

1 CORINTHIANS 11:20-22

WILL YOU LET JUST ANYONE EAT AT YOUR TABLE?

“When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.”¹

The Lord’s Supper is integral to Christian worship. However, this rite is too often treated thoughtlessly as though it were merely a prerequisite of the liturgy required in order to free us to do what we deem to be really important. We perform the rituals associated with the ordinance without thinking about what we are doing. Observance of the Lord’s Table has become routine, so habitual and so pedestrian within our churches that we have forgotten a basic truth—this is the Lord’s Supper, not ours. We are not at liberty to invite whom we will to the Table, but rather, it is the Lord Himself who invites whom He wills to share in this Meal.

When you sit down at your dining table, I seriously doubt that you look outside to see if there is anyone wandering by whom you can invite to join you at the table. Most of us are somewhat careful about who we invite to our table. Certainly, we invite family and friends to share in our camaraderie. Perhaps we will invite some who are less fortunate than us to join us in enjoying the bounty with which God has blessed us. However, strangers wandering past our home have no right to our table.

It is obvious to most of us that we do not “owe” anyone the right to share in our meal. It is our table; and we invite those whom we wish to bless with our friendship to join us as we eat. It is not simply that we are providing food for friends and family, but that we are sharing ourselves. Around the table, we fellowship; we share our very selves at the table, giving something of ourselves to those who join us at the meal and receiving convivial intercourse in return. Because dining together is more than merely an act of ingesting food, we are careful about whom we invite to join us.

Strangely enough, what is obvious in the world beyond the walls of the church is ignored at the Table of the Lord. Here, we grow quite passionate about our “rights” to the Lord’s Table. However, should we not inquire of the Lord whom He invites to His Table? If this is truly His Table, then He must have the final word concerning who eats at His Table. Thus, we should ask whether the Bible has anything to say concerning those invited to the Lord’s Table. Indeed, when we ask, we discover that God has addressed this issue, though we have largely ignored what He has said.

We need to clarify the purpose of the Lord’s Table in order to discover who is invited to the Lord’s Table. Then, having established the purpose of the ordinance, we will likely discover God’s instruction concerning those who are to share at the Supper. Ultimately, asking how we arrived at the point now observed within evangelicalism will benefit us through deterring us from continued error. Join me, then, in exploring Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian Christians concerning who is invited to the Lord’s Table.

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THE LORD’S SUPPER DEFINED — What is the Lord’s Supper? If we were introducing an individual to the Meal for the first time, how would we explain what we were doing? Those of us who have introduced our children to the Faith have had occasion to explain the rites and rituals of the church at some time as they wondered about what was happening as we partook of bread and drank the juice.

After he had instituted the Passover Meal, Moses was commanded to write, “When your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the LORD’s Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses’” [EXODUS 12:26, 27]. Israel was also commanded to redeem the firstborn male of all their herds and flocks, as well as redeeming the firstborn son. The ceremony reminded them of God’s grace to them as a nation. However, Moses appended these words, “When in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem’” [EXODUS 13:14, 15].

Then, when Moses had given the great Shema Prayer to Israel, he commanded the people to teach the truths of God to their children, talking about them and giving opportunity for the children to witness them as they carried out the prescribed worship. Moses concluded these instructions by commanding the people, “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’” the people were responsible to explain to their children the significance of what they did [see DEUTERONOMY 6:20].

As was true for Israel, the rites and rituals of the Faith provide opportunity to explain our Faith. Baptism is a visual portrayal of the Gospel—the death, burial and resurrection of Christ our Lord; it pictures how the old nature of those baptised was dead in trespasses and sin, and how the ones baptised have been raised to new life through faith in the Living Saviour. In a similar manner, observing the Meal gives opportunity to speak of what we hold true. We can tell those who inquire that this is a meal of remembrance. Eating the bread and drinking the wine remind us that Christ’s body was broken for us and that His blood was shed for us. We can tell those observing that this is a meal of anticipation, for we are commanded to observe this ordinance until He comes for us. Likewise, we can inform those who ask that this is a meal of fellowship in which we confess our fellowship with one another and with the Risen, Reigning Son of God.

