

Communion: The Fellowship of the Local Church, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

Both baptism and communion are ordinances of our Lord. They're rituals that he has commanded us to practice together as a church. It's to be a regular part of the life of the local church. If baptism is the ordinance that provides entrance into the local church, well, communion is the ordinance that preserves that membership. It preserves that fellowship. It maintains it. It protects it, even.

So with that in mind, turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 11. 1 Corinthians 11. Just by way of introduction, there is probably no better passage in the New Testament to illustrate the purpose and the function of the Lord's Supper than this one. So we're going to start in 1 Corinthians, make a few observations there, then we'll take a closer look at how Christ instituted the ordinance of communion on the night he was betrayed. Okay? Are you there, 1 Corinthians 11? 1 Corinthians 11, look at verse 17. I'm going to read a few verses there starting in verse 17.

Paul says, "But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not."

Let's stop there. Those, the internal problems of the Corinthian Church were manifold. If you're familiar at all with 1 Corinthians, you can see that Paul addresses issue after issue after issue. It's just a letter of confrontation for a sinful, disobedient church. But all the problems that Paul dealt with inside the Corinthian church all stemmed from the root of self-centeredness and pride. Self-centeredness and pride. All the errors that he addressed in this first letter to the Corinthians

come down to those two sins. In fact, whenever you see a church that's unhealthy you walk into it and see division and backbiting and all that you know, you know without even knowing the church, without even knowing the people, you know you can trace those problems back to the sins of self-centeredness and pride.

The problem, here, in this church was not just about the negative impact that those sins had on the church members themselves, even though they were significant. It wasn't even primarily about the church's terrible testimony to the watching world. Well, that was significant. The main problem was how those sins were an offense to the risen Lord Jesus Christ, that was the problem. Their internal sins showed up most clearly in the way they practiced this fellowship ordinance; partaking of the Lord's Table. "When you come together," Paul charged, "it is not for the better but for the worse." And Paul's first piece of evidence that you can see there in verses 17 and 18, when they came together, they weren't really together. They were not really together, they were divided, they were fractured, they were split up into divisions and factions. It was a massive problem because it destroyed the picture that is represented by

the Lord's Table, which is the corporate unity of local church fellowship.

In the previous chapter, you can flip over there if you'd like to 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul teaches them about the significance of the Lord's Table regarding this issue of fellowship. He says in that verse, "The cup of blessing we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" That word, participation, is translate participation there, it's that all familiar, but all too often misunderstood word, *koinonia*. *Koinonia*. It could be translated as participation, or sharing, or fellowship, or even close intimate relationship. That's why the Lord's Supper is called a communion. Our coming together pictures the reality of the union that we share in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Fellowship, you know, I always heard this growing up, there was a fellowship hall in the little Baptist church I went to. You went downstairs and it was a tile floor because they were tired of cleaning up punch stains out of the carpet, you know, so it was a tile floor. You went down there and talked about

anything you wanted to and that was fellowship. That's not biblical fellowship, that's talking over punch and cookies and coffee. That's okay. That's great. It's wonderful to do that.

But fellowship is a communing with the Lord Jesus Christ. It's deeply spiritual and is significant. It is what gives us the life in the body. This is about fellowship, this is about participating in the body and blood of Christ, sharing in his death for our sins. We're communing with him. And since we're all communing with him together, we are communing with one another as well.

The next verse in 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread." Communion is about the fellowship with the church. It's about fellowship with Christ, fellowship with his saints and whatever causes division in that fellowship, like pride, like self-centeredness, completely out of line. Those sins are the very incursion of Satan attempting to destroy and divide the fellowship.

You can go back to 1 Corinthians 11, verses 20 to 22, he rebukes Corinthian self-centeredness. Their self-centeredness, he says, "When you come together, it's not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk." That is to say, in those verses he's saying, you may be eating and drinking, but it has nothing to do with communion.

Oh, they were calling it, The Lord's Table, what they were doing was anything but. So to correct these abuses and to confront the underlying attitudes, Paul pointed the Corinthians back to what he received directly from the Lord. After the risen Lord confronted Paul, you remember on the Damascus Road when he called and commissioned him, the Lord personally taught and tutored Paul to get him ready for apostleship. Teaching Paul the significance of the communion ordinance, that was part of the curriculum. Since this fellowship ordinance is so significant to our Lord, we'd better pay close attention, shouldn't we?

Notice what Christ told Paul starting in verse 23, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also took the cup, 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."

Stop there. That's the pattern. That's the pattern we're to follow. That's how we practice this vital ordinance to proclaim the fellowship of the local church. The Lord's Table is the ordinance that proclaims and preserves and protects that fellowship. It's a fellowship that is very important to the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice how the fundamental attitudes pictured in this communion ordinance rebuke Corinthians' sins.

In verse 24, Jesus said, "This is my body." The one body points to the unity of the fellowship. The unity that the Corinthians were dividing by their pride and their arrogance. Jesus said, "This is my body which is for you." That indicates that his selfless sacrifice in giving his body for the church, it confronted Corinthian self-indulgence, Corinthian

individualism. In light of his selflessness, would we dare approach the fellowship of the church, represented by this table, with a self-centered, what's in it for me attitude? It's completely out of place.

