

## When It's Time to Eat

My faith journey began the day I was born when my parents held me in their arms and prayed for guidance in raising me to become a Christian. As a young child I often expressed the desire to follow Jesus. When I was in sixth grade, I participated in a membership class (some of you may call it catechism) and was baptized. This was a public statement of my Christian commitment. As a result of this act I became a member of Midway Mennonite Church, I began wearing a prayer covering on my head during worship, and I was eligible to participate in the communion services our congregation held twice a year.

I have several memories about my communion experiences during those early years. Memory #1: The pastor usually cut up several pieces of store-bought sliced white bread for use during the service. Memory #2: Communion always included foot-washing. Memory #3: The first time I took communion as a visitor at my grandparent's church, the pastor hesitated to serve me wondering if I was truly ready to participate. Memory #4: It wasn't unusual for me to experience some anxiety surrounding communion. I wasn't quite sure how perfect I needed to be to be worthy enough to participate. I was truly afraid that if I had some unconfessed, hidden sin when eating the bread and drinking the juice I might get sick and maybe even die.

This fear, of course, rose from Paul's words to the Corinthians in chapter 11. *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. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*<sup>1</sup> Why did Paul write this warning? Was my childhood fear warranted?

Paul wrote to the Corinthians while he was staying in Ephesus. In this letter, Paul addresses issues reported to him through letters from Corinth and by people who visited him in Ephesus. In this section, he responds to issues reported by Chloe's people. Chloe was a woman of means and influence, one of the more prominent members of the Christian community in Corinth. It's possible she was one of the hosts for their weekly assemblies.

Even though the Corinthian congregation was small, maybe 50 to 100 people, they wouldn't have met as an entire group very often. Instead, they gathered in private homes belonging to the more well-to-do members. These smaller groups included the people from that household – head of household, wife, children, extended family and servants – plus slaves and relatively poor freed persons from elsewhere in the community.

Differences in class, theological perspectives, background, and abilities affected how the group worshiped together. Their gatherings included prayer, prophecy, speaking in tongues, mutual discipling, singing and sharing the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 5-10, Paul addresses a variety of issues within the community that concern him. In chapters 11-14, he focuses on worship matters.<sup>3</sup> The portion we read today is in response to reports of drunkenness, gluttony, and class discrimination during the Lord's Supper.

This ritual was conducted in the context of a fellowship meal. When the people gathered, some ate and drank to excess while others received nothing. The wealthy Christians began eating and drinking before the rest of the group arrived. Those who arrived late were probably laborers or slaves who couldn't be there in time to eat with those who were free to come earlier. The latecomers also couldn't afford to bring their own food.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:28-30, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>2</sup> Background on the Christians in Corinth comes primarily from Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, pp. 27-29.

<sup>3</sup> This section draws from Nighswander, pp. 237-238, 252-268.

When the common meal did begin, some people were given more and better food than others as was a common practice in meals hosted by wealthy patrons in other settings.

This behavior offends Paul. It demonstrates contempt for the relationships in the faith community. It even humiliates some members. The main issue that concerns Paul is the disunity fostered by these inequities. The fellowship meal that they call the Lord's Supper should create unity, not discord. Paul scolds the offenders for their actions. Then he reminds them of Jesus' example and teaching. He applies that example to the assembly's fellowship meal.

The words said over the bread and the cup during this meal are reminders. At the first Lord's Supper with Jesus and his disciples, Jesus shared bread and wine saying, *do this in remembrance of me*. Paul tells the Corinthians to do the same when they gather. The bread symbolizes Jesus' body that is for you, Paul reminds them. And the cup is a symbol of the new covenant in his blood. The *body* language Paul uses leads to his discussion of participation in the body of believers in the next section of the letter. His use of the word *covenant* is a further reminder of the relationships among all who drink the cup together.

It's clear to Paul that the misuse of the practice of the Lord's supper in Corinth contributes to the disunity in the assembly. Paul suggests they've forgotten what they should have remembered every time they participated in this ritual: its historical and spiritual significance as a symbol of Jesus' death and of the unity of those who are saved by God's action on their behalf.

The section about judgment in the context of the Lord's supper, the part that caused me such angst in my younger years, has often been misunderstood. In the western world, we tend to understand sin and judgment only from an individualistic view. How am *I* acting? What have *I* done to offend God? Am I worthy to participate in communion?

But the warning in these verses is against those who participate in an unworthy manner. Paul's concern isn't so much about the *who*, the worthiness of the participant, but the *how*, the worthiness of the manner of participation. His instruction to examine yourselves isn't strictly about searching one's heart and memory for evidence of sins committed or contemplated. Instead, it's an instruction to honestly assess how one's actions affect other members of the assembly.

