

Small Group Study Guide
Honoring the Body of Christ at the Lord's Table
1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Introduction: As Steve mentioned on Sunday, the Lord's Table is an issue over which churches have historically lacked theological unity. Differences regarding the presence of Christ in the elements, what type of bread to use, whether to use real wine or not, the frequency of celebrating it, how the elements are distributed, and, who is qualified to administer the Lord's Table are some of the issues over which there has been great disagreement. These are issues, however, that are for the most part ignored in the key texts regarding the Lord's Table. As we look at 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, a passage that most fully addresses the practice of the Lord's Table in the local church, Paul has a different concern on his heart; he is concerned about Christian unity.

Opening Question: If you grew up in church, how was the Lord's Table practiced in your church?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

1. What problem does Paul address in this passage?
2. Paul says that they come together "not for the better but for the worse (v. 17)." What does he mean by this? In what ways were they worse off when they came together as a church?
3. What is Paul's concern about how they were practicing the Lord's Table?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-34

4. What do these verses say about why believers practice the Lord's Table and what they are doing when they observe communion?
5. Paul gives the warning that the one who eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27). In what ways were the Corinthians partaking in an "unworthy manner?"

6. What does Paul say a believer must do to avoid partaking of the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner?

Steve said:

It is certainly appropriate to examine ourselves to see if there is **anything** in our lives that displeases the Lord. When we partake of the Lord's Table, we are saying, "I have accepted Jesus' sacrifice for my sin. I belong to Him. Since He died for me, I should live for Him." We examine ourselves to see whether our lives line up with that proclamation. In the context of 1 Corinthians 11, however, perhaps Paul's primary focus involves examining ourselves concerning our relationships within the body of Christ. In verse 29 Paul writes:

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

Some translations read, ". . . if he does not judge the body **of the Lord** rightly." The different translations are based on different Greek manuscripts. The question is whether they were misjudging the **physical body of Christ** which was sacrificed for them or whether they were misjudging the **church** as the "body of Christ." Here in 1 Corinthians 11, the two go hand in hand: because they didn't hold the sacrifice of the body of Christ in highest regard, they didn't hold other believers in highest regard. Jesus sacrificed Himself **for the Church** (Ephesians 5:25-26). They failed to honor both the sacrifice of the body of Christ **and** the Church as the body of Christ. In this way they invited the judgment of God at the Lord's Table.

7. So, what does it mean then to "judge the body rightly" (v. 29)?
8. Typically, how conscious are you of judging the body rightly when you take communion?
9. What does Paul say may result from partaking of the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner?
10. How do you feel about this statement: "The only way I can take communion is if I'm absolutely sure I'm living a perfect life"? Explain. How would you explain in light of Paul's teaching in this passage?

Steve said:

We have considered a passage which addressed the Corinthians' disunity. We should each examine ourselves and ask, "Am I contributing to disunity in this church in any way – through what I think or say or do?" This type of examination should happen on an ongoing basis, but the Lord's Table provides a built-in reminder of the importance of honoring the body of Christ.

11. Is there any way in which you are contributing to the disunity of this church through anything you are thinking, saying or doing?

12. Given what we have learned here, how can you regularly prepare to partake of the Lord's Table in a worthy manner?