



The
LORD'S
SUPPER
is a
MEAL

JIM ELLIFF



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Purpose

My purpose is to motivate churches to recover the apostolic tradition of eating the Lord's Supper as an actual meal, with its special bread and cup, in order to experience New Testament fellowship in Christ built upon what the bread and cup represent, the sacrificed body and blood of Jesus. This is the sole reason for our joyful communion with God and each other.

Introduction

The Lord's Supper is an actual weekly meal for the gathered church as seen in its name and description, its often forgotten purpose, and its presentation in Scripture as an apostolic tradition.

In recovering the primitive weekly meal as originally intended, God provides an antidote to deadening individualism and the cooling alienation of spectatorship that has depleted and weakened many churches following generations of neglect. May God restore it to revive his churches.

This monograph is offered with gratitude to Christ Fellowship of Kansas City whose members have now eaten over 900 Lord's Suppers together.

Jim Elliff
ccwtoday.org

Note: Before you read the book, please turn to pages 83-84 and read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 to add to your understanding. Suggested discussion questions for small groups may be found on pages 85-93.

Chapter One

The Meal at Gaius' House

Alexio had become a believer in Christ when the Apostle Paul visited Corinth of Achaia, or southern Greece. Corinth was the largest city in the region, outsizing Athens just 44 miles to the east. Alexio was a wealthy man, a patron to many. His wife had also become a believer after listening to Paul. It was Gaius who had introduced them to the Apostle. Their world was inverted after they believed the gospel. And, much to the liking of Alexio, two of his servants, a husband and wife, had also come to Christ.

The church that was formed met in Gaius' home. He didn't live far away from Alexio. His spacious home, like that of Alexio, was a perfect place for the church to meet.

When the work day was over on the Lord's Day, the church began to gather. Alexio and his wife Selene readied themselves, as did the believing servants Secundus and Karme. They filled a basket with food for their master and his wife, found a good wine to place there as well, then covered it with a cloth. Off they went, going downhill to the gathering.

Upon entering, they were greeted by the believers. The servants naturally sidled up to friends who shared their similar work life, and the wealthier people comfortably stood beside others of their same status. There was nothing strange here, for each felt easier socially in the right company, and everyone greeted and showed kindness to all.

From their vantage point in the anteroom, they could see through another room into the atrium where the meal would take place. Secundus followed his master through the doors and into the open courtyard with its shallow pool and fountain. He carried his master's food, and Karme carried the burlap sack with the bread and knife for their own simple meal.

Being a patron and an accustomed guest of the hospitable Gaius, Alexio stepped confidently into one of

the dining rooms which opened up to the atrium. In the triclinium, all was ready with the tables and pillows upon the three couches placed into the shape of a "U." Alexio and Selene stretched out on a couch, diagonally, facing toward the middle, with their upper body resting on their elbow. Secundus spread out the food before them from the inside of the couches on a table, poured wine, and asked if anything else was needed. "Nothing more," said his master, "and thank you."

Secundus sat next to his wife in the courtyard, with his back against the low wall of the fountain pool, so that he could see his master. The other servants did as well. There was much for them to talk about. All of this was customary and nobody thought anything was out of line. Secundus and his wife pulled their bread out of the sack, cut it, and ate. Alexio and Selene consumed their lavish meal in the triclinium, as they did each night in their own home, enjoying Christian conversation with Gaius and the others. There were others of the working poor who felt very uncomfortable among the wealthier people. They anticipated their future in the consummated kingdom of God but owned little of value now.

As the people huddled in their own group of familiar friends, everyone was happy; everyone understood; everyone awaited the sharing of the various spiritual gifts and prayer and singing and teaching.

There were at least a few who crossed over, eating with those not normally mixing together in society. Some even shared their food around their circle.

People appeared to be happy. They felt that they were experiencing the new order of things in Christ.

A Surprising Assessment

It was about this customary weekly meal depicted in my fictional representation that the Apostle Paul wrote the following words in a shocking tone and force: “You come together not for the better but for the worse” (1 Corinthians 11:17).

How could he make such a statement?

Chapter Two

The Lord's Supper Is a Weekly Meal

Although the portion of 1 Corinthians dealing with the Lord's Supper was written because of a critical abuse, one deserving much attention, a fact we dismiss too easily is that the Lord's Supper is shown to be a meal. "The Lord's Supper, after all, was a *supper*," my son once said, to make obvious what is often missed. We have eaten hundreds of the Lord's Suppers among believers in our church over the years — over 900 by the time this book was written — and anticipate hundreds more like them in the future.

Some have called the wine and bread itself, or a ceremony around the wine and bread, "the Eucharist," taken from the Greek word for "giving of thanks," since Jesus had offered thanks at his last Passover meal. This, however, is not stated as a designation for the meal,

but rather an action within Christ's Last Supper ("And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said . . ." 1 Corinthians 11:24). "Communion," meaning "fellowship" or "participation," is another term sometimes used for a ceremony around the two elements (see 1 Corinthians 10:14–21), but this is what we are to *experience* in the Supper and not a scriptural term to designate it. The term given to this experience by Paul in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 11:20 where it is called "the Lord's Supper." It is elsewhere called a love feast (Jude 12). Both terms denote an actual meal. If we say we are eating the Lord's Supper, it has to be what is described in 1 Corinthians 11 and Jude 12, that is, an actual meal.

Here is the initial portion of the larger text about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. It will help us to see that the Lord's Supper is indeed a meal. Read it carefully.

But in giving this [next] instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among

you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

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 Corinthians 11:17–22)

Paul uses the term for “come together” five times in the entire passage (1 Corinthians 11:17–34), and three times in the section quoted above. He tells us that the meal is a major reason for the church coming together each week: “When you come together to eat . . .” (11:33). In this portion he writes, “Therefore when you meet [literally, come] together, it is not to eat the *Lord's* Supper, for in your eating each one takes his *own* supper first.” (11:20, 21). We will talk about the importance of that verse in the next chapter, but for now no-

tice that the Corinthian believers, under the tutelage of Paul, gathered to eat a meal.

It can hardly be denied that the occasion to come together was to eat a banquet in the context of Christian love. In the hospitality of this fellowship meal would come worship and sharing of life and spiritual gifts meant to edify as seen in 1 Corinthians 12–14, contiguous to this section. If we imagine that the believers did not eat a meal, but rather discreetly and ever so quietly slipped a tiny cracker and a thimble's portion of grape juice into their mouths, we misunderstand the purpose of their evenings together. Done that way we cannot begin to accomplish what this meal was designed to emphasize. Paul says that some got drunk at these meals (11:21). Drunkenness was not appreciated, but it is an indication to us that the Corinthians were eating a full meal, at least for those who could afford to bring such a meal.

Eating together was their regular weekly practice. It is likely that if the Apostle Paul could visit most of our churches today, his first words would be, "Where's the food?" From the first days of the church following Pentecost, Christians were all about eating together. Read this beautiful description. "Breaking their bread from

house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God . . .” (Acts 2:46, 47).

It was in the evening of the Lord’s Day in Troas that Eutychus fell out of the window. Despite the fact that their special guest, the Apostle Paul, would talk for a long time, long enough for at least one young man to fall asleep in a precarious place, they nonetheless intended to eat. Luke, the author, introduces the story like this: “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread . . .” (Acts 20:7).