Listen, beloved, it's absolutely imperative that we heed these biblical warnings, and we approach his table with the utmost care. Look at verses 27-29, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Listen, there's more, there is more to proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes, there's more to proclaiming that death by observing communion than merely digesting elements into our bodies. This table is not about stirring sentimental feelings of sympathy for what the Lord suffered, and what he endured on the cross. The Lord's Table is about the fellowship, proclaiming it, protecting it, and remaining committed to it. This table is a



matter of our attitudes, it's a matter of our wills, it's a matter of our affections. Let me show you why.

Let's go back to Luke 22. Luke 22, we're going to return to the night of Christ's betrayal and see what Christ had in mind when he instituted this ordinance. Why is this ordinance significant to him? Luke 22 records what happened the night Jesus was betrayed and it says in verse 1, "Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover."

Luke records the conspiracy of Judas and the Jewish leaders to deliver Jesus over to death in those next verses, verses 3 to 6, and that's very significant. We'll come back to that. But notice in verse 7, "Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepared the Passover for us, that we may eat it.'" So Jesus, there, sent Peter and John to prepare for the last Passover he would celebrate before going to the cross, which was near. And the Lord, knowing what the Father had sovereignly planned, what he sovereignly designed, what he intended, the Lord intended to turn that final Passover into the

first Communion, which would become the pattern for the fellowship ordinance of the local church.

As you know, Passover, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, that commemorated the Exodus, the time when God delivered his people Israel out of Egypt, when he delivered Israel from the Egyptians. It commemorated God redeeming Israel, purchasing his people for his own possession. That redemption, as you remember, required the shedding of blood. It required the sacrifice of a bunch of innocent lambs, had done no wrong, but they atoned for the peoples' sin.

That's what Passover commemorated, that covering over of the blood. You may remember the death angel came to Egypt one night, visiting every Egyptian home and killing every Egyptian firstborn, horrendous when you think about that. The angel of death would have killed every firstborn Israelite child, too, had it not been for the gracious salvation of God revealing a way of escape. God told Moses Israel could escape that judgment by sacrificing a lamb, one per household. They were to paint the doorposts of their homes with blood as a sign to that death angel so that home was covered by the blood of the lamb. When

the angel saw the blood, he passed over that home, sparing the life of the firstborn. Thus, pass over, Passover.

God made a distinction that night when he sent the angel, but it wasn't between good Israelites and bad Egyptians. In God's eyes, all of them were bad. All of them were idolaters. "All had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." What was the distinction then? The distinction, then, was between those who were covered by the blood and those who were not. The difference is the blood of the lamb. Isn't it the same today?

That's the significance of what the Apostles were about to celebrate and observe with their Lord Jesus Christ that night. Peter and John had made the preparations, verse 9 to 13 described that and then Jesus joined his disciples that night to celebrate. And as they were looking back, Christ was looking forward; his last Passover would become their first communion. Very soon he would shed his own blood, covering their sins as their Pascal Lamb, purchasing them as a people for his own possession.

Look at verse 14, “And when the hour came, he reclined at the table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

Now, here is a first point I want you to see about the significance of communion. Communion is an intimate fellowship. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we participate in intimate fellowship with Christ and his people. That’s what we noted earlier from 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 17, the Lord’s Table is about fellowshiping. It’s about *koinonia* with the risen Lord. Ingesting those elements pictures just how close and intimate that fellowship actually is. It’s internal.

In fact, the Passover meal, like all, like many other sacrifices of Israel, that, that Passover meal pictured the fellowship between the worshiper and God. Do you understand that? That’s what a meal does, right? It brings, food brings people together. The table brings people together. It sits them down at the same table. It facilitates the building of

relationships, maintaining relationships, strengthening relationships; same thing with Passover; same thing with the Lord's Table.

And that's why Paul, again in 1 Corinthians 10, he warns the Corinthians about participating in food sacrificed to idols while celebrating communion partaking of communion as well. He said it was a fellowship principle. 1 Corinthians 10:18 he says, "Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? [...] What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with 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."

So this is a fellowship and notice the intimacy the Lord desired in sharing this meal with his disciples. Look at verse 15. He says, "I earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." That's an intense Hebrew expression there. You can get a sense of the emphasis if you translate it literally. He is literally saying, I have desired with desire.

He's expressing deep longing to be with these men, a hungering for fellowship with them. And that's because these guys were close. They're family to him. Passover meal was typically celebrated as a family event, together, gathering together, eating together as households. That's why there was one lamb per household. For this Passover, the Apostles aren't eating with their families, with their households, at least their physical relations. They're eating this Passover with a new family, the household of faith.

Let me ask you, is this household more important to you than any other? More important than your own family? If the fellowship of believers is more precious to you than any other human relationship, you know what? It changes the way you spend your time, your money, your energy, your resources, doesn't it? You invest in what matters to you. For Jesus, intimate fellowship with his people is more important than all relations.