These explanations, offered to those who inquire, are in keeping with the teaching of the Scriptures. The Master instituted an ordinance and not a sacrament. He is not materially present in the Meal, as our Romanist friends contend. Neither is He mystically present, providing grace through ingesting His body as many of our Paedobaptist friends insist. At the Last Supper, the Master did not invite His disciples to bite His arm or to nibble on His toes. When He said, “This is My body, which is given for you,” He made it clear that He was not instituting a sacrament, for He continued by instructing them, “Do this in remembrance of Me” [see LUKE 22:14-20; MARK 14:22-25; MATTHEW 26:26-29]. The Meal we observe is a **Meal of Remembrance** in which we commemorate His love, recalling how He willingly sacrificed His life for our benefit.

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As Paul declares, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” Again, he emphasises this truth when he writes, “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [ROMANS 5:6,8]. In brief, the Communion Meal is an act of commemoration, a time to remember the love of Christ.

The Meal is as well as *Statement of Anticipation*, for we are to share in this Meal “until He comes” [1 CORINTHIANS 11:26]. This is in keeping with the declaration of the Master at the Last Supper that He would not drink the juice with His disciples “until that day when [He will] drink it new with” us in His Father’s Kingdom [MATTHEW 26:29]. Whenever we participate in this Meal, it should cause us to reflect on the promise of His coming again to take us to be with Him. We should draw encouragement from the knowledge that He is coming for us, and at His coming we will be transformed into His likeness—“we shall be like Him” [1 JOHN 3:2].

The Meal is also a *Declaration of Fellowship*, for it is always taken in assembly. Those holding to a sacramental view, whether openly expressed or covertly held, are prepared to give the elements of the Meal to people outside of the time when the church is assembled. Consequently, among some churches the Meal is commonly given to husband and wife as they exchange vows, to the sick in their hospital beds, and to others outside of the assembly on various occasions. However, Paul’s language clearly exposes the absurdity of this point. Listen to his declaration found in 1 CORINTHIANS 10:16, 17. “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? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

The Meal is a “sharing,” a “communion” [cf. KJV] in the body and blood of the Saviour. Assuredly, we declare our fellowship with the Risen Master; however, we declare that fellowship through sharing our life with the assembly where we observe the Meal. There are rules for partaking of the Meal, all of which point us to fellowship with the Risen Son of God as we walk in godly concourse with His people sharing the Meal.

What are the prerequisites for participation at the Lord’s Table? The question demands that we state that churches have executive authority, though they have no legislative authority; we are obligated to obey what God has commanded rather than creating rules. Certainly, *regeneration* is the foremost prerequisite. How can one remember the sacrifice of the Master if they have never received Him as Master of life? How can one live in anticipation of His return if they have never accepted the sacrifice provided at His first coming? How can one be said to walk in fellowship with the Living Saviour if they refuse to own Him as Ruler over their life? The Apostles, and by extension, the early church, are never known to have offered the Meal to outsiders.

Again, *baptism* is required to participate at the Lord’s Table. This is obvious from the following considerations. Baptism was instituted and administered long before the Communion Meal was introduced. The Apostles who participated in the Meal had all received baptism before participating. In the Great Commission, Jesus established baptism as preceding other observances: “Make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” [MATTHEW 28:29, 20]. The example of the early church upholds this order [e.g. ACTS 2:41, 42, 46]. The symbolism of the ordinances demand baptism before participation—there must be birth before celebration; sanctification, declared on the merits of Christ’s sacrifice, cannot precede the New Birth.

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“The Didache,” a document dated to the early years of the apostolic church preserves the following statement, “Let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptised in the Lord’s Name. For concerning this also did the Lord say, “Give not that which is holy to the dogs.”² Those who are disobedient to the initial command of the Saviour exhibit questionable loyalty to Him in every other facet.

An **orderly walk** is required of those who wish to observe the ordinance. If the Meal is merely communion of the individual with the Master, then the church has no right to exclude anyone. However, we are instructed to exclude those who are disorderly. Immoral conduct is to be dealt with by excluding those who act in such a manner from the Lord’s Table [see 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-13]. Listen to the closing admonition of Paul’s instruction on this matter. “I am writing you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:11].

