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# Sermon Summary

Speaker: Keith Harrington



## 1 Corinthians Ch. 11: 17-34 Communion.

I want to imagine for a minute. You live in Corinth. You work as a builder's labourer. It is hard work and low pay. You have a family, a wife and two young children. She stays at home with the kids and mends clothes to help ends meet. You have recently come to faith. One of your neighbours told you about Christianity. You were intrigued about this man called Jesus. Over many nights, they have patiently explained who Jesus is and what he did. You and your whole family have been baptised. The church in Corinth meets at a rich man's house because he has a large house, with a big dining room. Every Saturday evening the church meets for a pot luck dinner. The wealthier people in the church don't work Saturdays, and so they start congregating at the house about 3 o'clock. They bring lots of fancy food. But you have to work till 4:30 on the building site. You have enough food to feed your family, but it's pretty basic. You arrive at the church at 5, with the family. The central dining room is full of people already. People with lots of money. The food looks amazing— what's left of it because most of it has gone already. You have to have yours in the courtyard, and you realize that the people out here are those like you, just scraping by. Food here is pretty plain and not really enough to share with anyone else. It feels like the church is divided. Those inside are different, and they don't seem to make you too welcome. In fact, during the meal, there doesn't seem to be any intermingling between the two groups. The leader of the group says that the bread being eaten is a reminder of Jesus death. And the drink with the meal is a reminder of the new covenant. You know what this means because of your friends instruction. But it doesn't feel as if there is one body of Christ. It feels divided and you feel like second class citizens. You are told that there is no male or female, Jew or Gentile, in the body of Christ. But the church seems to have all these groups. Rich inside. Poor outside. Then sub groups. Gentile all over there. Jews all other there. Men in this corner, Women over there. You are all in the same place, but there are all these groups. Some follow one leader, some follow another. It just seems very clique which is what you are used to because that is how society is in Corinth. But you had begun to believe that the church, God's family, was something different—that truly all people were equal and could equally contribute. You feel sad and angry at the same time. And you know that people are grumbling. It is robbing you of the joy you felt when you first came to faith. This is the scene in the church in Corinth 2000 years ago, when Paul was writing to them. This is what he writes. Read 11: 17- So you get the scene: there is prejudice, clique, divisions, refusal to help one another.

Read 11: 23-26 "The Lord Jesus took some bread." This was the last supper—which was like our dinner, a meal. "He gave thanks" that is he said grace, giving thanks for the food. "This is my body." is not literal, remember Jesus was there in person. This is a Catholic idea. They would not have understood it like that. He was there. It is symbolic of his body. "This is my body given for you." Some translation say broken but it is not actually in text. "Given" is referring to his physical body given to us on the cross. The cup would have been wine, probably part of the Passover. Cup is symbolic in the Old Testament of judgment.

"New covenant sealed with his blood." The old covenant was the relationship between God and his people based on keeping the law. Sin was dealt with by sacrificial system. The trouble was the law was not possible to keep. One could fear God but not a love relationship. New covenant based on God's love and grace. We could come to God as children, nothing standing between us and God Sin dealt with.

Communion has been deeply divisive over the centuries for the church which is very sad. Basically there are three views.

1. As the minister (normally only someone ordained) prays, the bread and drink literally turned into the body/ blood of Christ.
2. While normally performed by a ordained minister, the elements are Not literally turned into body and blood of Christ, but God ministers his grace through these elements. This view is in some ways the hardest to pin down, because there is no consensus on what this quite means in practice.
3. Bread and drink are merely symbolic of the work that Christ did for us, and help us remember.

Most protestant churches hold views 2 or 3. Baptists tend to lean more to 3. But in saying that, many including myself, would recognize that at times God powerfully meets us in the taking of communion. What has happened is over the centuries we have reduced communion to a formula, which is far cry from it's' origins. Jesus took the staples of every day eating, and said: "every time you do this, remember what I have done." Note: there is no instruction on how often, on the type of bread to use, on what words to say, on what prayers should be said and when, on who should administer it, or on where it should be done. There is no formula, the danger with a formula is that we reduce this to something magical. I.e. It's not really communion unless it is held in a church, is solemn, these words are said and this prayer is said. None of those details are there. At ICBC, we have it once every 3-5 weeks, sometimes we hand it out, sometimes we get you to come forward, sometime it is part of the worship, sometimes it is after the sermon, sometimes is reflective and sometimes celebratory. Some home groups celebrate communion and we encourage that.