This was, after all, what they always did. It was church life. When Paul fell on Eutychus and he was brought to life after being taken for dead, the group went back upstairs to break bread (v. 11), and then Paul dialogued the rest of the night until daybreak. What a night that must have been! It was made all the better by the warm fellowship of a meal.

It is important to remember that it was not until much later, in AD 321, that the Roman Emperor Constantine issued a decree that made Sunday a day off from work. Until that time, believers met after work on the Lord’s

Day. They ate a supper because their meeting was in the evening after the workday was finished.

But there is more attached to the idea of “supper.”

Suppers Until Christ Comes

The Lord’s Supper is in a line of suppers of special significance, all reminding us of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Each meal listed below points forward to the next and ultimately to the final one, which is the greatest supper of all. Note the progression:

The first Passover Supper of the liberated Jewish slaves in Egypt

The yearly Passover Supper of the Jews

The Last Passover Supper of Jesus just before his crucifixion

The weekly Lord’s Supper of the Christian church from Pentecost until the return of Christ

And then the future Marriage Supper of the Lamb!

One can feel the import of this meal. Looking back, we reflect on a 2000-year history of the Christian Church eating this meal. We can step back another 1500 years to the Jewish Passover and the subsequent Passover celebrations which are still going on among Jews. When we eat the Lord's Supper, we reflect on a dark night when Christ was betrayed and died following his unique and defining Passover meal with his disciples, his last supper. He died as the Paschal lamb, the very centerpiece of his new interpretation of this ancient Jewish feast.

But we also look forward to a greater feast than all the rest yet to come — the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7– 9)! Will that be an actual meal? I think so. Jesus told the disciples that he would “not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). This is the time when the betrothed church finalizes her marriage to the Lord (v. 7) in joy and intimacy that she has never known before.

For Jewish people, the betrothal of a couple could last a year. They were considered husband and wife during this time but did not live together; the marriage was not consummated. Our marriages on earth reflect this mystery of Christ; the church betrothed to him will be

fully married to him when he returns (Ephesians 5:32), never to be separated again (1 Thessalonians 4:17). It is no wonder some say that the early Christians would often exclaim to each other the Aramaic phrase, “Maranatha!” or, “Come, our Lord!” The church lives its life in anticipation of the completion of our union with Christ when he comes for us, his betrothed bride.

This meal is not a minor thing, or just an add-on to church life, or a once-a-month perfunctory practice in which the same choreographed routine takes place and the same words are said. No, it is a dynamic meal that bridges history and adds depth and perspective to our lives and enriches us in our fellowship with God and each other. We must understand how God wants us to practice it to gain as much joy in communion with Christ and between believers as is possible now in anticipation of so much more joyful fellowship then.

It is the nature and practice of this fellowship I want to explain next, which we will learn about, sadly, in the context of the Corinthian church’s failure to understand and pursue it.

What is there to gain from their abuse of such a meal?

Chapter Three

The Lord's Supper Is a Meal for Intentional and Undivided Fellowship, Part 1

Beginnings

Go back with me a few years earlier when the first church was birthed at Pentecost in Jerusalem following Christ's resurrection. Here is what immediately began to characterize the Jerusalem church:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . . 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 2:42, 46, 47)

It is entirely reasonable to read the above passage another way. Rather than seeing four items that the nascent church in Jerusalem devoted itself to (the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayer), it may be read like this:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship (*that is*, to the breaking of bread), and to prayer.

In other words, it could indicate that the believer's fellowship was carried out in the breaking of bread, that is, the meals they shared as new believers in Christ.

It is not possible to make a sure case that these daily meals just after Pentecost were, in fact, intentional Lord's Suppers in the way we talk about the Lord's Supper now. This certainly may have been so, however. It is not a far stretch to imagine that the believers reflected on the "last supper" eaten by Christ and how he magnified his death by assigning new meaning to the bread and wine. It would not have been strange to think that the Apostles, who taught daily for a while in the Temple area, would have communicated and promoted such things and established the eating tradition.

The term “breaking of bread” used in this passage was not necessarily linked only to the Lord’s Supper, however, but to most meals. The actual breaking of the bread (likely flat bread) by the host may have indicated the beginning of shared meals in that culture, thus becoming a one-phrase summary for the concept of eating together. The bread was essential since it served as the “utensil” for eating the rest of the meal.

The important point to remember from Acts 2, however, is that their eating of meals together at first is linked to fellowship or the intimate sharing of life together — something believers were to experience on an entirely new level in Christ. For this reason, the first meals together at a minimum served as a precursor to the Lord’s Suppers that would take place in the churches from then on until Christ comes again.

Meals for Fellowship

Jesus talked of warm fellowship in the future world as reclining “at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Matthew 8:11). Remember that John among the disciples was close to Christ leaning on his bosom in the Last Supper. The artist, da Vinci, did not depict eating by stretching out on couches diagonally in his Sistine

Chapel painting, as described above, though he should have. The rich man Jesus described in Luke 16 saw Lazarus in the next world “in the bosom” of Abraham, another reference to the way meals were eaten on couches so that each person was close to the next, or in the bosom of the person next to him.

Meals, in other words, epitomized the warmest of fellowship. You cannot imagine a better medium for fellowship, as many cultures have found.

Idol Fellowship

Just before Paul’s explanation of the Lord’s Supper and its abuse by the church in chapter 11, he finishes a long section on idolatry contrasting and comparing the table of the Lord and the table of demons. We see there that the meal associated with sacrifices to idols, as well as those meals associated with the Jewish Temple sacrifices, was a “sharing” or “fellowship” meal. Notice the word “sharing” which could be translated as “fellowshipping” or “communing” throughout:

I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a **sharing** in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread

which we break a **sharing** in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices **sharers** in the altar? What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?

No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become **sharers** in demons.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than he, are we? (1 Corinthians 10:15–22)

In this section of chapter 10 Paul was making a vital point about eating meals offered to idols, but we also see something of the nature of sacrificial meals which we must not miss. We find that when such meats were eaten that had been sacrificed to an idol (or, in truth, a demon), the eater becomes a sharer in that demon;

he has fellowship with demons! And, similarly, when we eat meals highlighting the special cup and bread, believers are showing that they are sharers or have fellowship with Christ.

The fellowship we have is not only vertical with Christ, however, but also horizontal. "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread" (v. 17). The eating of the bread represents our union with each other based upon his sacrifice. We eat of the same body of Christ.

It was particularly the failure in horizontal fellowship that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 11. When fellowship with others is fractured or forgotten or distorted by status rather than united around Christ, the Lord's Supper becomes merely one's *own* supper. Worse than that, it brings judgment. The meal associated with the sacrifice of Christ *must* be about our indivisible fellowship built upon the death of Christ.

Chapter Four

The Lord's Supper Is a Meal for Intentional and Undivided Fellowship, Part 2

"I hear that divisions exist among you," Paul reported (1 Corinthians 11:18). Was this about the division he had already alerted them to earlier in the letter?

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:11, 12)

No, it does not appear to be that division Paul is addressing here. In chapter 11, when writing about the Lord's Supper, Paul's concern about division was not about disunity related to the style of leaders like Paul,

Apollos, or Peter. Paul had finished his straightforward rebuke about the implications of their favorite-leader sectarianism in the beginning of the letter in some detail, especially in chapter 3. It would seem strange for him to present it again here as if it had not yet been discussed.