Likewise, disobedience to the commands of Christ is to be dealt with by excluding the offender from the Lord’s Table. Listen to the stern words of the Apostle in his first letter to the Thessalonian Christians. “We command you, brothers, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us... We hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies... If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed” [1 THESSALONIANS 3:6, 11, 14].

Of course, heresy is to be addressed by excluding heretics from the Lord’s Table. Writing Titus, Paul warned, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” [TITUS 3:10, 11]. Understand that heresy, in the New Testament, is not restricted to those holding errant doctrine, but it includes as well those holding to orthodox positions in an unbrotherly or divisive spirit.³

Church membership is required for participation at the Lord’s Table. It is impossible to imagine that discipline will be administered by any other than a local congregation, and how shall that congregation hold members of another congregation to account when they are unknown to the church? We have responsibility for the conduct only of those who are associated with us; we have no authority over those outside this particular body. It is an interesting observation that catechumens—candidates for membership—were excluded from the Communion Meal in the early church. Then, services were divided into two parts. The first part was “the service of the Word” where participants sang, shared their testimonies and listened to the preaching of the Word. The second part was the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Those who were not members of the church were invited to absent themselves before the second part was conducted.⁴

² Kirsopp Lake (tr.), **The Didache**, 9:5, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lake.html>, accessed 4 January, 2008

³ Cf. Augustus H. Strong, **Systematic Theology** (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA 1907) 974

⁴ See Hughes Oliphant Olds, **The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1998) 344, accessed online on 4 January, 2008 at <http://books.google.com/books?id=ngVN6aRTm-AC&pg=PA344&lpg=PA344&dq=%22catechumens+were+excluded%22&source=web&ots=qSdNHGaulp&sig=NCLCz6-Yb9B3OYhlQsJQsPcccX0#PPA2,M1>, and Joseph Bingham, **Origines Ecclesiasticæ: Antiquities of the Christian Church** (Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden 1846) 468, accessed online

This division of the service into two distinct parts should be evident from reading Paul's First Letter to the Corinthian Christians. Chapter 11 deals with the service of the Lord's Table, which was unarguably for Christians, and I contend was exclusively limited to the membership of that particular congregation. Chapter 14 sets out rules for the public service of the Word when unbelievers and those seeking truth would be present [1 CORINTHIANS 14:11, 22, 26]. This latter point will occupy the remainder of our time as we seek to discern the mind of the Lord concerning membership in the local congregation as a prerequisite for admission to the Lord's Table.

WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER — That this was a service of a particular church is evident from the language employed throughout the letter. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the opening verse of the text, which is a continuation of the initial statement introducing this portion of the apostolic instruction. In 1 CORINTHIANS 11:18, Paul writes, "When you come together as a church..." providing the context that this was the church in assembly. In 1 CORINTHIANS 11:20, this is iterated, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat." The Meal is a church ordinance observed by the church assembled!

Tension among evangelical churches arises from two disparate views. Either the Meal is a "Christian ordinance," or it is a "church ordinance." If the Meal is a Christian ordinance, participation is determined individually as it is a personal act of worship. There is no particular oversight of the Meal assigned other than individual conscience. However, if the Meal is a church ordinance, it means that the congregation hosting the Meal is assigned responsibility to exercise oversight for the observance. The congregation is responsible to ensure that those participating recognise the Body and Blood of the Lord and that they are not acting presumptuously in their participation.

If the Meal is a Christian ordinance subject only to the desire of the participants, there are few restrictions on the Meal other than the conscience of those participating. It is certain that if this is a Christian ordinance no congregation can legitimately exercise discipline on those participating as they cannot be excluded since they are exercising their "right" to the Lord's Table. However, if the Meal is a church ordinance, then what we witness in the Word concerning the responsibility to discipline the unruly through prohibiting their participation at the Lord's Table makes sense.

Among evangelicals it an increasingly common assumption is that the Lord's Supper is an act of worship observed by individuals, though they may be in a church setting. However, the New Testament consistently presents the Meal as corporate worship. There is no clear example of any other than a church, "worshipping" by eating bread and drinking juice. This truth is more important than merely establishing a congregational setting for the Meal; it declares that the Meal is a church ordinance.