In the early church it was part of the love feast, the agape meal, a potluck meal that was a powerful symbol of the new community. Ancient culture was far more socially divided than today. Women were second class citizens. Jews did not eat with Gentiles. There was a very strong class system and a very divided rigid society. And into this you had this radical community where every wall is broken down. It is radically different. In the church there are no divisions because we are all made in the image of God, we have all fallen short of God's plan for us, and rebelled, and we have all by God's grace been adopted into this family as his sons and daughters. All been filled with the Holy Spirit of God, living in us. The meal was a powerful symbol of this. As part of the meal, the Lords supper was celebrated. Now we don't know quite how they did this. Was it as the end? Was it built into the meal

itself? Was it like and grace before hand and the drink at the end like a toast. We don't know. But what we do know is that it was very relational. What has evolved over the years is something for more ritualistic and individualistic. We have a tiny cup and a tiny bit of bread. It is often very quiet and reflective and about us and God. In the churches where the minister hands the bread out, there is something that feels a little hierarchal about that. There is no one priest any more. In some churches, you break the bread off one loaf which picks up the idea of one body. But both have issues of hygiene. Sometimes the minister asks that the church eats and drinks at the same time which picks up the symbolism a little.

What does Paul means in v27-29 There are two options that are not mutually exclusive.

1. we have communion without understanding its meaning or we do it flippantly.
2. The body in vs 29 is referring to the church. This better suits the context. I.e. the Corinthian by their actions were saying - we are in, you are not. Now I am sure in theory the Corinthians would have said. Yes, everyone in the church are Christians. But their actions were saying something different. Their actions in forming little cliques, not sharing, set up of the meal, and was saying actually you guys are second class... This fits with the context of what was happening. We have made this to mean we are to examine any sin between us and God or some sin we have forgotten to tell God about. It is very personal. But this is actually far more social. The question is. "Are my actions reflecting the reality of what the church, as Christ's body is really about? Am I loving just those who are like me, or am I loving those who are different from me? Am I sharing with those who have less than me? Do my actions recognize the radical community that is the body of Christ?" A community where young and old are welcome, included and belonging. A community where race is no barrier. A community where there is no sexism. A radical community where every believer is made in the image of God and filled with the Spirit of God.

I think God is grieved when we argue about the details of communion, because when we do we are completely missing the point. Communion is deeply relational. Firstly we remember God has called us into relationship with himself through the cross. We remember this and look forward to the time when we will be with God face to face, when he returns. Secondly we remember we are called into relationship with each other. This is what Paul is calling us to examine, our relationships one with another. So if we are holding forgiveness against someone, or we have offended someone and not sought their forgiveness, then we should not take communion. The act of communion should remind us that actually this is not right. And we have to put it right. We are also to examine our relationships more generally. The Corinthian were not guilty of this kind of relational issue. They were guilty by their actions of excluding people and making them feel less than. They were not including poorer people or sharing with them. They were socially not engaging with them. They were blind to their own prejudices. The reason I asked you to move (into groups for communion) I know some of you found it awkward, and are still not feeling very charitable about me. However it was to simply to get you to think about who you typically relate to in church. Do you typically talk to people of the same colour and same age, and same sex? Is your home group made up of similar people? But if you are in a minority in the church, maybe you feel excluded. I have heard older folk say feel forgotten and ignored. I have heard those different cultures say they feel excluded. I have heard those who are single, widowed, single parent feel the focus is always on family. I.e. married two kids. If we are to understand properly what Pauls is talking about here, it is about the kind of community that we are.

It sounds really radical to our ears, but Paul says actually God at times brings discipline to his people through sickness or even death. Now there are two extremes to this. Some churches studiously ignore this bit of the Bible and think that can't happen today. God does not do that. Other extreme is to suggest that every time we get sick, we think it is because of some sin in our lives. The middle ground is that based on this Scripture we have to at least consider the possibility that God at times does discipline through sickness or even death. We see that in Acts with Ananias and Sapphires. It grieves God to see his body not being as he intended. Sometimes God in his love disciplines us.

As we come to communion this morning, I want you to think about the body of Christ. That is, I want you to think about the people in your group that just introduced themselves. I want you to think about those who might feel left out. Think about the people who you avoid because they are hard to talk to. Think about those who come to a Sunday service and find it a lonely place. I want you to think about this verse. If you eat the bread or drink the cup unworthily, not honouring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgement upon yourselves. We honour the body of Christ when the stranger feels welcome. We honour the body of Christ when the lonely are included. We honour the body of Christ when we cross the barriers of race and age and class and recognize the every person is made in the image of God, and is a crucial part of this congregation.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

- # How have other churches you have been part of (or grew up in) celebrated communion?
- # Which view of communion resonates most with you?
- # Have you had times when God has powerfully met you during communion? What was this like?
- # Discuss the idea of communion being more relational, and less individualistic? Or of being part of a meal?
- # How can we celebrate communion on Sunday while not embarrassing those who are seeking?
- # Discuss the idea of God's discipline because of not recognizing the body of Christ.
- # Brainstorm and then refine until you come up your best 3 ideas for building the kind of radically inclusive community that Paul envisions. Email them to keith@icbc.org.nz