

# Discerning the Body at the Table

*A sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 by Nathan Nettleton, 9 February 2020*

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## Message

Jesus calls us to unite as his body around his table, and if we come to the table without seeking that unity, we dishonour Jesus.

## Sermon

The reading that we heard tonight from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is pretty well known, even though most of it is not included in the ecumenical three year cycle of Bible readings. It took me by surprise actually, because I felt like I had preached on it often. The little bit in the middle is very familiar to most of us – the bit about “on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took bread . . .” – that bit is in the lectionary once a year and it is included in our prayers around the Lord's Table every week.

However I felt sure I had preached on the rest of it – particularly the part about “eating the bread or drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner”, and “eating and drinking judgment against yourself.” But then I realised that I used to be a theology lecturer, and I taught about this passage year after year when I was teaching theology students about the history and understanding of the Lord's Table. So I want to address it today and I will try not to lapse back into theological lecturer mode, but you'll have to forgive me if there's a bit of that.

I do need to start with a bit of history though, because the biggest issue with hearing and understanding this passage is that for hundreds of years it was badly misinterpreted, and that misunderstanding continues to live on in the hearts and minds of many many Christians, and most of you will have been affected by it somewhere along the line.

In the passage, the Apostle Paul is not at all happy about what is going on when the Corinthian church gathers to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In fact he is so unhappy that he says that it is not the Lord's Supper at all, and that they are showing contempt for the church of God and humiliating some of their members. Strong stuff. And then after telling the story of what Jesus did at his last supper and how that created this ongoing celebration, he delivers some more equally harsh words.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

He even suggests that eating and drinking judgement on themselves has caused some people to get sick or even die.

Now the misinterpretation of this bit of teaching was responsible, more than anything else, for the decline of participation in the Lord's Supper and the eventual practice in many of the reformation churches of only observing it a few times a year instead of every week. It was also responsible for the uneasiness and guilt that a lot of people experience at the Table.

The way it happened is fairly straight forward. A few hundred years after the time of Jesus, the church got into bed with the Empire, and Christian faith was distorted more and more into a way of maintaining control over the behaviour of the population. To do that, the church's teaching and preaching became more and more heavily focussed on sin and the fear of punishment for sin. It got to the stage through the middle ages where Christianity was understood as being about little more than confronting sin and either getting it forgiven or facing an eternity of punishment for it.

So in that context, a passage of scripture that says that if you take communion in an unworthy manner you'll be in serious trouble is going to get a lot of attention. That's a pretty useful guilt generator right there. And all the more when it goes on to say that you should therefore examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup, or else you will eat and drink judgment against yourselves and you might die.

So what happened is that everyone began anxiously examining themselves before coming to communion, and anyone who examines themselves properly will find things to be anxious and guilty about, so everyone began concluding that they were unworthy and should refrain from receiving communion lest they face additional judgement or even die. By the high middle ages, most people were too scared to receive communion at all, and the Eucharist became a kind of spectator sport with the priests doing their thing but no one coming forward to participate.

When we got to the reformation, the reformers all tried to get the people to begin receiving communion again, but the people were too scared, and the reformers being very logical people could see that its not actually communion if the people don't commune, so they cut it back to just a few times a year.

Even then, the influence of this huge concern about eating and drinking in an unworthy state continued, and in many of the reformation churches, you couldn't receive communion without first being interviewed by a pastor or elder of the church and issued with a token saying that you measured up. It was the protestant version of the Catholic confessional.

Can we have a quick show of hands? Who here has experienced teaching that suggested that it was very important to examine yourself thoroughly and confess your sins before coming to the Lord's Table or there might be consequences?

So if I'm suggesting that this was a serious misinterpretation of this passage, what then does it mean?

Well, the issue is context. The way that this passage came to be heard as a general link between examining yourself for sin and receiving communion only works if you isolate those few verses (27-32) from their context. A lot of biblical verses can have their meanings radically changed by the inclusion or exclusion of context. This is a classic example.

When put back into the context of the whole passage as we heard it tonight, it has to be understood in the very specific context of what the Apostle was objecting to in the Table practices of the church at Corinth. So let's look at that and see how these warnings look then.