Rather, the division here is a new subject and having to do with status — the poor and the rich and how they behaved in the assembly. In particular, most of the wealthier members would go ahead to eat their meal when the church gathered, with no consideration of those poorer brothers and sisters around them.

I emphasized in my fabricated (but biblically and culturally informed) story about the Corinthian church in chapter 1 that nothing seemed out of the ordinary in eating the way they were doing it, separated into groups primarily built upon station in life. This is indicated by the fact that only Paul seemed to see into their problem and the reason for the judgment of God which he will discuss later. Those with plenty of food, the wealthier ones, would eat without including the others at all. This failure to consider others in the assembly of believers was, to Paul, an egregious sin against the body which in turn received a rebuke that

might surprise most Christians. This meal which was the context for their main meeting together, setting the tone for all of their interaction as a church, was to be an intentionally status-free experience, upsetting cultural norms — visibly and unapologetically.

Let's look again at what Paul wrote about the problem:

But in giving this [next] instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

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 Corinthians 11:17–22)

We see from these words that the Lord's Supper *must* be a meal without division. Not getting this right will turn what you think is the *Lord's* Supper into your *own* supper immediately regardless of how anyone feels about it. "For, in the first place, when you come 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" (v. 21). There was no "second" point, because Paul's emphasis here was his singular focus, as will be seen. Paul could not praise such action.

Not all the Corinthian believers failed in this way. There were some who were "approved." The approved ones stood out, or became evident, against the backdrop of those who were living in the old culture rather than the radical new gospel culture in Christ.

Paul's Amazement

Paul is aghast at what had happened — as aghast as they were clueless.

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 Corinthians 11:22)

He informs them that if the weekly Lord's Supper is about you, what you eat and enjoy while disregarding others — if your appetite is what this is all about — then you have homes to eat and drink in. Satisfy your appetite before you gather, if necessary, so that the Lord's Supper can be about fellowship and not dominated by your desire for food.

These people had turned the fellowship meal of the church, which was at the heart of church life together, into something very selfish. They had shamed those who have nothing by putting their own appetites first and forgetting those around them. They had perpetuated societal divisions and status markers which had been brought to dust in the new fellowship Christ created through his death for poor and rich alike. They had forgotten that they were all less than nothing before Christ's death was applied to them. What a travesty! And they did not even see it.

Our Private Way

In the above section we have seen that the Corinthians had a problem about which they were entirely oblivious. But Paul saw it immediately. To him it was a major abuse of the fellowship that the meal — the very occasion for being together — must be all about. Without this fellowship, the significance of the meal was lost and it became merely “their own supper,” regardless of what they called it.

How does this concept of intentional warm fellowship in a meal, as was practiced by the New Testament churches, impact your thinking? In the practice of most churches, when a tiny cracker and thimble of juice is served, it may well be the most independent and private moment in the church’s time together. What results is far removed from the intent of the agape feast of the early church where unity and fellowship among authentic believers of all backgrounds, societal status, education, and wealth was to be put on display and the beauty and power of the gospel was to be exalted.

Yet, sadly, following a more Roman Catholic pattern rather than that designed by the Apostles under Christ’s headship for the churches, we have largely

abandoned this effective, powerful, and immensely enjoyable centerpiece of New Testament church life which accelerates and deepens Christ-centered relationships and unity in amazing ways. In the evolution of the Lord's Supper, we have made that which is to be the most familial and intimate of practices among the congregated people of God the most private or individual one.

Removal from Fellowship Is a Lord's Supper Issue

Finally, let me add this somber note. In this same letter, Paul addresses a gross sin on a member's part in the Corinthian church — incest (1 Corinthians 5). The church had not acted in removing this incestuous person, so Paul uses strong appeals, invincible logic, and pointed language. Paul insists that people sinning on this grievous level should be immediately removed from the fellowship of the church. One way he describes this is with Lord's Supper language including connections to the Passover and the evil of leaven to be removed from the Passover meal. Note what I highlighted:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little **leaven leavens** the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old **leaven** so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact **unleavened**. For **Christ our Passover** also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us **celebrate the feast**, not with old **leaven**, nor with the **leaven** of malice and wickedness, but with the **unleavened bread** of sincerity and truth.

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—**not even to eat with such a one**. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES. (1 Corinthians 5:8–13)

Fellowship is so important to the church that heinous sins necessarily involve removal of people from it, like the leaven was removed before the first Passover meal. The local church has boundaries according to Paul. Unrepenting members are to be put outside this warm fellowship found among the believers displayed in the meal which was at the center of their weekly meetings. "Not even to eat with such a one" means that they are to be removed from the Lord's Supper and all other Christian fellowship extended by individual members of the church. This is what happens when "disfellowshipping" takes place. They are no longer in the church's membership, but this is reflected powerfully in the fact that they are removed from its fellowship experience of eating together. Once again, we see the importance of fellowship in the church and the meal which is its main context for its expression in the weekly New Testament church meeting.

Chapter Five

The Lord's Supper Is a Meal to Proclaim Christ's Death, Part 1

For many, the insertion of the words by Jesus about his body and blood in 1 Corinthians 11:23 – 26 is an enigma. At first glance, it may seem as if those words were added without consideration of what Paul had just said and what he would say following; they appear to sit there like an island entirely by themselves. Why did Paul insert them where he did? How do those words relate to what he has been talking about?

Remember that Paul has just spoken firmly to the church about how they were turning the Lord's Supper into their own supper by their failure in intentional undivided fellowship across all status lines. He could not praise them for this. By individuals going ahead to eat without consideration of others, the church had

together committed a sin that brought God's severe judgment against them, as will be seen. Some had died because of this thoughtlessness.

Now, as if inserting something that does not seem to flow with his argument, he writes the following. In quoting it, I want to highlight two terms that I will discuss in a moment — the word *for* and the word *therefore*. Pay attention to how they are used in this paragraph. They tie the words before this section and the words following it into a meaningful argument.

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. (1 Corinthians 11:23–27)

Why Does Paul Include These Words About Christ's Death?

It is obvious that many pastors have assumed that these words were included in Paul's rebuke and warning to the Corinthian church for the purpose of being verbalized each time churches eat the Lord's Supper. I am not sure that pastors would actually state it that way, but I write it because it is a practice I have noted over and over again through the years of my growing up and throughout my extensive travels to various kinds of churches around the world. Almost without exception, these words are repeated during a more-or-less formal ceremony which is called the Lord's Supper. It is true that leaders are free to speak these words as they wish, but nothing is said by Paul that requires them to be said, nor is there even a hint from Paul that they are to be repeated every Lord's Supper.

Rather, I believe that Paul is bringing these words to mind because of the vital connection with Christ's sacrifice and how the Corinthian church had been acting when they ate together in a meal focused on

that death. I will show, I hope, that it was not that the Corinthians failed to say the words Jesus said about his death that precipitated Paul's inclusion of these words, but his concern centered on their failure to *behave* as if Christ's death actually meant something about how this meal was to have been eaten. He laid out through these words the reason they are guilty of a remarkable sin, one which many church members today are unaware of themselves.

So What Is the Point?

