

Enjoying communion

Littlebourne - 14th September 2025 - 1 Corinthians 11:23-33, Nehemiah 8:9-12, Ezra 6:19-22

1 Corinthians 11:23-33:

23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 31 But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— 34 if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Nehemiah 8:9-12:

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." 11 So the Levites calmed all the

people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Ezra 6:19-22:

19 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. 21 It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. 22 And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Introduction

We're talking about Communion today - also known as the Lord's supper or the Lord's table. Christians differ on the details, the liturgy, the type of bread, or the strength of the wine, but the difference I want to focus on today is that of attitude. We sometimes say we are 'celebrating' communion, but then we also say we 'celebrate' funerals, and often treat communion in much the same gloomy way.

For as long as I can remember, I assumed that communion should be prefaced by a last minute inner audit. I had to confess sins, reassure myself of forgiveness, etc. Nobody taught this to me explicitly, I don't think, but it's a common feeling. You can see from 1 Corinthians where that feeling might come from, not that I think that's quite what Paul is talking about.

The instinct itself isn't wrong. Confession and assurance are vital. If what we are doing in communion is actually meeting God, then if we haven't been cleansed and consecrated to meet Him, we should feel as Isaiah did (Isaiah 6:5): “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Isaiah needed some pronto cleansing.

But as we've seen in previous weeks when we've looked at the structure of the worship service, this cleansing should come much earlier than communion. The pattern starts with God calling us, that has to come first, but then nice and soon in the service God cleanses us - we confess and receive assurance that God has dealt with our sin. We go into the rest of the service hopefully feeling cleansed. The stage is set for the consecration through the word, communion with God, and finally commissioning.

Because our services so often have neglected this confession and assurance, we don't feel cleansed when we come to the table, but we do realise our need for it. Communion becomes a somber affair of dealing with sin, rather than the joy it should be in communing with God. When we skip the confession and assurance, we're transported to the summit of the service, without climbing the hill up there, and then we wonder why we're not acclimated.

Examination

Now having told you that I think we're getting a bit out of whack with the self-examination stuff, we have to deal with the 1 Corinthians passage. What is the examination that is called for in 1 Corinthians 11:27-31? Paul says (1 Corinthians 11:28-29):

Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

And then, to make things worse, he adds (v30):

30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

So the stakes are high. This self examination is important. And it's not whether we self examine - we're commanded to do it, but it matters how and what we are looking for.

The whole context of this text is about the disunity in the Corinthian church when it comes to this matter. They are not sharing with each other, not eating together, not acting as if they are one body. The rich are at one table, with the best food and drink, whilst the poor have the scraps, if anything at another table. In our day, they would be like the kind of family that all eats apart, with their own individual screens to keep them company.

The verb that is rendered 'examine' is in some translations rendered prove or test. It's the same root word in the form of a noun used in verse 19 - the genuine or approved of ones are literally in Greek those who are proven. The command is to show that you rightly discern the unity of the body of Christ. Those in Corinth were not doing this - this is why they must be told - they were not demonstrating unity in the way they ate and drank together. They profaned communion, by not communing. So the goal is not merely to look inside to determine this, but to act like it. To eat with each other, to recognise that the whole church sits at this table as one body. This is the body that we discern. Whenever the elements that we actually consume are mentioned in chapters 10 and 11 they are always in the pair - the bread and wine, the body and blood. But the body on it's own here refers to the church, the body of Christ. The judging the body is parallel to judging ourselves in verse 31.

Then Paul ends his section about communion with instructions - "when you come together to eat, wait for one another" - that is, act as one body. This entire passage is about the manner in which the church as a whole at Corinth eats the Lord's supper and how they need to partake as a united church. It's not about knowledge or qualifications for coming to the table, to exclude those who do not have the intellectual ability. It's not about morbid introspection, nor about some requirement to discern the true nature of Christ's presence in the bread, as some would have you think. It's just about manifesting unity at the Lord's Table. Examine yourself, prove that you are eating communion in a way that displays unity.

Feasting

One analogue of communion in the Old Testament would be the passover - a feast, the first of which was admittedly pretty hairy, given that the firstborn son in each family was on the chopping block, but subsequent passovers were true celebrations - celebrations of what happened, and how God saved His people.

