

## **Discerning the Body: 1 Corinthians 11:17-29**

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Plymouth Park, World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2007

The table we gather around this morning, and every Sunday, is bigger than us. This is a table that has been around for millennia, and has been gathered around by Christians in all places around the world. I do not speak, of course, of this literal table. This table was purchased when this building was furnished not that long ago. I speak of the table of which this table represents. The table that is bigger than us. The table prepared for us by our Lord on the night he was betrayed.

When we gather at this table, we gather at that table. And we are not the first ones to gather at this table.

This table is the table Alexander Campbell gathered around with his group of rebel Christians in Bethany, VA, inspired by a new vision for the church, and drawn to the ancient yet still very relevant practice of communion. This is the table at which Barton Stone gathered with Christians from various denominations during the Cane Ridge Revival. He was criticized for communing with other denominations, yet he knew that the table that had once divided these Christians could become again a place of unity.

This table is the table over which John Wesley presided when he gathered with his group of Christians who deeply desired holiness and pursued it through their Methodism. This table is the table at which Martin Luther sat while he was protesting the abuses of the church, calling all Christians to a faith characterized by freedom and rooted in faith alone.

This table is the same table where Thomas Aquinas gathered, and C.S. Lewis. The table from which Dorothy Day received communion as she fought to end poverty. This is the table of William and Catherine Booth and their Salvation Army, the table of Mother Teresa and her selfless service to the poorest of the poor. This is the table of Martin Luther King, Jr., of William Wilberforce. The table of Saints Benedict, Francis, and Theresa of Lisieux. It is at this table that Bishop Oscar Romero was assassinated as he broke the bread for the oppressed people of El Salvador.

This is the table of the Churches of Christ, and of the Disciples of Christ, of the Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Brethren, Mennonites, Presbyterians, Pentecostals—the table of all Christians no matter their name.

This is the table of Christians in the United States, in Canada, in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Venezuela. This is the table of those who meet in mud huts in Kenya, and in refugee camps in Sudan. This is the table of those who meet under the cloak of night, in secret locations in China. This is the table of the Christians who stand for peace in a time of war in Burma.

This is the table at which Jesus gathered with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. This is the table which Paul gathered with the Christians in Corinth. This is your table. This is my table. This is our table, but this table is so much bigger than us, bigger than our church, bigger than our denomination, bigger than our nation, bigger than our time.

This is the Lord's Table, and we are not the first to gather here, nor will we be the last. But this morning we gather in remembrance, not just of Christ and his broken body on the cross, but we gather in remembrance of the body of Christ, spread out across time and place, who gather just as we gather this morning.

Today, and every Sunday, we gather with them, and they gather with us.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter, he had some encouragement to give. A few things here and there to say that would pat them on the back, and let them know that were doing a good job. But when it came to the subject of "Communion", Paul writes, "*Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.*"

In other words, you've got the Lord's Table so wrong that it would be better if you did not even come to worship at all! This is not a message I've ever heard any preacher preach before. We preachers beg people to come to church. Seats in the seats—that's the goal. Who cares if they don't get it? Who cares if they don't completely live out their faith? We'd rather them be here on Sunday morning than at home watching the game, right?

Paul says no—if you don't get the Lord's Table right, you might as well not gather at all.

For a while, I thought what got Paul so upset about with the Corinthian's communion practices was that they didn't think enough about Jesus' sacrifice and their sinfulness. This is what I was taught when I was young. Paul tells us to examine ourselves, to make sure that we don't eat or drink unworthily. "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."

That's pretty serious. You better get it right; examine yourself. Discern the body, and if you don't, you will eat and drink judgment against yourself. This is serious.

It was a lot more serious when I was a kid, because we used the King James Version of the Bible, and in that translation, Paul is quoted as saying, "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."

It sounds a lot more serious in the KJV, and I knew as a child that anytime we were allowed to say “damnation” in church, it was pretty serious.

So, when we approached the Lord’s Table, we approached in fear. We got to do this right. Think the right thing. Say the right thing. Make sure we pass the bread before the cup, heaven forbid we get the trays confused! We had to get it right, or we might eateth and drinketh damnation!

And so devout Christians would spend the communion time focused on themselves, in deep meditation, thinking about all they did wrong that week, asking for forgiveness, picturing Jesus’ bloody corpse hanging on the cross, and realizing that he’s hanging there because of what I did this week.

This was, for us, how we “examined ourselves” and “discerned the body”.

But I wonder if this is what Paul has in mind here? Before Paul ever tells us about Jesus and the night he was betrayed, before he tells us to examine ourselves and discern the body, Paul chastises the Corinthian Christians because, as he explains, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. <sup>21</sup> For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. <sup>22</sup> What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”

It’s not that the Corinthians were not thinking enough about Jesus hanging on the cross. It’s not that they were not focused enough on their sinfulness. Paul has no good words to say about their communion practice because they are using that time to divide the Lord’s body into factions. The rich are getting drunk, and the poor are going away thirsty.

Of course, you must realize, that in order for them to get drunk during communion, they had to have had more than little cups of grape juice in metal trays. Communion for them was more of a real meal, than simply a symbolic meal as we celebrate it today. But the point is not so much how much they ate or drank at communion. The point is, when they did it, they did not respect and honor and appreciate the entire Body of Christ.

When Paul talks about “the body”, he’s not talking about the corpse of Jesus on the cross. He’s talking about “the body of Christ”, the church, those who are baptized in Jesus’ name to be the light of the world and salt of the earth. This is the body of Christ—we are the body of Christ—and it was this body that the Corinthians were ignoring.

When we do not pay attention to our brothers and sisters in Christ, we fail to discern the body of Christ and eat and drink judgment on ourselves. When we believe that this table is for us and only us, we do not discern the body. When

we think our group, our church, people who look like us, talk like us, think like us are the only ones invited to this table, we do not discern the body. When the rich divide from the poor, the black divide from the white, the Americans divide from those of other countries—we do not discern the body.

For this table does not exist to confirm our personal agendas, to authenticate our group. This table is bigger than us. It's bigger than our factions. This is the Lord's table, and at the Lord's table, all are one.

This bread is not just for you and me. This bread is for all people. This cup is not just for you and me. This cup is for all people.

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Some of you have been wondering why we've been doing communion a little differently lately, and this is why. Sometimes it's hard for us to "discern the body" when we sit in our pews, passing trays, and barely noticing the people around us. But when we get up out of our seats, stand next to our brothers and sisters, look someone in the eyes and speak to them as we receive the body and blood of Christ, broken and poured out for us—this is true communion—this is the body of Christ sharing the body of Christ.

(Invite the praise team up.)

In a moment we will have a special time of communion on this World Communion Sunday. This week, we have gathered as our communion bread, breads from different cultures. They remind us of the diverse body of Christ which gathers at this table around the world.

We are the body of Christ, church. We are the body of Christ! Look around. To your left. To your right. Read through the pages of history. Travel across the world. Men, women, and children of every language, color, and nationality gathering in fields, straw huts, brick schools, wooden shacks and stone cathedrals, praising God and entering into both a physical and spiritual communion with one another. This is the body of Christ. And as we share in this World Communion Sunday, may we discern the entire body of Christ, and realized that this bread we share is bread for all people.

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Sing "Where is Bread?"

Followed by the Presentations of the Breads and the Communion Prayer.