

# WHY WE CELEBRATE THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNAL MEAL?

C Stephen David | Ekklesia Evangelical Fellowship | June 4, 2023

One of the major reasons the church gathered was to have the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:46; 20:7). It was a focal point of their fellowship. Paul devoted much of the words in 1 Cor. 11 to discuss about the right implementation of the Lord's Supper.

- ❖ **Acts 2:46**, And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
- ❖ **Acts 20:7**, On the first day of the week (at Troas), when we were gathered together to break bread...
  - The phrase "to break bread" is, in Greek, a telic infinitive that denotes a purpose or objective. The reason for the meeting was the eating of the Lord's Supper!
- ❖ **1 Corinthians 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34** "When you come together as a church" used five times.

**Michael Svigel** (*Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary*), Paul uses the term "come together," *sunerchomai*, in this passage as a term for the official assembling of the local church in Corinth.

Therefore, we must consider the significance of the Lord's Supper and how it was celebrated in the early church.

## 1. Prescription

**Luke 22:19**, And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. **Do this** in remembrance of me."

**1 Corinthians 11:23-25**, 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, 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.” 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.”

**John Piper:** Jesus himself is the origin of the Lord’s Supper. He commanded that it be continued. And he is the focus and content of it.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Purpose

### 1. Work of Christ

**1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, 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, 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.**” 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.**” [v.26], For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

**John Piper:** If "remembering" means calling to mind what Christ did by his death, then "proclaiming" means calling to each other what Christ did by his death. This is the normal movement of worship: the preciousness of Christ presses itself on our memory, and then that inner remembering breaks out in proclaiming the worth of what we remember.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Unity of the Church

**1 Corinthians 11:17-22**, 17 But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. 18 **For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.** And I believe it in part, 19 for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. 20 **When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.** 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-and-how-we-celebrate-the-lords-supper>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-lords-supper-as-worship>

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 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.

**Everett Ferguson, bible scholar and historian**, A concrete expression of our accepting one another is our sharing in the Lord's supper. Communion shows one's participation in the church, for the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Eating of the "one loaf" makes the participants "one body" in Christ (1 Cor. 10:17). (*The New Testament Church . Desert Willow Publishing. Kindle Edition.*)

**In similar fashion Cyprian (bishop of Carthage in 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) writes:** When the Savior takes the bread that is made from the coming together of many grains, and calls it his body, he shows the unity of our people, which the bread symbolizes. And when he takes the wine that is pressed from many grapes and grains and forms a single liquid, he shows that our flock is composed of many who have been brought into unity.

**In their commentary on Corinthians, Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer concluded:** "The single loaf is a symbol and an instrument of unity."

### **3. Pattern**

**1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, 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, 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." 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." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (**cf. Luke 22**)

**Point:** This means Jesus passed the first cup and the bread during the course of the supper.

**Note:** Bread was a regular biblical diet (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, pg. 117).

**Robert & Julia Banks, in his book *The Church Comes Home* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1998), pg. 44, noted:**

In the first century bread and wine were people's basis food and drink. The breaking of the one and the drinking of the other customarily marked the beginning and conclusion of a meal. When the Lord's Supper commenced with the breaking of bread and ended with the drinking of wine, it was not a separate ritual but an ordinary meal given an extraordinary significance.

**Luke 22:18,** For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

**Luke 22:28,** "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, **29** and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, **30** that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

**I. Howard Marshall, in a work entitled, *Christian Beliefs: An Introductory Study Guide* stated, in a section entitled 'the Lord's Supper',** The Bible often speaks of the life to come as a banquet (Luke 22:29f.). The Supper is a foretaste of that banquet, for at it we show forth the Lord's death until he comes and faith is replaced by sight. Thus the Supper is a prophetic anticipation of the time of full salvation.

**Everett Ferguson:** More directly to the point, Jesus at the Last Supper spoke of eating and drinking in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 26:29; Lk. 22:16, 18). In the Lord's supper we anticipate the blessings of the end time. Here is an eschatological act, which shows the church's character as the people who partake of God's eschatological gifts. (*Ferguson, Everett. The New Testament Church . Desert Willow Publishing. Kindle Edition.*)

**Acts 2:42**, And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and **the fellowship, to the breaking of bread** and the prayers.

**NOTE:** Study the punctuation of 2:42. Notice the "and" between "teaching" and "fellowship," and between "bread" and "prayer", but not between "fellowship" and "bread." In some Greek texts, the words "fellowship" and "breaking of bread" are linked together as simultaneous activities. They had fellowship with one another as they broke bread together. It was "fellowship in the breaking of bread." In Jewish thought, to eat with someone was the perfect picture of fellowship (cp. **Re 3:20**).

