has done in giving us his Son! It brings us back to the centre of our faith, the foundation of our lives, the reason for our

hope, so that we can express our gratitude, love and worship for the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

b) Look Ahead

But Paul also wanted us to look forward. “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” 1 Corinthians 11:26

There are no commands in the Bible as to how often we should take the bread and cup. Some churches only do this now and again, others once a month. We of course usually do it every week – as we believe it should be at the core of our church life.

But however often we do this, one day we’ll stop. One day we won’t need the symbols of the bread and cup anymore. That’s because communion is not a funeral service for a dead hero. Rather it is the victory celebration of our Risen Lord.

He defeated death and rose from the grave and ascended into heaven and is seated at the Father’s right hand interceding for us. And one day he will return “And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

And so as we take communion, we look forward in eager expectation to meeting our Saviour face to face and being with him forever!

c) Look Within

But before we do this, Paul wanted us to look within. “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” 1 Corinthians 11:28

This is an opportunity for us to examine our lives and to judge our sins and to confess them to the Lord and receive again his full and free forgiveness. This is a much better idea than waiting for the Lord’s hand of discipline in our lives: “If we judged ourselves we would not come under judgement.” 1 Corinthians 11:29

But we need to remember what Paul was saying here. He wasn’t encouraging us to examine ourselves to see if we’re worthy of eating this meal, because we’ll never be worthy of that! This meal is not for people who think that they are living a good life. Rather it’s for sinners who know they’ve been forgiven!

Instead, Paul was telling us to examine whether we’re eating this meal in a worthy way! Are we eating in a way that is consistent with what Jesus has done in our lives?

In this feast we celebrate Christ’s love and grace in laying down his life to reconcile us to himself and unite us together with him in his body. And so we need to eat it in a way that reflects Christ’s love and grace for each other.

We need to examine our hearts to ensure we’re not holding on to any attitudes of pride, selfishness, division, resentment or unforgiveness. If we are, then we need to heed Jesus’ teaching to “First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” Matthew 5:24

d) Look Around

And so Paul said to this church that, “When you come together to eat, wait for each other.” 1 Corinthians 11:33 Instead of selfishly thinking of themselves, he wanted this church to be patient and loving and respectful of each other.

And so finally, in communion we need to look around – not to criticise, compete or condemn others – but to recognise the body of Christ and cultivate the unity that Christ has formed through the sacrifice of himself, so that, “We who are many, are one body.” 1 Corinthians 11:17

Conclusion

So, this morning, let’s be careful that we don’t say one thing while doing the other. As we take communion each Sunday together, let’s do it in a worthy manner, in a way that is consistent with what Jesus has done. Let’s

- Look back and remember Jesus and his willing sacrifice of himself for us.
- Look forward in eager expectation of his return.
- Look within and examine ourselves to see if our attitude to our brothers and sisters in Christ is right.
- And look around and celebrate that by his grace, we have become the children of God.