Think of some common practises that are excluded in the context of the Apostle's words. Among the members of a former church was a couple that took umbrage on one occasion at a statement I made as we prepared to observe the Lord's Table. They were irate in the extreme. What callous statement do you suppose caused them such anger? I had said that unbaptised children should not be given the elements by their parents. My plea was that parents instruct their children, leading them to faith and to obedience.

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This couple were unwilling to instruct their children in biblical etiquette or in the necessity of obedience to the instruction of the Lord. Therefore, they were angered because I had spoken publicly. What is fascinating about their supposed pique is that I was not even addressing them, but expressing a general concern because of a number of families who were giving the elements to toddlers and little children. Nevertheless, it remains that unbaptised individuals are not in fellowship with the assembly and they should not be invited to participate at the Lord's Table—even if they are children of church members. The parents to whom I referred in this example were outspoken in their contention that their opinion outweighed the determination of the congregation and superseded the written Word of God on this point. At best, their attitude in this matter was arrogant, being influenced by their bruised pride rather than exhibiting a spirit of gentleness and humble submission as would be expected of the people of God.

Earlier, I mentioned the practise among some of our Paedobaptist brothers of giving the elements of the Meal to couples as a part of the wedding ceremony. Such an errant practise finds no support in the Word of God, apparently being fabricated upon the supposition that this is a sacrament rather than an ordinance. I suppose that officiants imagine that by offering bread and wine to the couple, they are somehow blessing the union. Nothing could be further from the truth, for nowhere is grace said to be conferred through participating in the Meal, though it is clearly stated that divine censure will result from partaking without self-judgement.

Soon after arriving at a former charge, a small communion set was discovered in the church office. When I asked why the church owned the set, I was informed by one of the former deacons that it was to permit serving the Lord's Supper to those who were hospitalised. I was disappointed to discover that these professing Baptists tacitly held a sacerdotal view of the Meal, believing that in some way observing the Meal conveyed grace, especially to the sick. When questioned as to the biblical authority for the practise, the deacon who first informed me of the presence of the set admitted that there was no particular scriptural authority, but that it had always been done that way.

Each of the preceding situations is indeed egregious; but the far more prevalent practise of open communion—inviting all who are present to participate at the Lord's Table—is more detrimental still. This practise exposes a lack of biblical perspicuity. It is a tacit confession that most evangelicals hold to the sacramental and sacerdotal view of the Lord's Table; it is an admission that we believe the Meal conveys grace to those receiving the elements. Many beloved friends will protest that they hold no such view; yet, they feel hurt if they are excluded. However, the essential question would be whether they accept the discipline of the congregation and whether they are participating through investing their energies and spiritual gifts into the life of the Body.

Moreover, the practise of open communion reveals that advocates of that position are at best confused about the concept of the church as a Body. In particular, they reveal that they know little about church discipline. Those promoting this view tend to see sin as a sickness to be cured, and discipline is exercised through counselling designed to heal the wayward, instead of leading them to repentance and restoration to the church through confession of sin. The Apostle is pointed in his statement that the goal of discipline is “destruction of the flesh,” resulting in the salvation of the spirit in “the day of the Lord” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:5]. Loving discipline, exercised with a view to turning the sinner from his sin, leads to repentance and restoration [cf. 2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-10].

The practise of admitting all who are present to the Lord's Table is a triumph of culture over Christ. It is a tacit admission that we who profess evangelical doctrine are fearful of holding one another accountable as members of the same Body. It is effective testimony that we no longer practise biblical discipline. Embracing the practise of open communion denies biblical ecclesiology, implying that we are unaware of the Body of Christ to which we profess to belong. To fail to practise biblical discernment in this instance is to expose the church to ever more grievous error as we exalt private opinion over the concept of mutual accountability and submission to the written Word of God.

IT IS NOT THE LORD'S SUPPER THAT YOU EAT — The Corinthians to whom Paul wrote were guilty of a terrible sin. However, their sin was not so terribly different from the sin of multiplied evangelical congregations. They were treating the Lord's Table as though it was their right to eat instead of seeing it as an opportunity to worship. They saw their actions as isolated and unrelated to others with whom they shared the Meal.

