

**God's Wisdom in an Age of Confusion**  
**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**  
*One Body, One Lord*

**Introduction**

Good morning! Welcome to EBC, please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 11.

*What does communion mean and why do Christians do this?*

Let's pray...

**Background to Corinth: Review**

Where we have been so far...

*Paul's call to fellowship and union with Christ (1:9)*

*Understand Identity*

*Paul addresses the issues of eating meat sacrificed to idols, both in the Temple and the market*

The sum of it all is this:

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:2

Last week we began a new section of the letter concerning the traditions which Paul is teaching the church how to conduct itself during public worship, and live out the instructions of 10:31ff. concerning glorifying God in all they do, not giving unnecessary stumbling blocks/offense, but rather seeking the salvation of all and doing so by imitating Christ. Last week, we discussed head-coverings; this week is communion, and starting next week the focus will be on spiritual gifts.

**Exposition of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

*Abusing the Lord's Supper with selfishness, pride & injustice*

1 Cor. 11:17-22

So, what is going that has made Paul so upset? Let's walk through this together. First of all, Paul says there are divisions among them. What does that mean? If you recall from chapters 1-3, the first thing Paul addresses in this letter is divisions regarding personality/popularity. He says they are acting fleshly or “in the flesh”. Again, he brings up divisions, but this time the division is rooted in the divide between rich/poor, privileged/unprivileged. Now, before barriers go up in your mind over something on social justice – this is not – we need to ask the question: what is happening here culturally?

So, in Roman homes where churches were typically hosted, you had two main sections: the Triclinium and Atrium. The triclinium was a smaller space, where the host would have their wealthy, well-connected, well-to-do friends eat, drink, and meet. It was common in Roman culture to treat your esteemed guests well – you bring out the best dishes, give them the best seats, etc. The atrium, also known as a courtyard, was where you held more general gatherings. It might be the place where children played, servants worked, etc. It was culturally offensive to have your esteemed guests in the atrium, and to have your not-so-esteemed guests in the triclinium. So, you can see where all of this is heading, can't you? Imagine the communion services for the church, Corinthian-style. You have the more esteemed, well-to-do members coming early for the communion service. Plenty of bread, plenty of wine – feasting together in the Lord's name. Later in the day, when the more common folk are able to be there to also worship and partake of the Lord's supper, they have to wait to be served in the atrium, and sometimes – maybe a lot of time – they have run out of bread, and run out of wine, and the host (and his friends) are a little tipsy from all their feasting.

This is not a good look for the church! It's not only abusing the Lord's supper but it's neglecting the other members of the church who are supposed to be equal members of the body. But the factions in Roman society between well-to-do, not-well-to-do, between rich and poor, upper class elites and working class, everyday people, is now being reflected in the church. And it's scandalous to Paul not only because it's not fair and right, but it's not an accurate reflection of the gospel, and it's certainly not imitating Christ (11:1).

*The Lord's Instruction on the Meaning of Communion*

## 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Now, we get the words and teachings of Jesus concerning the true meaning behind communion. Typically, we refer to these words as “Words of Institution” that we say each time we do communion. But in this context, Paul is giving them theological/biblical instruction on what they are actually doing when they receive the elements and partake together as one, holy, body of believers.

So, let's unpack this together:

First, (origins) Paul says the source of where he got this teaching is from the Lord himself, most likely on behalf of the Apostles. We know Paul had some direct contact with the Lord Jesus Christ, so it's possible this was during one of those encounters, but more likely he is passing on what he's learned from the Apostolic core of leaders like Peter, James, and John (from Jerusalem).

Second, (elements) Jesus the core elements of communion as bread (body) and the cup (blood). What does this mean? Well, if you know the accounts in the gospels, Jesus has this meal with them just before He is arrested, goes to trial and then is publicly executed on the cross. This is his final meal with his disciples before He dies. It also happens to be the Passover. If you aren't familiar with the OT, the Passover is a Jewish holiday celebrating the Exodus from Egypt. The final plague which God sent against the Egyptians was to kill all the first born in the land, both people and livestock. Those who had the blood on their doorsteps were (passed over) and spared the final plague, which thus prepared them for their dramatic exodus and escape from Pharaoh's army. The exodus was to be celebrated with unleavened bread, showing the haste which they had to escape from Egypt. So, it's a redemption meal. But now, Jesus says, the bread you eat is my body, the cup you drink is my blood, for a different kind of Passover. Now, it's not Egypt and political oppression you are escaping and being set free from, but it's the power of SIN! It's not just a plague you are being relieved of, but not counted as one who will face the wrath of God and judgement day – instead, your sins will be forgiven, and you will

receive an inheritance amongst those whom are the new children of God – not born of flesh and blood, but born by the Spirit.