In order to make sense of this, we have to remember one very major difference between the modern practice and the first century practice of the Lord's Table. Back then in the church in Corinth, the Eucharist was celebrated in the context of a full meal. We have a full meal after the Eucharist each week here, but it's not quite the same. Back then the whole worship service happened around the meal table. Bread was blessed and broken to commence the meal, and then a cup of wine was blessed and shared to conclude the meal. Not only was this the practice in the churches, but non-Christians in the Roman Empire had ritual meals with a very similar structure, so it was all very normal.

In fact, it may have been the fact that these meals were quite similar to the normal non-Christian Roman version that was at the root of the problem in Corinth. Because the normal Roman version quite intentionally reinforced the structure of social classes. The wealthy had more leisure time, and could arrive early and enjoy the best of the food. Ordinary working class people could only get there later when the working day was done. Slaves were lucky to get there at all and would only be eating the leftovers.

What Paul is so infuriated about is that this pattern was being replicated when the Corinthian church gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. If you do that, Paul thunders, it is not the Lord's supper at all. It is just an ordinary Roman meal that reinforces exactly the sort of divisions and disunity that are supposed to be being dismantled and reconciled at the Lord's Table. You are eating not the Lord's supper, but your own supper, and one is left hungry while another goes home bloated and drunk. This, he says, shows contempt for the church of God and is humiliating to the poorer members of the church, exactly those members to whom, he says elsewhere, we should be showing the most honour.

The fact that this is what Paul is addressing when he talks about the risk of eating and drinking condemnation on yourself is made clear at the end of the passage when he says, "So when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation."

That is, if your eating and drinking isn't reinforcing social class divisions and humiliating your poorer members, then you're not eating and drinking condemnation on yourself.

Paul is not talking in this context about a general examining of yourself for every random sin you can come up with. That's not necessarily a bad thing to do; it's just not what he is talking about here. He is calling us to examine a particular aspect of our individual and group behaviour as we gather in worship around the table. Are we properly expressing our equality as members of Christ's body and honouring all members, regardless of social rank outside the church? Or are we reinstating status structures that Jesus died to abolish?

When Paul talks about "eating and drinking without discerning the body", he is not talking about failing to recognise the bread as the body of Christ. In this context, he is talking about failing to recognise the congregation as the body of Christ, and each member as honoured parts of the body of Christ. If you are treating one another without honour, with contempt, you are clearly failing to discern the nature and extent of the body of Christ.

This is why the ritual sharing of the peace is an important part of the celebration of the Lord's Table. "Though we be a company of strangers, in approaching this table we bind ourselves to one another to live in love and peace."

So, the medieval teaching about a very personal self-examination was actually taking us in the exact opposite direction to what the Apostle intended. Instead of turning us to our brothers and sisters and doing a unity check, it turned us in on ourselves and had us thinking of the Eucharist as a personal me-and-Jesus moment. Paul, in contrast, is asking us to think about us; us-in-Jesus.

So if you want to take seriously what he is saying here about examining yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup, then ask yourself about your relationships with the others here in this room who will come to the table with you tonight. Have you made the effort to be united with them in the body of Christ? Ask yourself who among them you don't really know, and ask yourself why. If they've been coming for more than a few weeks and you haven't established any sort of friendship and unity with them, examine yourself. Why not? Is it because they don't belong to the class of people you usually draw your friends from? Because that doesn't count as an acceptable reason in here.

In here, building reconciled relationships across the boundaries and differences that might normally divide us is the name of the game. That's what coming to this table means, and if it doesn't mean that, then it doesn't mean anything. If it doesn't mean that, it is not even the Lord's supper, you are just eating your own supper and you are not honouring either Jesus or his body gathered around this table.

The Table of the Lord is a wonderful gift, and we are all incredibly privileged to be invited to share in it. But invited you are. Our crucified and risen Lord, Jesus the Christ himself, invites you to the feast that he hosts week by week here at this table. Here he offers us his own body in the form of bread, that sharing in this one loaf, we might become his own body in the form of a gathered, reconciled, and loving community. We receive what we are, one body, that we might become what we receive, one united body.

Here at this table we are called and invited to step boldly or timidly across all the usual social divisions, and taste the first fruits of the new communion of people reconciled in Christ and learning to love one another deeply and generously. It's a bit scary, but it is worth it. New life begins here, and if we get into the habit of properly examining ourselves, ourselves in relationship with one another, then we will be practicing and growing into the new life of the coming reign of God. And that is a banqueting table worth gathering around.