To be certain, Paul appears to be describing the “agape,” the “love feast” that usually preceded the Lord's Supper. This appears to have been a sort of potluck meal at which members of the congregation dined before they worshipped at the Lord's Table.⁵ In the case of the Corinthians, wealthy members dined scrumptiously, while poorer members did without. Paul was scandalised by this behaviour.

In response to this disparity in practise, the Apostle established a principle that holds for Christians throughout all time. The distribution of your goods lies within your purview. Whether you give generously to various causes or whether you are less inclined to support assorted causes is a matter of no concern. However, in the church, you do not have the right to be stingy while your fellow saints are in need. You are responsible to be generous toward your brother and sister Christians who share the services with you. This teaching expands the words of James [JAMES 2:1-13] and embraces the implication of generosity found in the early church [ACTS 4:32-37 contra ACTS 5:1-11].

This is not an excuse to be stinting with what you possess. In fact, all that you hold should be seen as entrusted to you by God. What you possess is to be employed to His glory and for the benefit of others. To do otherwise is to deny the grace and generosity of the Lord God. However, no one can tell you what to do with your own goods, especially as you use them in your own home. However, when you join in any congregational activity that anticipates sharing what we have and what God has entrusted to us, you must not permit yourself to be penurious or grudging in sharing.

Paul excoriates the Corinthians, asking, “Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” Certainly, the conduct of the Corinthians did not merit apostolic commendation. In a similar manner, those who view the Lord's Table as their right, approaching to partake without recognising the Body—the church—are not to be commended. Does not even our language recognise this? We speak of this Meal as Communion? Did you imagine that this is restricted to individual fellowship with Christ without recognising His Bride?

⁵ Donald Wilson Stake, *The ABCs of Worship* (Westminster, Louisville, KY 1992) 7, <http://books.google.com/books?id=SniVcL-x9uEC&pg=PA7&lpg=PA7&dq=%22the+agape+meal%22&source=web&ots=yB9DoyMI8q&sig=OqSC1p2CXf4MSB0BMK-6RA13S08#PPA7.M1>, accessed 6 January, 2008

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This principle is evident through reading John's First Letter. One theme running throughout this brief letter is that of love for one's brothers and sisters. Listen to John. "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" [1 JOHN 2:9-11]. Perhaps there are some who would say they do not hate their brother, but if we fail to recognise them as God's gift to us, treating them in a casual manner as we conduct our own private worship, though in the same building as them, we show no love for them.

"By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother... We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous... Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him... If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" [1 JOHN 3:10, 12, 15, 17]. Notice especially **VERSE 17** where John presents the divine standard for love—those who love must share in all things. This is practical theology indeed!

May I remind you that there is no neutrality in this business of love. Either we love the brothers, or we hate the brothers. There is no neutrality. Thus, John's testimony in **1 JOHN 4:20, 21** is vital to understanding the obligation of loving one another earnestly. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

Finally, there is the issue of responsibility for one another—even responsibility for each other's actions. John writes, "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that" [1 JOHN 5:16].

Fellowship with one another is mandated if we will enjoy fellowship with the Master. Fellowship with one another is so much more than merely a nodding acquaintance on a Sunday morning. Fellowship anticipates sharing our lives, supporting one another and building one another in this most Holy Faith. Fellowship requires us to seek what is best for each other through knowing what is required to enable each one to serve God powerfully and honourably.

When we come to the Lord's Table, it is expected that we will recognise the Body of Christ—the congregation hosting that Meal. This recognition will be evidence through a spirit of humility toward the people of God and acceptance of the oversight entrusted to the congregation. Worship of the reigning Son of God results when we see His work within His church and among His people.

At the Lord's Table, we may either reduce the act to a time of private worship, continuing to hold others at arm's length as we endeavour to commune with the Lord; or we can recognise the Lord's Body, rejoicing in the work He has performed in creating the particular Body with which we worship. As we approach His Table, we can give thanks for His great work, especially the knowledge that He has included us in that work and has given us a place in His Body.

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To those outside the Faith, our invitation is simply to receive Jesus the Lord as Master of your life. To those outside of this Body, our invitation is to come, heeding the call of the Spirit as He appoints you to serve among us, glorifying the Lord whom you confess. To those who would now approach the Lord's Table, our invitation is to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Come, confessing the glory of His work in saving you and in giving you a place among His people. Amen.