Paul included Christ's words at his last Passover meal to show the Corinthians that they had been displaying the very opposite of what the cup and bread was to stir up in them. While Christ's death should engender selflessness and unity played out in intentional status-free fellowship, *their* meal exhibited the opposite — selfishness and disunity. They were proclaiming through their actions a counter message to the message that was intended to be on exhibit in the meal itself!

The hint that this is so is found in the word *for* in verse 23, the first sentence of this section, and the word *therefore* in verse 27 in the last sentence of the section, which I highlighted. He ties this section you just

read to what is above it — namely, to the Corinthians' selfish, disunifying actions during their supper — with the word *for*. This word introduces the basis for evaluating their actions, that is, that their actions need to be thought of in light of what Jesus said about his pending death, and what he actually did in dying. And then Paul concludes by stating that their actions have, as a consequence, placed guilt on them, by his use of the word *therefore*. By these two words introducing and concluding the section we just read, we see that Christ's words are effective and essential as Paul's way of drawing attention to their problem of social divisions among them (even if undetected by them). And that this problem is very serious indeed.

So, this meal proclaims something in the way it is conducted. In fact, it shouts out the message of the gospel! It is to herald the Lord's death until he comes, by word and behavior!

A Meal with Peter

Before we consider how this happens, note that at another time, and in another place (Syrian Antioch), Paul also used very strong language before the church about failure to eat a meal in a way that corresponded

to the gospel of Christ's death. Let us think about the Antioch experience and how it relates to the 1 Corinthian 11 disconnect with the gospel we have been studying. Here is what happened. Again, notice the words I have emphasized.

But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I [Paul] opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:11-14)

We do not know for certain if this awkward Antioch experience was at a Lord's Supper, but it was likely so.

We do see, though, how the gospel of Christ's death is either being proclaimed in a meal among believers, or distorted not by words but by actions. In this Antioch case, Peter was rebuked in a very severe way by Paul. This happened in front of everyone, guests included. Peter earlier had been eating with Gentile believers, something he could not have done before believing the gospel. Christ died to erase those barriers between them. Yet, when caught in an awkward situation with guests from the church in Jerusalem (whether commissioned by that church or coming on their own), he separated from the Gentile believers and ate in the Old Covenant style, solely with the Jews as if Christ had not died. We are not sure of Peter's reasoning here. Various options have been suggested. Above all, however, his action spoke a catastrophically errant message.

Paul was incensed at this weakness and capitulation of Peter to a practice that had been decimated by the death of Christ, that is, the pattern of separating as Jews from Gentiles in meals. Those old distinctions of Jew and Gentile were now obliterated in Christ. This action of Peter's reflected directly on the gospel that Peter and Paul preached. It was every bit a gospel issue and Paul could not go on without setting straight the gospel reality of unity between Jew and Gentile

in Christ which must be lived out in terms of true fellowship. It was not just rhetoric that Paul wanted, but action. I fully expect that Peter and others were forced through these words to actually get up and move to another table to intermingle as before with the Gentiles. How could they sit there separated on purpose from those for whom Christ had died? What hypocrisy! Paul's outrage in Antioch is very similar to his surprisingly strong reaction to the Corinthians practice in their weekly meal in 1 Corinthians 11.

How we eat the fellowship meal among believers is indeed a gospel issue. Anything, *anything*, that distorts the gospel of Christ's sacrificial death for his church played out in the members' meal must be corrected according to Paul — *now!*

Chapter Six

The Lord's Supper Is a Meal to Proclaim Christ's Death, Part 2

How Is It Proclaimed?

Let's emphasize and also expand our thoughts about this proclamation of Christ's death in the meal. Once again, what did Paul mean when he told the Corinthians that the Lord's death is proclaimed in the Lord's Supper? "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (v.26).

First, we all know that Christ's death is seen in how the primary *symbols* of the supper — the bread and the wine (or juice, as it might be) — speak of his body and blood given for us. Though Paul uses Jesus' words

about the symbolic meaning of the bread and the cup itself, as I explained above, Paul is not including this set of words by Jesus to correct a misunderstanding the Corinthians had about their symbolic meaning.

Rather, while fully knowing their meaning, the Corinthians failed to conduct themselves in a corresponding way in their meal, as I have stated. For most evangelical churches today, this symbolic aspect is affirmed, but is usually the sum total of their proclamation of Christ's death. If so, something is missing in understanding the purpose of this meal.

Second, Christ's death is proclaimed not only in what the symbols represent, but in the sacrificial *behavior* his death produces in his people. This is the point Paul is emphasizing in his rebuke to the church. Christ's words about his impending death reminded the Corinthians of the great cost of his love and sacrifice for sinners. Believers must meet together with similar sacrificial behavior.

Think of that carefully. His death was a willing and perfect offering for sinners who did not deserve it. It includes those near and those far from God at a huge cost to himself. It brought sinners into covenant with

God and with each other. And, he was a servant to others in his incarnation and death so that forever his example of love is imprinted on our consciousness.

The writers of the Bible were not only aware of his substitutionary death providing forgiveness for our sins by which we are saved but also of its servant-like example. He will forever be the supreme picture of love. Christ's death was not only an act of objective significance, securing our eternal salvation through atonement, but was an act of servitude which is to be emulated. The New Testament writers often refer to the example seen in Christ's death (e.g., 1 Peter 2:20–25; Ephesians 5:25–27; Romans 15:7–9; Hebrews 12:2).

Christ's sacrificial death is dramatized and therefore proclaimed as believers pursue unity and true fellowship at a cost to themselves. Even enemies are brought together in Christ's death. The worldly status markers are meaningless in the church of people who have been transformed by his death. We are all reconciled to God and to each other, but living out that unity requires costly love as seen in Christ's death.

So when some Corinthians went ahead to eat their meal and drink their wine in eyesight of those without

anything much to eat, they shamed those poor people who were actually part of their own body, Christ's body, and made a mockery of Christ's accomplishments on the cross. The unity we have in Christ compels the sacrifices we make, which is symbolized in the special bread and cup. We live this out in the meal itself, and beyond, or we make light of the implications of his death. This was unacceptable to Paul and it should be to us. Christ died to remove our separation, and we must live to show our unity, especially in our weekly meal together. It starts there.

There should have been much shame seen in the faces of the Corinthians who heard this stern and logical rebuke being read to them. Surely they hung their heads in embarrassment at Paul's words upon receipt of them. The meal they enjoyed so much failed to proclaim the truth about Christ's death because of their unacknowledged sinful and selfish behavior.

Unworthy

What is the "therefore" about in 1 Corinthians 11:27? "**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".

Obviously Paul has arrived at an important conclusion to this section, which could be called a result or consequence. The word *unworthy* could be translated something like “unfitting” or “not corresponding to” or “inappropriate.” One of the meanings of “worthy” in the New Testament is “correspondent to” and “suitable.” I believe this is the idea in Paul’s mind here. If a person eats this meal with behavior that is unfitting in its relation to Christ’s death, not corresponding to the death of Christ, which certainly the Corinthians had done, he or she is guilty of the body and blood of Christ!

Consider the strength of the words, “guilty of the body and blood of Christ.” Paul means what he has said with these shocking words. How can it be that these believers who are forgiven children of God are also guilty of the body and blood of Christ? We must let the awful sound of those words sink in without finding an escape from them. God will have his own response to their culpability, resulting in judgment that you may consider too strong for the sin and too broad in its application. There will be much more to say about this in the next chapter; it is better worked out there. But, for now, do not for a moment think that Paul is giving the Corinthian church a slight slap on the hand for their actions, nor is he doing so for us if we neglect to proclaim Christ’s

death by our behavior in the weekly meal called the Lord's Supper.