Matthew 12:46 and following, "While he was still speaking to the people, behold his mother and his brothers stood outside,

asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'"

That's why this fellowship meal was so important to him. He longed for the intimacy with his disciples, which he would not experience again in the flesh until, as it says, there, in verse 16, "Until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Perhaps you haven't thought about communion this way before. Now that you see the way the Lord looks at this ordinance, you should align your thinking with his, shouldn't we? Communion is an intimate fellowship.

Let's keep moving. You can't see it in the text of Luke's Gospel alone, but by comparing the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and John, we know there are quite a few things going on between verses 16 and 17. Some of the most significant events are recorded in John's Gospel. So turn over to John 13. We'll come back to Luke 22. But I want you to turn to John 13 because we need to learn more about what the Lord thinks of communion, by

considering what happened in that upper room on the night that he was betrayed.

And this leads us to the second point in our outline: Communion is a pure fellowship. Communion is a pure fellowship. John 13 through 16 are chapters known as the, Upper Room Discourse, where Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure. He was going to leave them soon, and he wanted them to be ready. He knew this was going to be hard. Everything recorded in those four chapters happened at that last supper, at that first communion. And they really shed light on the significance of the communion ordinance, and that's exactly what we're proclaiming by partaking of these elements.

We learn in John 13:1 to 20 that the evening started off with a foot washing. You understand how walking around, if you've traveled at all, gone to India or some other countries around the world, walking around on dirt streets with the sanitation system mixing in with the foot traffic wearing sandals. That made cleaning your feet a pretty routine necessity. You wanted to do that often, especially when you came



to sit down to eat. You didn't like the smells mixing with your food. It's just a normal part of life.

So when they sat down to eat, it was odd, really, that none of the disciples took up the slave's role of washing one another's feet. They didn't even wash their own feet. It turns out it was according to plan because Jesus intended to teach them something. He donned a towel. He grabbed a basin of water, and he washed all the disciples' feet. Note this, he washed all of their feet, including the feet of his betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

Peter couldn't stand the thought of his Lord stooping down to perform the slave's duty on his feet, so he tells the Lord, I love that, he tells the Lord in verse 8, "You shall never wash my feet." Isn't it interesting when we give the Lord commands? Odd. Jesus is so gracious. He answers Peter here, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." In other words, This is a matter of our fellowship, Peter. Peter said in verse 9, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head." That is so

Peter, isn't it? What he lacked in understanding he made up for in enthusiasm, didn't he?

And Jesus, he's still patient to teach Peter and the others. He continues the lesson there in verse 10, "The one who's bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean." Stop there. "You are clean". For true disciples, this foot washing is a picture of our need to confess our sins. We need to keep our consciences clean and clear before God by regularly confessing our sins, coming often to Jesus to wash our feet.

The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just," or you might translate that, faithful and righteous, "to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That is to say, if we confess our sins, that is to acknowledge our sins before God, to admit that we've committed them, to identify our sins as the sins that they are, that's what confess means, by the way. *Homologeō*: homo, same; *logeō*, to say, or, to speak. So it's, to say the same thing as. When you are saying the same thing about your sin, you are saying the same thing about your sin that God says about your

sin. You're coming into agreement with God about what you have done, what it is. So you are saying the same things about your sin that God says about your sin; if you will do that, God will forgive you. He'll forgive you.

Notice why, because of his character. God is faithful. That is, he is always consistent. He is never changing. Not only that, but he's just or he is righteous, meaning he doesn't let sin go. He doesn't wink at your sin. He doesn't just ignore it. No, he fully punished it when he put Christ to death on the cross. All of his wrath was poured out on Christ; none left for you. So in view of Christ's atoning sacrifice, and in light of your fellowship, God will restore us by confession, through confession. He'll restore us back into fellowship with him. He will forgive.

The sin you've confessed, that sin, that interrupted your fellowship with God and broke it as far as you were concerned because there is guilt on your conscience, you feel the shame. You want to hide, just like Adam and Eve when they transgressed the law and they found out in the garden. They immediately hid from one another and then from God, in silly ways. They tried to

cover their own sin. They tried to cover it up themselves. They tried to deflect. They tried to counter accuse. They tried to blame; shift blame around. They didn't deal with sin directly, did they? The same thing we do, isn't it?

No, if we come clean, if we come and confess to God, that sin that interrupted our fellowship can be wiped away. He'll forgive it. He'll forgive it, not only that, but the sin that you're unaware, noted there as, all unrighteousness, that sin; he'll cleanse you of that, too. So you come confessing the sins you know about, he will forgive those. The sin that you don't know about, that you're unaware of, he'll cleanse that too. So gracious, so gracious.

Listen, that is why confessing sin is so vital for maintaining fellowship. That's what we face whenever we come, we do it here monthly, whenever we come to celebrate the Lord's Table. We remember what happened that night, how the Lord washed his disciples' dirty feet. He stooped down before them, taking the role of the lowest slave to wash the filth and the muck from their feet.