Third, the promise of a new covenant. What does this mean? This is important:

The “new covenant” is biblical language about God fulfilling His promises, and specifically concerning His work of salvation. Let me show you:

In Exodus 24, after they have been delivered from Egypt, and have reached Mt. Sinai, receive the Ten Commandments, their covenant relationship with God is ratified, secured, and signed, sealed, delivered, with blood of sacrifice.

Exodus 24:3-11

Now, later in Israel’s history, while they are in exile, another new covenant is described and promised them as they await God’s deliverance and restoration recorded in Jeremiah 31. Listen to this:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

So, the thing that the Mosaic covenant was pointing towards but never fully achieved, God would do by the Spirit for a new generation after the exile.

So, here is Jesus, making this happen! Not with the blood of an animal, but His own. And the face they are promised to see of God will be His own when He returns.

*What does it mean to be “unworthy” during communion?*

1 Corinthians 11:27-32

This passage has been, in my opinion, so horribly abused and misunderstood and taken out of context. For many years, I struggled to take communion because it was always framed not as an invitation given by the Lord Jesus to come and eat and drink freely, and enjoy the gifts of salvation and communion with Him, but instead it came across as an impossible standard that I knew in my heart I would never meet. Whoever is worthy? So, when I actually studied the context, and the situation that Paul is addressing, it was very encouraging and relieving that I did not have to

somehow build myself up to become worthy of communion. So, look at the text with me now, what do we find?

The unworthy manner that the Lord's Supper is being taken here is one group having the privilege over another, hogging all the elements for themselves to the point of gluttony and drunkenness, leaving the rest of the church members without. Depriving them of the opportunity to also share in the Lord's body and blood.

*"To examine oneself means to examine one's compliance with the covenant as reflected in their ways of relating to other members of the community and to discern the body of Christ must include recognizing that those other members of the community represent Christ Himself (since they have also been united with Him) and must be treated as people for whom Christ chose to give up His life and shed His blood."* – Roy Ciampa & Brian Rosner, 1 Corinthians

And so, the judgement that Paul refers to here is the judgement of God against those who are not loving their neighbor as Christ loved them and treating them as if they are vital members of the body. They are robbing their neighbor and taking advantage of their neighbor; not loving them. So, this sickness that was going around – and again, since we don't have a lot of information about exactly what was happening we can infer that it was some kind of plague or flu or something – and Paul seems to be saying, "This is the Lord's discipline – and how seriously God takes the body of Christ and how we treat one another in this sacrament!"

Now, does that mean that we don't do any self-examination at all? No – I will say more about that in just a minute. But I want you to understand the context of Paul's warning, and remember that this is an invitation, from Jesus, to do this in remembrance of Him; and what are they to remember? His death, which was the foundation of saving us from our sins and restoring us to fellowship with Him, and that He will come again for us. The new covenant – that we belong to Him and through Him to the Father! Communion is supposed to be good news, the best news, that picks you back up, gets you on your feet, and walking towards Jesus again, with joy! Not a depressive, sorrowful, and self-abasement thing. I had someone in my church back in KS who had not taken communion, literally, for

years because this text had been taught to Him. And after one of our services, he came up to me, with tears in his eyes, and he said, “I never knew this before...” And it liberated him, to enjoy and celebrate the free gift of His salvation in Christ.

### *Paul's final instructions*

1 Corinthians 11:33-34

Paul makes a final common-sense plea for unity!

### **Main Idea:**

*The Lord Jesus intends for the church's communion service to accurately reflect the unity of His (spiritual) body, the depths of His saving actions, and the assurance of His future return.*

### **Application: Glorifying God during Communion**

Let's do some application together and walk through some basic things as we prepare for doing this very thing together.

First, when should children take communion? (ideally following baptism, but always after confessing faith. So, you as a parent need to be discerning that with your kids).

Second, what is an appropriate examination of self? (confess, repent, turn)

Third, are unbelievers in danger of God's judgment if they take communion? (that is often how the “unworthy” is taken; as I've tried to show you that's not the specific context. However, there is a principle there concerning the integrity of communion).

Finally, how “real” is Christ's body and blood?

*Transubstantiation (Roman Catholic)*

*Consubstantiation (Lutheran)*

*Symbolism (Zwingli; most modern evangelical churches)*

*Symbolic Instrumentalism (Calvin; Reformed tradition)*

### **Discussion Questions**

- 1) What is the main issue with how people are taking communion in Corinth?
- 2) What is the significance of the scriptural background of communion for understanding God's plan of salvation? (hint: see Exod. 24:5-11; Jer. 31:31-34).
- 3) Why does Paul tell the Corinthians to "examine themselves"? What should "examination" be like for us today?
- 4) What is the "invitation" Jesus is seeking to offer His church through the symbols of the bread and the cup? How does this invitation encourage and minister to your own heart?