

1 Corinthians 10:14-22: A Theology of the Lord's Supper

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

Today I would like to take the opportunity to talk about something familiar but difficult, a theology of the Lord's Supper. Every branch of the Christian church practices communion, but we do not all agree about what it means. Each one of us comes from a background that has an opinion on the Supper. Even if you were not brought up in a Christian home you would have seen movies that would have given you certain impressions of the Lord's Supper, these would usually be Catholic ideas. Just stop for a moment and think about what you think about the Supper for a moment. If you come from a JW background the Lord's Supper is only done once a year at Easter and only the 144 000 partake. If you have a Roman Catholic upbringing you would associate it with perhaps a Latin Mass, with the priesthood, the action of adoring the mass, and think of it in terms of the real body and blood of Jesus being present as a bloodless sacrifice for sins. Maybe you just had the typical 20th century evangelical view where you held to the memorial view where the Lord's Supper was merely a reminder of Christ's death. In the 20th century we divorced the Lord's Supper from the church and it became a personal devotional tool. If you have a home church or a homeschool background you might have used the Lord's Supper as part of the pietistic and individualistic way in which it was being used. Maybe communion like Baptism is a time where you give to God and not receive from Him; where you do all the talking and giving instead of listening and receiving. Maybe you come from a background that uses the Lord's Supper as the reward for your performance that week, if you have been a good Christian who has had their quiet times and not fallen into sin you can get a reward but if you don't think you have been good enough you self-excommunicate. Instead of seeing the Supper as God's word to you about your standing in Christ you change it into a barometer for how you are doing spiritually. Maybe you come from a tradition that was very serious about the supper and you had to be interviewed by the elders and receive a ticket to partake, making it only a quarterly event filled with much anguish and soul searching. There will be some good and biblical things from these traditions, they are not all bad, but it is easy for us to stray from the biblical teaching on these matters. Today I would like to revisit a familiar passage as Paul talks about the nature of the Lord's Supper and draw out some helpful reminders for us. Our text is 1 Cor. 10:14-22.

The Corinthian church you will know was filled with a number of problems, one of which was their ongoing negotiation with idolatry. Idolatry dominated every aspect of life and the new believer had to negotiate how to go about ordinary everyday tasks like buying meat from a butcher who might have offered your steak as a sacrifice before you bought it; or attending a birthday party which just happened to be thrown in an idols temple because that is where meat was butchered; some Corinthians were still participating in the religious activities and meals associated with idolatry, I mean who doesn't want to take advantage of a free steak meal? It is this context of eating food offered to idols where Paul brings in the Lord's Supper. Chapter 10:1-13 you will notice opens with warnings about idolatry, where Paul points back to the OT people of God who played with

idolatry and were punished. V14-22 function to reinforce this warning bracketed with a call to flee idolatry in v14; and not to provoke God's jealousy in v22. After using the Lord's Supper and truths about it to heighten how problematic it is to participate in idolatry Paul summarizes his thoughts in 10:23-11:1. You may have heard me talking about responding to ethical issues with a 'yes; no; depends' answer. I got this from Paul's engagement with the Corinthians on the question whether you can eat meat offered to idols. Yes you can if you are just buying meat from a butcher that may have been offered to an idol but you are not directly involved in idolatry or in a temple; no you should not eat it if you are participating in a religious ritual or your conscience is tripping you up; and it depends on whether you are causing someone else to stumble, maybe a brother in Christ, or an unbeliever who thinks you are worshipping his god and compromising your faith. Paul marshals arguments to help them negotiate this tricky issue. It is Paul's incidental statements about the Supper that interest us that will help us get a sharper and more biblical view of the Supper.

We will divide our portion up into two parts, we want to take note of the physical elements Paul mentions, but secondly, we also want to note the spiritual realities stated.

Physical elements

V14-15, 'Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.' The therefore comes after the warnings of v1-13, and Paul tells them to judge for themselves. Not only does he wage an argument from the OT to help them see the seriousness of idolatry and God's actions against it; he now goes on to open up the realities of the Lord's Supper to help them see how the meal of the Lord's Supper; and the meals associated with idol feasts are incompatible.

V16, 'The cup of blessing that 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?' This is a very dense verse which has four physical elements we want to engage with as we start opening up the doctrine of this passage. We see a cup and bread; and there is the mention of body and blood. I want to put the idea of participation on hold right now as we look at these elements.

Firstly, the cup of blessing. This comes from Luke 22:20, 'And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" The Lord's Supper through the cup links us to two OT meals. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the feast of the Passover, a feast given by God to the people of God as a remembrance of Him delivering them from their bondage in Egypt. The idea of 'do this in remembrance of me' ties in very well with the fact that Christ adapted an OT feast originally given for this purpose. We will be familiar with remembering through things like ANZAC, where we remember those who gave their lives to save others. But there was another important meal in the OT at the time of the Exodus, in 24:1-11. This was the moment after the 10 commandments were given and the covenant between God and Israel was confirmed over a covenantal meal. There is a clear connection between blood and covenant making which lies behind these words, v6-8, 'And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the

people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." Christ by the shedding of His blood was establishing a new covenant and cleansing a new people. The Lord's Supper is like a wedding anniversary where we remember the covenantal bond that now exists between Christ and His people.