Another parallel is in what we've seen of the Old Testament sacrificial system - the third step of all sacrifices, following the shedding of blood and the preparation of the animal, was the placing on the altar and meeting God. The sacrifice, the stand-in for the worshipper, would ascend to God by means of the altar and would commune with God.

Or in the pattern of the different sacrifices used together, following guilt or sin offerings for atonement firstly, and following ascension offerings for consecration secondly, the fellowship or peace offerings were used, which had a key difference compared to other sacrifices. In these sacrifices, the meat on the altar was not all burnt up, or kept just for the priests, but that which was roasted was for the worshipper to eat, with his family. When we think that the peace offerings were typically oxen or cattle, then this was not a quick snack - it was a communal affair. People feasted together.

The last parallel I would call our attention to is the pattern we see in the making and renewing of covenants. As we've seen, there's a fivefold pattern there that matches the threefold pattern (cleansing, consecration and communion) seen in the sacrificial system, and gives us a pattern for our worship, with the additional bookends of calling and commissioning. God calls us, God cleanses us, God consecrates us, God communes with us and God commissions us.

I gave some examples of covenant making and renewal throughout scripture two weeks ago, and one common factor was that the communion stage consisted of a meal, usually a big one. In the covenant with Noah after the flood, God gives humanity the animals to eat, in addition to the plants. When the covenant with Israel is ratified on Mount Sinai, the elders go up and feast in the presence of God. When the exiles renew covenant with God after returning to the land, in Nehemiah 8, they are told to eat, and drink and enjoy themselves. In covenants that God makes with men, and that men make with each other in scripture, we see them seal the deal with a meal.

In our day too, when the covenant of marriage is made, the most natural thing we do next is eat and drink. We party and enjoy ourselves, and it would feel incomplete without food and drink. When we invite people over, our first thought is often, what shall I cook? When we want to meet people, we so often arrange to drink or eat together. When we want to celebrate with others, inevitably we eat together and drink. The dinner table is where people are joined together, where joy is found, where unity is built up. Strong families eat together, and they enjoy it.

A good meal allows us to enjoy other people, to be communal, and to some degree to forget ourselves.

Manners

We don't have the specific problem of Corinth, because when we do communion we all eat the same thing together. But we've talked in previous weeks about how in our worship we join with heaven, how rather than calling God down like most religions seek to do, in our worship God calls us up. He invites us round, and when we sit at His table to eat, we should remember our manners. For the Corinthians, bad manners were seen as they did not all sit at the same table, where God put the food, and many of them started tucking in before everyone was seated. They disrespected their host and each other.

For us, it might be different manners that we need to work on. Maybe we need to work on coming with an appetite - if you've invited people over and made people food and they don't eat much, they just pick at it, you would feel offended. If we're coming to communion just for a nibble of grace, not for a real filling up, God has every right to be offended at that. For us the small amount of bread and wine that we physically consume represents much more. He gives lavishly, so come with an appetite for blessings.

Maybe we need to remember to thank our host properly - we have as a Hollander family Sunday lunch each week, and I confess, I don't say thank you for that very often. Familiarity can lead to taking things for granted. But we're invited around week after week to God's house, and we should remember to thank Him properly. Eucharist, as some denominations call it, literally comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving. It's an inescapable part of the act, if we do it properly.

Another kind of bad manners might be being a miserable guest. Now God invites us around regardless of how we feel, and we're welcomed in in spite of a sour demeanour. If you feel miserable today, you can still eat and drink with God. But a part of our being invited around is to cheer us up. We are meant to enjoy this, we're meant to have a good time. Yes, we want to be reverent - we're eating with the Holy God, the creator of all things, so we don't want to be flippant or disrespectful, but we can have a smile on our faces as we do this. We don't have to be stony faced, we don't have to be somber.

Conclusion

So the charge today, as we head into communion, is to eat, drink and be merry. Maybe that's a bit of an ask, because we all have habits around this that are very hard to break. But do try to enjoy it and to receive from God. I hope what I've said has built a little bit of an appetite in us.

Smile and be glad. We are communing with Christ, and being fed by God. At one time we were His enemies, but now, by His sovereign grace, we are guests at His table. Taste and see that the Lord is good.