Examine Yourself

Paul finally leads the Corinthians to a specific action related to their meal. It is a simple but integral action: "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink the cup" (v 28).

For many years I assumed this meant that we must take time to be somber together in order to think about our sin and Christ's death in a very deliberate manner, maybe best done with music quietly playing and lights dimmed. I employed the Lord's Supper in a reflective way, with a hard look at our sins. I assumed that this fulfilled both the issue of examining ourselves and of remembering Christ ("Do this in remembrance of me"). I thought during those times that if we did not keep the mind focused on our sin and Christ's death, then in this way we were taking the meal in an "unworthy manner."

Though there are immeasurable benefits for having moments of stillness in the life of the church, and thinking about our sins and Christ's death in times of medi-

tation, this was not the intention of Paul's statement. In this banquet of joy and love, he was simply reminding the Corinthians to bring deliberately to mind what they are there for as they come among the others. And the memorializing of Christ's death takes place in the actual eating of the meal itself. So take a look at yourselves as you step into the group of believers to eat a meal which proclaims Christ's death for all believers. Only in the right attitude, that of remembering and living out sacrificial love and unity, should you eat this meal together with its special blessed cup and bread.

To Summarize

The Lord's Supper is a meal that proclaims Christ's death. We should love this idea. And because it is so, how you and I eat it is highly significant. Some would say that having no meal but merely a few independent moments of worship is enough — a meditative personal gaze at Christ's death in the presence of the church while consuming a tiny piece of bread and sipping from a small cup — but in the Apostle's mind, only an extended supper including the symbolic bread and cup could portray adequately in both words and behavior our proclamation of "Christ's death until he comes." Our meal should rise to become a joyful ex-

pression of sacrificial love and unity in Christ. And, besides, should we not seek the fullest possible expression of his death when we come together, rather than the most limited?

Chapter Seven

The Lord's Supper Is a Meal That May Bring Judgment, Part 1

The members of the church at Corinth did not know why so many of them were feeling weak and why they were getting sick more often than normal. They did not understand the increase in deaths among them either. They surely *did* believe such things could happen to Christians for no apparent reason. They also likely did not believe that sickness and death *had* to be related to sin in believers' lives.

Paul, however, saw the cause of their weakness, sickness, and death with apostolic eyes.

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 Corinthians 11:27–32)

Guilty of the Body and Blood

Let's return to this frightening prospect of being "guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" introduced in the last chapter. The Corinthians did not have emotional guilt about what they were doing in their gathering. In fact, they appear to be oblivious to their problem, as I have already mentioned. But they did have *true* guilt because of the obvious divisions which to them were culturally *apropos* but not acceptable in the new order in Christ. We learn something here about the placement of guilt. We do not have to *know* that what

we are doing is wrong for it to be sinful. In fact, in the Old Testament, the once-a-year sin offering by the high priest on Yom Kippur was to cover sins which the Israelites were not aware of during that year. We can sin without knowledge, much like the person speeding may not be aware she had exceeded the speed limit when caught.

But why does Paul say that they were guilty specifically of the body and blood of the Lord? The answer is found in the union of believers and Christ. Christians are so truly one with him that sin against the believer is considered sin against Christ. For instance, Saul, who would be known to us later as Paul, his Gentile name, was confronted with this revealing question when the glorified Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul did not believe he was persecuting Christ. He was persecuting *Christians*. But Jesus thought of this differently because of the union he has with his church. To persecute the church was to persecute him.

See how Jesus identifies as one with the believer in the following passage. Note the words I have emphasized:

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to **one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.**’” (Matthew 25:34–40)

When a merciful act is done to believers (“these brothers of Mine”), they are done to Jesus. The reverse is true as well, as seen in the larger passage (see Matthew 25:41–46). These are not words from Jesus about helping just anybody; they are about how we treat fellow believers. In this category, neglecting Christians is

neglecting Christ, and showing mercy to Christians is loving Christ. Therefore, because Christians in Corinth were in fact “the body of Christ,” the Corinthians’ neglect of the poor brothers among them was an act against Christ himself, regardless of societal norms. He places them in the category of being murderers of Christ. Such an indictment makes one shudder. The Corinthians could not *in fact* murder Christ again by their inconsiderate actions toward the others, for that death had already taken place once for all, but they could be thought of as ones who similarly act murderously against Christ (specifically his body) in neglecting the church’s unity and fellowship.

Eating and Drinking Judgment

Those who ate the special bread and drank the special cup of the Lord in an unfitting manner must have trembled when hearing these words as the letter was read. It placed them on the side of the perpetrators of Christ’s death because their actions toward the body of believers were against Christ. This would have seemed unimaginable!

This is the reason Paul wanted the Corinthians to examine themselves when eating the bread and drink-

ing the cup. They were not only eating their own meal when eating with such neglect of others (vv. 20, 21) but were committing these unjust actions against the Son of God. At whatever point the cup and bread were shared among themselves their hypocrisy was at its height.

They were drinking and eating judgment to themselves. Their failure by creating divisions in their larger meal was all the more shameful when the special bread and cup were eaten, the dramatic reminder of their unity.

Sickness and Death

Such a serious sin cannot have a light sentence. “For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep” (v. 30). “For this reason”— that phrase connects the judgment to the sin. It is a serious sin with a concomitant sentence.

As we know, not all sin has such a discernible and direct consequence as Paul detected in the Corinthians’ case. It took Paul’s trained eye to see into the spiritual cause of the sickness and death taking place among them.

I can only imagine how their minds were processing the information Paul was sending. It was “my brother” or “my father” or “my daughter” or “my son” who was ill or had died.

Now they knew why. These deaths were not only a loss to the families but to the church as a whole.

As to the question of how many constituted the “many” and “a number” and “some,” we cannot be sure. It may help to consider that the church in Corinth met in Gaius’ home. I used his name in my fictitious story in the first chapter, but it was truly his home that was the place where all the believers met. We find this information in a statement by Paul, via his amanuensis Tertius, who said from Corinth that Gaius was host to the whole church (Romans 16:23). A large home would hold around 50–60 people or so, with typically 9–20 eating in the triclinium (there may be more than one) and perhaps 40 or so in the atrium or courtyard. This helps us to imagine at least what “many,” “a number,” and “some” may have looked like. The judgment was severe!

Chapter Eight

The Lord's Supper Is a Meal That May Bring Judgment, Part 2

The notion of judgment for eating a meal is difficult for us to imagine. But how do you know it is not taking place in your own church and in your own day? Remember, the Corinthian church did not recognize what they were doing. Your church may not be aware either. Yet sins in the area of love among believers are highly significant.

Is there a remedy? Paul gives three actions to the Corinthian church that churches in our day must pay attention to. He would have more to say when he came again, but these would make a major difference affecting the need for God to bring such strong discipline.