**The phrase, "breaking of bread," throughout the book of Acts is generally associated with the Lord's Supper.**

**David Watson commented**, "The term 'breaking of bread' was a common expression for the whole fellowship meal, and Luke in Acts never mentioned the cup at all. What is more important is the joy and praise that accompanied such meals, as they experienced the presence of the risen Christ amongst them, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, a few years later, when Paul wrote to the church at Corinth (probably around AD 55), the Lord's Supper was very much part of the life of a local church." (*I Believe in the Church* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1978), pg. 237).

- **Acts 2:46, English Standard Version**, "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts..."
- **New American Translation Bible**: "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, **and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals [lit *food* ]** together with gladness and sincerity of heart..."
- **New Living Translation**: "They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity."

**Acts 20:7 is one of the few places in Scripture where the purpose of a church meeting is stated. Why did the church at Troas come together?**

- **Acts 20:7**, On the first day of the week (at Troas), when we were gathered together to break bread...
- **The Message**: “We met on Sunday to worship and celebrate the Master's Supper.
- **New Living Translation**: “On the first day of the week, we gathered with the local believers to share in the Lord's Supper. Paul was preaching to them, and since he was leaving the next day, he kept talking until midnight.”

**Evidence of an ordinary meal (not the Lord's Supper) in Acts 27: 33** As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. 34 Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” 35 And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. 36 Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. 37 (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) 38 And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

### **Why did the church at Corinth come together?**

**1 Corinthians 11:20-21**, When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal.

- The Lord's Supper means the supper belonging to the Lord.

**1 Corinthians 11:33**, So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

**What does the word “supper” mean?** The Greek word *deipnon*, usually translated “banquet”, “feast” or “meal” (meaning especially the main evening meal) (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, pg. 828)

In the first firmly datable evidence of Christianity in Bithynia, Pliny (Romans author) writes to the emperor Trajan in A.D. 110 (Pliny, Ep. 10.5-96) that at the

end of the first century, Christians were meeting before dawn and again in the evening of the same day.<sup>3</sup>

**It seemed even the church at Troas met in the evening in Acts 20:7,** On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

**Why, according to 1Co 11:17, were the meetings of the Corinthian church doing more harm than good?**

**11:18,** For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are **divisions among you**. (There seems to have been class divisions that caused the rich not to want to eat with the poor. Unfettered by employment constraints, the rich arrived for the Supper in advance of the poor, specifically so as not to have to eat with the poor.)

**What in 11:20-22 indicates that the Corinthians ate the Lord's Supper as a full meal?** That some went away **Hungry** demonstrates that they came to the meeting expecting to be filled. That some became **Drunk** shows that more than a thimble full of wine was used!

**See even 11:33-34,** 33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— 34 if anyone [not all but some who cannot wait] is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.

- It was not a symbolic supper but a real supper that they had.

**Bob Deffinbaugh of bible.org:** The Lord's Supper was a supper. When our Lord broke the bread and gave the wine to His disciples just before His death, He did so in the course of the meal (see "after supper," 1 Corinthians 11:25). The celebration of the Lord's Supper by the early church in Acts (2:42, 46; 20:7) and at Corinth was also observed as a part of a meal (11:20-22, 33-34). The Lord's Supper seems to have been referred to as the "breaking of bread"

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<sup>3</sup> <https://archive.gci.org/articles/the-origins-of-sunday-worship-in-the-early-church/>

(Acts 2:42, 46, 20:7). <<https://bible.org/seriespage/23-corrections-communion-1-cor-1117-34>>

**According to 1Co 10:14-17, what theological significance is given for using a single loaf of bread for the Lord's Supper? 10:17.**

- ❖ **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.

**Note:** It seems that the church partook in one bread and then had a meal. Everett Ferguson points that although the breaking of the bread occurred in a meal setting, it is something distinct from the meal itself.

**John Drane, lecturer in Religious Studies at Stirling University ( "*The New Lion Encyclopaedia*", Section on the Lord's Supper on page 173):** "The early church observed the Lord's Supper as an exclusive community meal. Throughout the New Testament period the Lord's supper was an actual meal shared in the homes of Christians."

**Donald Guthrie ( "*The Lion Handbook of the Bible*", 2nd Revised Edition, 1978. Section on I Corinthians 11v17-34 on page 594:),** "In the early (church the Lord's supper took) place in the course of a communal meal. All brought what food they could and it was shared together."