Paul talks about the cup of blessing that we bless, what is meant by this? The NIV helps us by translating it 'cup of thanksgiving' 2 major ideas that would have occurred to the first century mind were 1. The cup that we bless is a cup of thanksgiving and blessing towards God. This understanding seems to find support in the fact that Jesus Himself gave thanks for the cup at the Last Supper, Matt. 26:27, 'And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you.'" This is where the language of 'Eucharist' comes from which comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving. 2. The language could be language of consecration, when something is blessed, it is set apart for religious use, in other words separated for exclusive religious use towards God. This idea finds support in the fact that Paul emphasizes the necessity of not being associated and partaking of the table of demons while also being consecrated to the Lord.

The cup is of course directly associated with the blood of Christ, not only because the blood was necessary to establish a new covenant and a new people. In Matthew 26:28 we see Jesus spelling out the significance of the cup as pointing to his blood, 'for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' The wages of sin is death, the sinner who sins deserves the judgement of death. But God in His mercy made a way for the sinner to be saved by a substitute dying in their place. In the OT this was pictured for us by the sacrificial animal having its throat cut and the blood offered on the altar as a sign of payment so that God would not merely ignore our sins, but forgive them by paying for them. Sin is so serious that it has to be paid for. But the price is too high for any of us to pay that Christ alone is the sufficient payment. The animal sacrifices of the OT were only ever a temporary measure anticipating the one sacrifice of Christ that would be able to make the forgiveness of sin possible for many. God has set forth Christ as a propitiation, a wrath removing sacrifice, in His blood, that any who believe will have their sins fully covered. Unlike Roman Catholic views Paul is not saying that the cup is an offering or a form of sacrifice; we partake in remembrance of the blood once given for us, and we express our gratitude that His blood has paid for our sins when we believed. The Lord's Supper is not an oblation, a blood offering.

Then we have the bread, this would have been the unleavened bread seasoned with bitter herbs that was used at the Passover feast. At the last Supper Christ took this bread gave thanks and broke it saying, Mt. 26:26, "Take, eat; this is my body." Christ brings the idea of bread sustaining life and His body as a sacrifice and brings them together in one idea. He does this when he talks about Himself as the bread of life from heaven, John 6:51, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.' Jesus is not implying that salvation is by an act of eating the right sort of bread, but in the context equates believing with eating, v47-48 (also v35) 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life.' He does not say this is my body *broken for you*. In 1 Cor. 11:24, Paul writes, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Technically the body of Jesus was not broken life a loaf of bread, none of His bones were broken in fulfillment of the

fact that He was our Passover lamb. We break the bread not to symbolize what happened to Jesus body but as an act of distribution. The breaking and the sharing graphically illustrates the words 'which is for you.'

This means that the Lord's Supper is for believers only. In theology we call it a sanctifying ordinance not a converting ordinance. I was once in a church where the pastor suggested that instead of answering an altar call you could make taking the Lord's Supper your sinner's prayer. No, Jesus teaches us to repent, be baptized, that in the act of baptism we are added to the visible church, and then we come as disciples to participate in the table which speaks of our oneness with Christ. Baptism first, then the table. So I must ask you, are you a believer? Do you see His death as the only way your sins can be paid for? Have you put your trust in Him?

So far we have emphasized that the Lord's Supper looking back to the past, to the past establishing of the New Covenant; to the past shedding of Christ's blood as a sacrifice in payment for our sins; to the past giving of his body as a sacrifice and which now gives life and sustains us.

Spiritual realities

One of the main disagreements around the Lord's Supper is around the question of whether there is or is not a spiritual blessing. The memorial view is in the minority as it says there is no special blessing to be had in the Supper. But most other views all insist that the supper does indeed bestow a blessing, that there is a real communion/participation/fellowship with Jesus. This leads us down the avenue of discussion about whether the literal body and blood are present; or if the blessing is only spiritual. To state our view up front, we believe that the Lord's Supper is more than merely a memory; there is a very real spiritual blessing to be had; though we deny Roman Catholic and Lutheran interpretations which emphasize a real presence of the real body and real blood of Christ that enables a real eating of Christ. There are at least three points in these verses which indicate a spiritual presence of Christ and spiritual blessing for the people of God.