Remedy 1: Examine Yourself

There is a remedy for the consequent sickness and death for the Corinthians. As we have seen already, each church member could “examine himself” as he or she eats the bread and drinks the cup. In other words, church members could curtail the ongoing damage if they consider what is happening in the Lord’s Supper carefully, and especially when they take the symbolic bread and cup, around which this meal is built. The death of Christ was to shape their meal together and, beyond this, their lives as a whole. It is as if he is saying, “Stop and think before you eat and drink the very symbol of the extremity Christ endured in loving sacrifice for believers to provide unity and fellowship between you and God and each other. Weigh it, and act accordingly, so as not to distort the unity and familial love that Christ has bought.”

Put another way, Paul teaches that in their examination of themselves they are to “judge the body.” Here he does not mean to judge the body as in bringing judgment upon it themselves. Rather, in this use of “judge” he means for the member to evaluate the body and to discern who these people are, in the hope of changing his behavior accordingly. Note below that “judge the

body rightly” and “judged ourselves rightly” are about the same object. He is not talking about the physical body of Christ represented in the bread when he uses “body” in these verses, but the church.

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. (1 Corinthians 11:29–31)

“Judgment” in this sentence is that which comes upon them in the form of sickness and death, but “judge” in these verses is evaluative, that is, it is about a mental exercise of weighing what the body is — the body of Christ, the church — and therefore correcting their actions.

A Greater Mercy

Before giving the Corinthians a second corrective action, he reminds them that the purpose of God bringing consequences for their actions is not to be punitive but medicinal. It is only harsh because this is the kind of medicine that will work.

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 Corinthians 11:32)

This judgment of God, the judgment of persons in the church who are truly guilty of the body and blood of Christ and are experiencing physical suffering and death as a result, does not mean that they are now put outside of the church and Christianity. Rather, God's mercy is involved even though the sin is egregious. The physical maladies and death are acts of God's loving redemptive discipline toward the church meant to turn the church in the right direction. If this were not so, they indeed would be "condemned along with the world." This means, left to their sin it would be apparent that they are not a true or redeemed church at all and in fact are condemned just like all other humans, even though "Christian" by name.

Paul is speaking on principle here. He uses "we" throughout these two important sentences in order to make clear that this is the way God habitually works with us as believers. Like a loving parent who corrects his or her child, so God corrects us to bring about obedience.

Sometimes that correction is severe, as we see in this case. But it is meant for good for the church, even though people have died.

With this in mind, we are prepared for Paul's second corrective action for the church which follows from self-evaluation.

Remedy 2: Play the Host

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. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come. (1 Corinthians 11:33, 34)

The Apostle finishes with one more command. Note that Paul does not instruct them to suspend or curtail meals together, though he recommends eating at home before the larger meal as an appetite control measure. No, he still states that the practice of the church will be to "come together to eat." So, the Corinthians are to continue their Supper together in Gaius' home despite all Paul has said. But when they "come together to eat," they are to "wait for one another."

The word “wait” does not mean to delay until everyone can eat together. The assumption in the text is that they are all there already, but that some are going ahead to eat their food in disregard of others. “Wait” can mean “welcome” or “play the host” to the others in the church. In other words, they were to act proactively toward others when they meet. Paul no doubt meant that they are to greet each other as they enter, but more importantly that they are to share their food with one another in a welcoming and hospitable manner. They are to be alert to the body’s needs and not shame the poor by leaving them to their meager food while the wealthier eat sumptuously. We get our idea of “inconsideration” from this kind of failure that the Corinthians displayed. Change that, he says, and act as though you are the host to all.

Remedy 3: Don’t Make the Lord’s Supper About Your Appetite

Paul says, again, “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment.” He means that eating at home prior to coming to the feast is appropriate only because not controlling hunger at the Supper is dangerous. Eat something earlier at home if this is your problem. Do not let appetite

for food characterize your meal together, even though it is truly a feast to be enjoyed, but let your fellowship and sharing characterize the meal — the sharing of your food and love with others.

I realize that somewhere along the line, Christians learned to have potluck meals together, a good invention. But imagine coming together in a different way, perhaps like you have experienced in a picnic when baskets were brought with food for your family. The idea Paul is after would be to pull out that cake from the basket, slice it in many pieces, and go around to share it with everyone else! You may have none left, but the spirit of sharing would be emblematic of the love Christ had for you in his sacrificial death and the oneness his death created. Just imagine such a meal! Paul has more to say to them about all of this, as he mentioned. I would love to have heard it. He gave them some alleviating action to start with. But ultimately this is a matter of the heart, like everything else in the Christian life.

Chapter Nine

Should You Do This? And How?

Apostolic Tradition

In the beginning of 1 Corinthians 11 the Lord's Supper is designated as an apostolic "tradition." Note the words "traditions" and "instruction" in the two verses below. The assumption of Paul's praise is that what they have been doing with the traditions assigned by the Apostles in general has been acceptable, but what lies ahead in his letter are two traditions about which he has concerns. Perhaps the first instruction about women's veils (vv. 2–16) came out of a question or was a way of warding off a potential problem. It is not our purpose to delve into that tradition. But the second is about the actual abuse of the tradition of the Lord's Supper which had already brought severe judgment, as we have seen.

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the **traditions**, just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand, etc. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

But in giving this [next] **instruction**, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.
(1 Corinthians 11:17)

This language leads us to see that “traditions” are apostolic “instructions” about church practice to be fully obeyed.

These traditions are given to the Apostles by the Spirit and sometimes directly by Christ. It is interesting to note that Christ himself said almost nothing about the local church except in Matthew 18:17 where he addressed the expulsion of unrepentant members, a practice which would come into play once the first churches were begun at Pentecost.

Christ instructed the Apostles to teach the disciples the things they had received from him (Matthew 28:20). Christ left it to the Apostles under the tutelage of the Spirit with the repository of teachings he gave them

(which the Spirit brought to mind) to apply what they had learned to societies called to regularly assemble. How the church is shaped is an apostolic issue which Christ, the Head of the church, did not address directly. The Apostles, however, spoke under inspiration of the Spirit and in the authority of Christ.

There are interpretive matters about all of the writings of the Apostles, such as with the tradition on veils discussed in chapter 11, but the assumption is that traditions are to be obeyed.

Apostolic traditions are the set of instructions given to churches that are essential for being what Christ wants his church to be. In this way, the Apostles and Christ's writing prophets became known as the foundation of the church (see Ephesians 2:19– 22). Paul said, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

So, we take the tradition of the Lord's Supper, in the way Paul shapes it, to be the tradition our churches must follow today. It is apostolic instruction.

How May This Be Done?

It may seem that returning to the Apostolic practice of eating the Lord's Supper together weekly is impossible for your church. Yet, with careful leadership and commitment to following the New Testament order, I am convinced it can be done. God is for it. And it is axiomatic to say, "True churches *can* do the will of God."

I will describe three models of church life and how the Lord's Supper may become part of each: the house church, the sanctuary-style church *without* small groups, and the sanctuary-style church *with* small groups.

The House Church

At the beginning I mentioned that from our church's inception the members have shared over 900 meals together which were called the Lord's Supper. Our model of church life in homes, though normative in the first century to the start of the fourth, is hardly so now in the West, though it is quite prominent in the world as a whole. This model provides the most natural context for eating the Lord's Supper weekly, which is a priority to us. I want to explain how we eat the Lord's Supper

each week. Our church is comprised of several smaller house churches, or congregations, and has been well-established for nearly two decades.