**Leon Morris ( *Commentary on 1 Corinthians for the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, published by Inter-Varsity Press, 1976.**

**General Editor: R V G Tasker. On page 158),** "At Corinth the holy communion was not simply a token meal as with us, but an actual meal. Moreover it seems clear that it was a meal to which each of the participants brought food."

**I. Howard Marshall, in a work entitled, *Christian Beliefs: An Introductory Study Guide* stated, on page 80, in a section entitled 'the Lord's Supper',** "This simple rite was observed by His disciples, at first as part of a communal meal, Sunday by Sunday."



**Jonathan Went, a Hebrew Scholar, commented,** “The Lord's Supper, communion, or eucharistic meal, as it appears in the *Didache*, comes across as more of an *Agape* love meal. The meal is more than just symbolic bread and wine, the end prayers come after all have eaten to satisfaction, implying a **full meal** rather than token elements. The emphasis is more on a fellowship meal prefiguring a messianic banquet with prayers of thanksgiving for physical and spiritual food and drink in general, for the ingathering of the Church and for the second coming of Jesus.”

<http://www.leaderu.com/theology/passover.html#Lord>

**About the Lord's supper, it is mentioned in the book *Illustrated Manners And Customs Of The Bible*, whose editors are J. I. Packer and Merrill C. Tenney:** “The early Christians ate the symbolic meal of the Lord's Supper to commemorate the Last Supper, in which Jesus and His disciples observed the traditional Jewish Passover feast. The themes of the two events were the same. In the Passover, Jews rejoiced that God had delivered them from their enemies and they looked expectantly to their future as God's children. In the Lord's Supper, Christians celebrated how Jesus had delivered them from sin and they expressed their hope for the day when Christ would return (1 Cor. 11:26). At first, the Lord's Supper was an entire meal that Christians shared in their homes. Each guest brought a dish of food to the common table. The meal began with common prayer and the eating of small pieces from a single loaf of bread that represented Christ's broken body. The meal closed with another prayer and the sharing of a cup of wine, which represented Christ's shed blood.” (*Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980, pg. 540-541*)

**What about the churches that does not have a meal?** They are following the prescription and the purpose but not the pattern. The essence is still maintained (content) but the communal meal (context) is missing.

**Bobby Jamieson in “Understanding the Lord's Supper” (pg. 61-62):** Finally, as we've seen in our study of 1 Corinthians 10—11, the church in Corinth clearly celebrated the Lord's Supper in the context of a whole meal. Recall that the phrase “the breaking of bread” may well refer to the Lord's Supper in Acts 20:7. The use of a similar phrase in Acts 2:46 to describe a normal meal seems to suggest that “the breaking of bread” was a meal in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated (cf. Acts 2:42).

Does that mean the New Testament requires churches to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal?

I don't think so. What Jesus commanded us to do is eat the bread and drink the cup. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper is the corporate performance of those acts. So I don't think that eating a full meal together is of the essence of the Lord's Supper. It's not a necessary element.

However, celebrating the Lord's Supper in the context of a whole-church meal is a practice I'd love to see more churches recover. It highlights the fellowship we share with one another in the Lord's Supper. It underscores that we go to church in order to be the church. Sitting down for a meal together is a way to show our acceptance of each other in Christ. And having a communal meal as an element in a church's "worship service," rather than merely as an optional potluck afterward, sends the message that fellowship with one another is an essential part of what it means to be a church.

Like I said, I don't think a church has to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the context of a whole meal. But I'd love to see more churches do it.

### **What are the advantages of having communal meal?**

- Creates familial atmosphere.
- Creates more room for mutual fellowship and encouragement.
- Manifests social acceptance (1 Cor. 5:9-11; Rev. 3:20)
- Creates opportunity to eat together as one community irrespective of caste, color, race and status. (Acts 11:1-3; Gal. 2:11ff)
- Reflects future messianic banquet (Rev. 19:9) <sup>4</sup>

**Note:** Don't miss the communal meals of the church, which is the horizontal celebration of the Lord's Supper (vertical is remembering Christ's death; horizontal is celebrating as a community). If you are dieting, get your own food but eat together as a church.

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<sup>4</sup> R. P. Martin has identified three features of the Lord's Supper in the early church: (1) a common meal; (2) the bread and wine; (3) an eschatological hope.

**Michael Sviel** (*Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary*), What were the churches expected to do when they “came together” (*sunerchomai*) each Sunday? Returning to 1 Corinthians, we see that in conjunction with the “coming together,” they were to celebrate the unity of the body by observing “the Lord’s supper” (1 Cor. 11:17–20)—a mark of unity at which they were utterly failing (11:21).