



**Temple Baptist Church**  
Wilmington, North Carolina  
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**The Meaning of This Meal**  
**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

The Lord's Supper, Holy Communion. In Acts it was called "the breaking of bread." In the second century, Christians called it "the Eucharist," from the Greek word for giving thanks. Many churches today still use that name. Most other Christians, including our British Baptist brothers and sisters, refer to Communion as a "sacrament"; most Baptists in North America prefer to call it an "ordinance."

We call it by a lot of different names, but *what does it mean?* What happens when we partake of this simple meal? What is being expressed when we eat the bread and drink the cup?

***Some context . . .***

When we look at what Paul said to the Corinthian church here in our text, it appears that they had lost sight of the meaning of the Lord's Supper—if they ever had really understood it.

The problem was *the way they were partaking* of the Supper. As Paul put it, they were making it their own supper rather than the *Lord's Supper*.

Earlier in this letter, Paul had warned the Corinthians about divisions based on personalities and loyalty to certain leaders. Here he warned them about divisions based on economic and social status.

From the text, this seems to be the picture. In the first couple of centuries, churches generally didn't have their own buildings, but met in homes—house churches that would from time to time come together as the church in a city.

The Corinthian church was made up of some fairly well-to-do members as well as laborers and slaves. So it would be reasonable for the well-to-do members to host the church for worship and fellowship meals. Scholars tell us that in a typical Roman house of a well-to-do person, there would be a dining room where about nine people could be seated, and a large central room, an atrium, where about thirty to forty people could gather.<sup>1</sup>

Now in the first century, a fellowship meal—a "love feast"—was often connected with worship, and Communion was observed as a part of the meal. That seems to have been the case in what Paul described here.

The specific problem in Corinth was that the more wealthy members would arrive early with the food and drink they brought and gather in the dining room and start eating. The laborers and slaves who had been working all day would of necessity come in later. Most of them couldn't afford to bring much food, if any. So the poorer members were out in the atrium eating meager fare while the wealthy members were already full and some were even drunk! The effect was that they were despising God's church and humiliating those who had nothing. Paul rebuked them sharply, saying that this wasn't the Lord's Supper at all!

### ***Correcting the Corinthians' confusion . . .***

So to deal with the Corinthians' confusion about the Lord's Supper, Paul described its meaning.

He began by reminding them of its origin—that Christ himself had given his Supper to his followers the night he was betrayed as *a way of remembering* him and what he has done for our salvation. This remembrance Paul was talking about was not just remembering the facts, but the kind of remembrance the Jews practiced with Passover, where they relived God's deliverance just as if they had been there at the Exodus and had come out of Egypt themselves.

In Communion, we as Christians remember Christ's life and death and resurrection. It's not just remembering *that* he did all this, it's remembering *that* he did, and that he did it all *for us*.

Paul also told the Corinthians that the Lord's Supper is *a way of proclaiming* the Lord's death—his saving activity—until he comes. In other words, participating in Communion declares our faith in Christ's sacrificial death and our confidence that he will return in glory.

And then Paul offered a warning. He told the Corinthians that they were putting themselves in danger of God's corrective judgment when they partook of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. Doing so meant profaning or sinning against the body and blood of Christ. So he called on them to examine themselves before they shared in the Supper, since eating and drinking without discerning the body was to eat and drink judgment on themselves. He even said that this was why some of them were sick and some had even died. The way to avoid this judgment was to judge themselves honestly. If not, the Lord would judge them so they wouldn't be condemned along with the world.

But what did Paul mean by *discerning* or *recognizing* the body?

Taken with what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, where he said partaking of the one bread means that we are all one body, along with his portrayal of the church as the body of Christ in chapter 12, and given the problem he was dealing with in this text, it seems clear that Paul was talking about not having the appropriate regard for the church and its members.

In other words, for us to partake of Communion when we are divisive or when we have ill feelings toward a fellow-believer or hold another brother or sister in contempt, or when we regard ourselves as better than other members of the church because of economic or social status, we are not having the proper regard for the body of Christ. Participating in Communion with such an attitude puts us in danger of God's judgment, because as well as being a remembrance and a proclamation, the Lord's Supper is also *a communion* (*koinōnía*), a celebration of our fellowship with Christ and with one another as his followers, as one body in Christ.

### ***And so . . .***

So when we come to the Lord's Table and partake of this bread and this fruit of the vine, what is the meaning of this meal?

Simply this: *The Lord's Supper is a holy communion with Christ and his church in which we remember and proclaim his saving acts.*

So come, and meet our Lord Jesus here. Come, remember him and what he has done, and proclaim his saving acts once again. Come, experience his presence and our fellowship with him and with one another in him as we share in *Holy Communion*.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 75.