Our main meetings in the home are usually in the late afternoon and evening on Sundays. We are together for about four and a half hours or longer. We eat the Lord's Supper usually in the last hour and a half or two hours of the evening. It includes lots of unplanned relaxed time to talk and enjoy each other. All of this typically follows an open session designed for mutual edification which includes shorter teachings and exhortations, sharing of stories and testimonies, confession, prayer and singing, along with a longer serious, often interactive, teaching time. The open session and teaching session might be combined in one long period, or two shorter ones.

The elders use various ways to connect the special juice and bread to the meal in each of the home congregations of our church. Even within the congregations, there may be variations week by week. One pattern is to begin by standing in the kitchen together in sight of the food, which is provided by all the people without coordinating the items. One of the men in the congregation will speak to us from the Bible about Christ for

five minutes or so. These are devotional thoughts. We will pray and may sing as well at this time.

The juice and bread, made special by our grateful recognition of its symbolic representation of Christ's death ("the cup of blessing which we bless," "the bread which we break," 1 Corinthians 10:16), will often be placed at the end of the food line. A simple unleavened flat bread is provided for this. As people come through the line, they break off a portion of this bread, whatever size they wish, and pour the juice from a pitcher or container into a normal-sized disposable cup, as much as they want.

If there are unbelievers present who are not aware of our practice, we mention that this special bread and juice is the symbol of Christ's death which is the sole basis for our unity with him and with other believers. We say that this cup and bread specially denoted is therefore provided for true believers to share. Our children also, if unbelievers, do not take this highlighted bread and juice. If someone takes the bread and juice who is not a believer, we are not alarmed. To them it is just bread and juice, but to us it is a significant symbol. We can make it clearer to them at a later time.

In this approach, the bread is eaten and juice drunk along with the rest of the meal without further acknowledgment. However, at times the bread and juice are placed on the table, rather than the end of the food line, to be poured and passed at the beginning of the meal, with appropriate words, singing, or prayer. Sometimes we eat the bread and drink the cup in the middle of the meal with some important word or song.

The meal continues with joy and love for each other, as we share our food and our lives and insights into life and Scripture, or just enjoy each other as believers until we have to say our good-byes and leave for home. I have to say, there is nothing here to dislike. It is one of our greatest joys to eat with each other week by week, going deeper into our lives and into our love for Christ. Everyone looks forward to it.

The Sanctuary-style Church Without Small Groups

Normal church life for most western Christians makes use of a building and a larger meeting in an auditorium. What can be done to establish the weekly Lord's Supper experience in this context?

A pleasing possibility is to eat the Lord's Supper in a church hall following the larger meeting. I have been in many churches in my travels as a Bible teacher who have eaten meals together occasionally or even weekly, but most do not designate this meal as the Lord's Supper by adding the highlighted bread and cup. While this practice is to be commended, how much better to eat the Lord's Supper in all its rich meaning.

The leaders may decide to try this for the short-term at first, then evaluate in order to orient people to the concept. A church must begin somewhere when introducing a new concept and therefore may find an intermediate step reasonable on the way to the goal. Leaders in that case may wish to arrange for a shared meal weekly for a few weeks or months at first, either following the morning service, or in the evening, then evaluate with the hopeful anticipation of continuing.

You may wish to arrange your service times to help people see that this is one continuous experience on the Lord's Day. Some churches may wish to meet first in the auditorium, followed by the meal in the early afternoon, and then a Bible study period or prayer time. In other words, the church should think of this as one event with various parts which in this case will include

Bible study in classes, singing and main teaching in the auditorium, and the Lord's Supper where you normally eat together.

A pitcher and cups could be on each table, with the bread, depending on the size of the group or preference. The leader of the whole, or a man designated at each table, can share an inspiring thought about Christ's death and then the group as a whole or by each table can eat the special bread and juice simultaneously or just along with their meal. Some may wish to share one cup as many European churches do, though this seems unhygienic to many. I will leave that for you to work out. This could take place in the middle of the meal, or on either end of it. Or you may ask the believers to break off bread and pour their cup at the end of the food line in order to incorporate those elements into their meal.

Remember, this should not be a sad time but a joyful feast with special symbols and emphases. That being said, there might be times to be more sober if you wish. Yet, as one friend explains, this is a rehearsal for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb!

Sanctuary-style Church with Small Groups

Many churches who employ an auditorium for its main meetings also have small groups. It is permissible to eat the Lord's Supper in these gatherings. This should be thought of as a whole church action. In other words, you are not eating the Lord's Supper just because some believers get together but as a decisive plan for the church to express fellowship and unity even though meeting in different locales. Because your small groups may gather on different nights, the church will have to decide if eating the Lord's Supper on other evenings besides the Lord's Day would have been allowed by the Apostles.

It is commonly accepted that the gatherings of the early church were in homes and therefore their Lord's Suppers were in that context. Beside the references already mentioned, it seems logical to say, for instance, that the Jerusalem church, as a church of many thousands, would have had difficulty without such a small group plan. I doubt that Jewish leaders would have appreciated the courtyard of the Temple being used for a meal every week for several thousand people. The reason for mentioning that fact is to show that even in the earliest days of church life, the city churches (e.g., "the church of Thessalonica") were divided into smaller

groups (“the church in their house”). This pattern gives freedom to a larger church to eat the Lord’s Supper in their small groups in homes some or all of the time, if they wish, in my view.

We will have to wait for all believers to be all together at the future Marriage Supper of the Lamb. In the meantime, we are separated from other Christians in the city and around the world just as they were then when larger churches had their main meetings in the homes of the members. Even so, we all partake of the same Bread, the one bread of Christ’s body. This symbolic meaning of the one bread and cup is not diminished by the fact that we cannot all be in the same place.

Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.
(1 Corinthians 10:17)

We have seen why eating the Lord’s Supper as a meal is expected by Paul. This is made clear in three ways: it’s singular designation and unmistakable description as “the Lord’s Supper” and “the Agape Feast”; it’s purpose to experience the fellowship with God and the church which is based on Christ’s death; and it’s status as an apostolic tradition to be obeyed.

We should rejoice that this prospect is before us. Just imagine how wonderful it is to eat together with those you love and value and with whom you will spend eternity. The fellowship of the church will grow in love and people will be bonded together who only shared passing greetings before.

Even just one year of eating such a meal will raise people's affection and praise for Christ who gave his life for them.

Just one year.

Just the first 52 meals together.

Afterword

Do you have questions? We would love to help. We are excited to share what we have learned as we have faced various questions and scenarios.

I suggest that leadership groups read through this book together, discussing all the implications.

Then take your entire church through this book. You may order more copies at ccwtoday.org. A free pdf may be found as well on the order page.

Discussion questions are suggested at the end of the book (pp. 85-93), but certainly more will come up spontaneously from the group since this concept may seem unfamiliar to many. Read the chapter aloud together and, if possible, read through 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 also each meeting, or as many times as you can. That will only take a few minutes and will be very profitable for intelligent and biblically-minded discussions. The passage is provided on pages 83-84.

1 Corinthians 11:17–34

17 But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.

18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it.

19 For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

20 Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper,

21 for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

22 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.

23 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;

24 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."

25 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.”

26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

27 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.