Paul urges his readers to think about the Lord's body in two ways. His biggest concern is about the local group of believers, the body of Christ meeting together for fellowship and worship. This Christian assembly is formed, of course, around the broken body of Jesus that is remembered in the Lord's supper. Discerning the significance of the Lord's body is a matter of recognizing that the people gathered for the fellowship meal which is the Lord's supper are indeed the body of Christ.

In Corinth, fellowship meals of all kinds served as boundary markers. The invitation to participate in a meal recognized acceptance by the host. The seating arrangements and foodservice demonstrated a person's ranking within the group. The Corinthians were judging one another in the way they admitted people to the table and in the amount and kind of food and drink they received.

In his words to them, Paul challenges their right to judge, reminding them that it is the Lord who is the host, not the person who owns the house where the assembly meets. Those who fail to recognize whose supper it is and who fail to discern the right relationship of the participants eat and drink judgment against themselves.

In the Corinthian world, fellowship meals were associated with deities. Participants believed that honoring the deity in the meal would result in blessing, and offenses would result in sickness and death as punishment. We don't know what illnesses and deaths had been experienced in the Corinthian church. We do know that Paul associates those experiences with improper practice of the Lord's supper. His readers would have accepted this connection as well.

Paul ends this section of the letter by giving explicit instructions for correcting the problems in the practice of the Lord's supper. The proper way to foster unity is to ensure that all members are fully included. Instead of going ahead with their own food, the wealthy, powerful, and well-connected members of the assembly should wait for the others. This will both alleviate the humiliation of those who have been excluded and address the problem of gluttony and drunkenness.

We might be disappointed or even dismayed that Paul doesn't try to eliminate the inequities underlying the problem with the Lord's supper. Instead, he directs that they should be practiced in private. Perhaps in Paul's mind this is another application of the principle he mentions earlier of everyone remaining in the condition they were in when they converted to Christianity.

We skipped over chapters 7 through 10 in which Paul addresses marriage, circumcision, and slavery. He is anticipating the imminent return of Jesus and the end of the current age. In view of this impending crisis, there isn't enough time to address marital status, slavery, or financial and social inequities. But the humiliation and exclusion of brothers and sisters on any of these grounds is intolerable and must be corrected immediately.

Even now, almost 2000 years later, the Lord's supper continues to divide the Lord's body. In their desire to maintain the integrity of the "true church," many denominations and congregations welcome only their own members to the table. Inclusion or exclusion from the Lord's supper is the ultimate test of whether a person or denomination is recognized as legitimately "Christian."

Like it was 2000 years ago, sometimes individuals or groups are excluded or feel excluded because of social status, wealth or poverty, theological differences, moral judgment, or other criteria. This failure of Christians to rightly discern the body is not for the better but for the worse and continues to show contempt for the Church of God.

How does each denomination or congregation decide who is invited to participate in communion? This wasn't the question for the Corinthian congregations, so Paul doesn't directly address it in this letter. He does intimate, however, that it's members of the body of Christ who remember and proclaim his death and resurrection.

But what are the criteria for determining who is a member of the body of Christ? Is it synonymous with being a member of a particular congregation? Or with being baptized? Or with being a certain age? My thoughts on this have changed over the years. They've even changed during the 11 years I've been pastor of this congregation.

In the Mennonite Minister's Manual, the invitation to communion includes these words: *It is the Lord's Table, and all who are baptized are invited to it.* In my copy of the manual, I've changed it to read: *It is the Lord's Table, and all who choose to follow Christ are invited to it.*

I believe communion is an act of both invitation and commitment. I continue to wrestle with how those interact. As an act of invitation, the table is open to all. As an act of commitment, the table is open to all who choose to follow Christ. How is that choice demonstrated? Is it through baptism? Is it through membership in a congregation? Is it simply a private matter between a person and God?

I affirm the core values of Anabaptism which state that Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our life, and reconciliation is the center of our work. My desire is for people to choose to be baptized and to commit to worship and accountability within a congregation. However, I'm no longer willing to decide who can or cannot participate when we celebrate communion together. I will continue to invite those who choose to follow God's ways to participate and let each person decide how they will respond.

In keeping with Paul's example, my concern isn't so much about the *who*, but about the *how*. While everyone is worthy to participate in the Lord's supper, each person must continue to assess how their actions affect other members of the body of Christ. We each come to the table as we are, with our foibles, faults, and shortcomings. We confess these to God and, when necessary, to each other. As much as it is possible for us, we make things right with each other, so that our participation in communion doesn't add to any divisions among us but contributes to our unity as a community of faith. May our celebration at the Lord's Table strengthen our devotion to God and our relationships with each other. Amen.