The first indication is that word 'participation' in the ESV, it is the Greek word *koinonia* and can be translated as communion/partnership/fellowship/participation. Like most words it can have a spectrum of meanings, it can mean a loose and external affiliation all the way over to intimate spiritual oneness. Paul when talking about our *koinonia* with Jesus does not mean an external political association but an intimate spiritual union. 1 Cor. 1:9 is a good example, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.' Our fellowship with Christ is more than the Fellowship of the Ring, it involved a spiritual oneness wrought by the Holy Spirit. But this is where it gets a bit awkward for the evangelical who rejects the Catholic view. Paul uses some very strong language in v16, 'is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?' and 'is it not a participation in the body of Christ?' Paul is asking rhetorical questions with the obvious answer of yes, partaking in the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Jesus. Doesn't this sound like a Catholic view? In the early Church the Church Fathers did not have a single way of interpreting these words. They did believe that they physically partook of Christ's body and blood but there was no real attempt to explain the mechanics of how this all worked, they left room for mystery while speaking in concrete terms. All the medieval views up until Luther fell into the

trap of taking these words to be describing a physical partaking of the physical body and blood of Christ. The Roman Catholics following Aquinas who was influenced by Aristotelian philosophy believed in transubstantiation. This view believed that the bread and wine were changed and became the body and blood. In order to prove this, because it was obvious to all that the wine did not taste like blood and the bread did not taste like flesh, they had to borrow imaginatively from Aristotle. Aristotle made the distinction between a thing's accidents and its substance. Outwardly bread is white, fluffy, spongy etc., but these are not the substance that makes bread what it is. So then, the bread and wine has every appearance and taste of bread and wine but are miraculously changed into the blood and body of Christ by the priest's consecration. The accidents remained the same but the substance was changed. Because the host was thought to actually become Jesus it was lifted up for adoration during the service and many worshipped the host as Christ, this is obvious idolatry and sophistry and not what Paul intends here.

In order to understand what Paul means here we need to think more about how Paul views our union with Christ in general. Turn to Eph. 2:4-6, 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.' Paul is talking about God causing a dead sinner to come alive through the new birth. God by the power of His Spirit unites us to Christ, we participate in His resurrection power, and are now seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. So where is the resurrected Christ right now? He is in heaven. Where are you right now? You are on earth, but it says you are in heaven, how? Look at Eph. 1:3, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.' God the Father, blesses us with every spiritual blessing, how? In Christ. The two lenses you need to understand how spiritual blessing comes to us are the lenses of union with Christ; and the role of the Spirit of Christ. All blessing come to us by virtue of our union, our participation in Christ. And it is the Holy Spirit who is the bond who unites us to Him and all His benefits. I want have time to open it up for us but Eph. 3:14-19 gives us a quick glimpse into the mechanics of how this works, 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

So coming back to Paul in 1 Cor. 10:16, do believers have communion with the resurrected body and blood of Christ? Yes. This is of course post cross and post resurrection, so nay implications of needing ongoing cleansing or an ongoing sacrifice are out of the question. Paul reinforces this spiritual truth in tow more ways. V17, 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.' The same Spirit that binds us to the head binds us to the body. We are spiritually one with Christ which is a relationship we express and draw benefit from given the nature of that relationship at the table. But through the use of a single loaf which we share we are also communicating a spiritual truth about our oneness with one another. The implication of this for Paul's point is that we are expressing our oneness with our fellow believers at

this meal; so don't get mixed up in spiritual meals of idols and their worshippers. The third spiritual reality Paul outlines is the fact that those who participate in idol feasts have fellowship with demons, v20-21, 'No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ 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.' Having specified that Christians have a real participation with Christ and then compares that to having fellowship with demons, it is clear that the spiritual nature of the meal is in view.

There is so much more to say but we need to draw some conclusions.

When we come to the Lord's Supper we should come with a sense of assurance, we come to an event which speaks to us telling us of blood that was shed for us, a body that was sacrificed for us, and a new covenantal arrangement where we are now the redeemed people of God. Like the Passover we remember a past victory and rescue and come with a deep joy and gratitude. Our participation speaks of our gospel welcome by Christ, not coming to the table speaks of our being cut off from Christ, do not self excommunicate by taking a meal which was given to speak of your union with Christ and His people and turn it into form of self-punishment.

Secondly, because of the very real interaction between us and the living Christ; we come to the Lord's Supper not mourning the absence of a lost loved one, but with deep love and celebration because our union with Christ has conquered death.

Thirdly, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ who takes that which is Christ's and makes it ours, who benefits us through our faith as we are built up in our inner man, we come with expectation to receive. We come ready to hear the word of God, inform our faith and readily apply that faith to Christ as the One we are already united with expecting a blessing.

Fourthly, if there is a peculiar blessing to be had in the Lord's Supper how often should we do it? The Lord's Supper is an element of worship like preaching, or singing. We would not dream of coming together each Lord's Day and not singing or not sitting under the word, or not praying, in the same way we celebrate the Lord's Supper when we come together for worship. This is the apparent practice of the early church.