28 But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

29 For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

30 For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

31 But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged.

32 But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

33 So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

34 If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Chapter 1 (with Introduction): The Meal at Gaius' House

1. Read the Purpose and Introduction and the biblical text we will study on pages 83-84 (1 Corinthians 11:17–34). Then read Chapter One.
2. Take a few moments to share the way you have experienced the Lord's Supper in your own history. How have your Lord's Supper experiences impacted you? (Be as honest as you can.)
3. Without going into a lot of detail, share some of the "first impression" differences you noticed in the reading of the Bible text you read related to the way the Corinthians were to eat the Lord's Supper (if they had not been abusing it), compared to the way you have typically experienced it.
4. If you have more time, reread 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 once or twice more found on pages 83-84.

Chapter 2: The Lord's Supper Is a Weekly Meal

1. We cannot read the main Bible text too often. Read it again on pages 83-84. Then read Chapter Two.
2. The author is making the simple point that is often overlooked: the Lord's Supper is a meal eaten by the church. What are some specific ways you see this in the text?
3. If someone would have asked the New Testament church members, "Why do you eat a meal together each week?" what do you think would be their reply?
4. If you are able, read the Bible text on pages 83-84 once more.

Chapter 3: The Lord's Supper Is a Meal for Intentional and Undivided Fellowship, Part 1

1. Read through 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 on pages 83-84 with this one thing in mind: What does this text tell us about fellowship and unity?
2. Now, read Chapter Three.

3. Having fellowship with demons is a strange concept. What do you make of it? How does Paul make connections from this to fellowship with Christ in eating bread in the Lord's Supper?
4. If we are reading Acts 2:42 correctly in my restatement of it, how could that help shape your view of the Lord's Supper?
5. How would you define the word "fellowship?" What makes meals a good strategy for increasing fellowship?
6. If you have more time, read the 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 text again.

Chapter 4: The Lord's Supper Is a Meal for Intentional and Undivided Fellowship, Part 2

1. Read through 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 once again with the question in mind, "What does this text tell us about fellowship and unity?"
2. Now read Chapter Four.
3. We said that the division Paul had in mind was related to status and wealth. Why do you think the people in

Corinth could not at first see this? Why was Paul so tuned in to it being a true problem?

4. How did appetite become a hindrance to fellowship in the Corinthian church? Explain Paul's solution. Compare to verses 33 and 34.
5. Would you naturally think of fellowship with God and each other being at the heart of your Lord's Supper experience as you have understood it? Explain why or why not.
6. If possible, read the Bible text once more before ending your session.

Chapter 5: The Lord's Supper Is a Meal to Proclaim Christ's Death, Part 1

1. Read through the Bible text on pages 83-84 while thinking of this question: "Why did Paul include verses 23-26?"
2. Now, please read Chapter Five.
3. How does the story in Galatians about Paul confronting Peter relate to the instructions and warnings in our 1 Corinthians 11 passage?

4. Please articulate why Paul included verses 23–26 in the clearest way possible.
5. How should this section of Scripture affect you personally?
6. If you have time, please read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 once again.

Chapter 6: The Lord's Supper Is a Meal to Proclaim Christ's Death, Part 2

1. Read through the Scripture portion from 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 once again looking for how the behavior of the Corinthians matches the actions of Christ highlighted in the symbols of the supper.
2. Now read Chapter Six together.
3. In Chapter Six we see that there are two ways that the death of Jesus is proclaimed. First is in the symbols themselves, the bread and the cup. The bread and cup symbolize the giving of his body and his blood as the sacrifice in our place which atones for our sins. The second way the death of Christ is proclaimed is in the way the Lord's Supper was eaten. The behavior of the believers in this meal should reflect the sacrifice

of Christ being emphasized in the meal. In this way we preach the effects of the gospel by our behavior. Since this is so important, take a few minutes to restate this truth in your own words together.

4. Paul continues by saying that eating this meal in an unworthy way brings about judgment. What did he mean? In what ways do you think believers today might eat the Lord's Supper in an unworthy way?
5. Finally, explain what Paul means when he tells the Corinthians to "examine" themselves before eating?
6. If time permits, read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 again.

Chapter 7: The Lord's Supper Is a Meal That May Bring Judgment, Part 1

1. Please read the text again, 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, found on pages 83-84. Look for the places where judgment is brought out by Paul as you read. Then read Chapter 7.
2. How can Paul say that a Christian can be guilty of the body and the blood of Christ? Please articulate the argument in the book, but also, if you have another explanation, share your own perspective.

3. How should we think of the judgment Paul mentions which came from God on the Corinthians: weakness, sickness, and death to several. Do you believe God judges like this today?
4. Do you believe it is warranted for God to bring judgment to Christians just because they eat a meal wrongly? Why?
5. If time permits, read the 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 passage again.

Chapter 8: The Lord's Supper Is a Meal That May Bring Judgment, Part 2

1. The best way to learn a Bible passage is to read it over and over. Read once more through the 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 portion provided on pages 83-84.
2. Now please read Chapter Eight.
3. There are three remedies for the judgment the Corinthians were experiencing given by Paul in the 1 Corinthians 11 text we've been reading. Recall them together and discuss them each carefully so that you can say you know what we should do if such a judg-

ment comes on us. Also bring out those deeper issues which the remedies were meant to address.

4. Read verses 31 and 32 again. Paul teaches that the Corinthians did not have to be judged along with the world. What does that mean? Explain these verses to each other.
5. If you have time, read the text on pages 83-84 once again, remembering what you learned.

Chapter 9: Should You Do This? And How?

1. Please read the 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 portion on pages 83-84. For those of you in the entire study, you will have read the text 9–18 times. This will do a lot for embedding its truths in your heart.
2. Please read Chapter Nine in the book while thinking hard about your own situation and what would be the best way to approach a possible change.
3. Do you think there is any real hindrance to fulfilling the apostolic tradition of eating a weekly Lord's Supper in your own church if you should concur that this is the will of God? Why or why not?

4. What are a range of possible ways you could eat the Lord's Supper together in your own church, if you were to take this approach to be God's will? What could it look like in your context?

5. I introduced this short exposition on 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 with the expectation that God will use it in part to bring about a turn by many churches to authentic fellowship on a new and vigorous level. I do not think this will happen because of the eloquence of the author but for higher reasons. Do you think that is a possibility? Do you see the true value in practicing what Paul has written about in our churches? Can it have such a major effect? Why or why not?

6. If you have time, do one last read of 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 recorded for you on pages 83-84. This time, rejoice in what you have learned and ask God as you read to honor himself through the obedience and faith of believers to God's call to unity and fellowship.

7. Finally, let me leave you with a statement to ponder: Your church may not be the best at many things, but there is nothing to stop you from being the most loving church in existence. Nothing. Eating the Lord's Supper as a weekly meal is one of God's best ways to become that kind of church!



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How was the Lord's Supper eaten in the New Testament era? What was its purpose? Are we called to the same weekly experience those believers enjoyed? Jim Elliff seeks to answer these questions in his exploration of Paul's surprising rebuke of the Corinthian church. How they ate the Lord's Supper was, literally, a life or death issue. The author appeals to us to return to the apostolic tradition of eating the Lord's Supper together as a full meal, with its highlighted bread and cup, weekly.

Jim Elliff travels throughout the world as an author and Christian speaker. He is president and founder of Christian Communicators Worldwide. He is also one of several pastors of Christ Fellowship of Kansas City, Missouri, whose members have eaten the Lord's Supper as a meal since it began in 2003.



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