

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

In our community of faith, we have a growing number of people who have joined us from different denominational backgrounds. For that reason, how they think about the Lord's Supper (or Communion) might well differ. As you talk through this section of Paul's words to the Corinthians, keep that in mind—but don't lose sight of Paul's key thought: Together, we who are the body of Christ, celebrate our common life together through our participation in the Lord's Supper.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

Not purposefully but almost accidentally we can find ourselves humming some tune without realizing it. When we get focused on other things, we might not be fully conscious of what we are doing. Although the relational problems the Corinthians were facing in the celebration of the Lord's Supper might not have been entirely "without realizing it," in fact they were not participating well in what they were doing because they were distracted by other things. That is the idea we hope to explore.

The Lord's Supper (or, as some refer to it, "Communion," in reference to the "communal" or shared experience we have with the Lord Jesus and with one another) was a regular part of the worship of the early church. It is also a part of our regular worship, even though we may not celebrate it in an identical fashion.

"Church" gatherings in Paul's day, in the city of Corinth, were likely held in homes. In those early days, the believers also might have met in public places (as the church first did in Jerusalem, meeting on the Temple grounds; Acts 2:46). But they would meet together to share a common meal and to share in life with Jesus together; and those meetings would have likely been held in homes.

Most likely they met in the home best able to accommodate those who would come. And, therefore, the church might meet in the home of one of the more well-to-do believers. In addition to teaching and worship, they would share a common meal and celebrate the Lord's Supper. And it was in that setting, in Corinth, that there was some trouble.

What apparently was happening is that the sharing of the common meal was not truly "sharing the common meal!" Those who could brought plenty to eat and drink (and, perhaps the wealthy person hosting the gathering had special places for his wealthy friends). But others had little or nothing to eat and drink. Those who were poor and couldn't afford much might well be left embarrassed ("humiliated," ESV; 11:22). As a result, the "shared meal" was hardly an experience of true community life. And, in light of that, the Lord's Supper did not really reflect the shared life of the community. (Notice Paul's observation in 10:17 that the "one bread" shared by the community should underscore the reality that they are, indeed, "one body" in Christ.)

Paul's corrective word has to do with "eating and drinking" (participating in the Lord's Supper) in an "unworthy" manner (11:27). He calls everyone who participates to examine himself or herself to ensure that he or she is participating appropriately (11:28). Some will say that this means to examine one's own heart to make sure that there is no "unconfessed sin." Although such an idea is not entirely inappropriate, that is not what Paul has in mind.

Paul says that some are eating and drinking (participating in the Lord's Supper) "without discerning the body" (11:29). It's important to note that Paul *does not* say that they are eating and drinking without discerning "the body and blood" (or "the bread and the cup"). When he refers to not "discerning the body," he is not referring to thinking wrongly about the "bread" or not fully appreciating Jesus' death (by coming with unconfessed sin in one's heart) but *not thinking rightly about "the body of Christ"* (that is, the community of faith). This brings us right back to where Paul began this section—the idea that in participating in the Lord's Supper some were having little or no regard for others in "the body."

So, what is the real problem in the Corinthian church? Fundamentally, they were not participating in the Lord's Supper in a way that reflected their awareness that they really were *one body in Christ* and that the Supper was supposed to reflect their *common life together*.

Paul goes on to explain that in "coming together" (that is, when the community of faith assembles for fellowship and the Lord's Supper), the Corinthians are to "wait for" one another (11:33; ESV). The sense of this word conveys not only the idea of being patient to participate with one another but also the idea of welcoming or embracing one another (as the word is used in Romans 15:7). In contrast to the neglect that was apparent, at times, in the fellowship meal and the celebration of the Lord's Supper as described in 11:17-22, Paul is calling the believers in Corinth to be more attentive to, more supportive of, more appropriately "body conscious" of the others in the body of Christ as they celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

This idea has real implications for all believers, even those who may not celebrate the Lord's Supper in the same fashion as the Corinthians did. When we participate in the Lord's Supper although it might not be a bad thing to reflect on the condition of our own life with Jesus, we really should be reflecting on how we are doing in relationship with one another—that is the "body" we are to be discerning about when we participate. We are to be proclaiming Jesus' death as the common ground for our shared life—and to do that with little or no regard for others in our community of faith means that we don't really grasp what we are celebrating in partaking together.

To not participate in the Lord's Supper in this way, we neither "discern the body" of the Lord (11:29) nor do we truly "eat the Lord's Supper" (11:20). Let us celebrate well, what Jesus has done for all of us in making us one family in grace, through His death and resurrection.



INITIAL THOUGHTS

Have you ever found yourself humming a tune, without realizing why that particular tune is going through your head? Why does that kind of thing happen?

In what other kinds of occasions do you find yourself doing something without really realizing what you are doing?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

As Paul continues to speak into the Corinthians' lives about how they are living out the Gospel in their community, he turns his attention to "the Lord's Table" (or "Communion"). They were not celebrating it appropriately and he has a corrective word for them.

What was the setting for their participating in the Lord's Supper together? From what Paul writes here, when and how was it celebrated?

What appears to be the problem(s) arising from how they were conducting themselves when they met for worship and for the sharing in the Lord's Supper?

What would give rise to such a problem? Can you imagine what thinking or what attitude of heart would result in the kind of actions that Paul has to address here?

Paul highlights the real reason for participating in the Lord's Supper. In what way were the Corinthians *not* celebrating the Lord's Supper (as Paul mentions in 11:20)? How was there practice at odds with what they were supposed to be "proclaiming" in their participation?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

How we integrate the Lord's Supper into our worship might differ from how the Corinthians did, but the *attitude of heart* and the *awareness of what we are doing* should be identical. What do you think you need to hear about your attitude and awareness in your participation in what Paul writes?

How could celebrating the Lord's Supper with a greater awareness that *we are the Body* impact the way you participate?

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
11:17-34

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