



## Questions About the Lord's Supper by Gerald Cowan

All Scriptures and comments are based on the **New King James Version**, unless otherwise noted.

**QUESTION: In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 what is the Lord's supper and why is it called communion?** What is the purpose for it, and who is allowed to do it? How do we discern the Lord's body when we take the supper? Why did Paul seem to disapprove of the way it was being done in the Corinthians church? Was he really implying that God would not be pleased with it and might reject it? Are we commanded to eat it every Sunday or is it optional? Is it a sin if we fail to observe the Lord's supper every Sunday? Should you do it even if you aren't worthy or don't feel worthy because that means you are condemned if you try to do it? Should those who are not Christians be allowed to eat the Lord's supper?

Is it necessary or even scriptural to make the Lord's supper available in the evening or some other time on Sunday for those who didn't or couldn't receive it at the morning worship service? Should those who have taken the supper earlier have to wait for late participants?

**ANSWER: So many questions! Do not expect complete answers to all of them in one essay,** but we will give some attention to and about each one. Bracketed Scripture references are from **1 Corinthians** chapter **11** (KJV), unless otherwise indicated.

Communion means sharing, doing or participating in something together with others. In the Lord's supper we not only share bread and fruit of the vine (grape juice, or wine made from grapes), but we perform the act of eating and drinking together, as a collective, not as separatist individuals. It is this mutuality and togetherness that makes it communion – a sharing or participation together by members of the one body, both the local church as congregation and the universal church/ body of Christ. What are the true elements of the communion, elements that serve as metaphors of the physical body and life blood of the Savior? Unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. Discernment means we recognize the reality for which each element stands, what it symbolizes or represents.

It seems common to assume the body of the Lord we are to discern, distinguish, and focus our attention upon when we eat the bread in the Lord's supper is his abused, broken, and bloody physical body that was nailed to the cross – as if to say, "See how he suffered for us and what a terrible price he paid to purchase us for God." Those of this mind then explain, we are told plainly, that if we aren't visualizing that body on the cross we aren't properly discerning the/his body. Although recognition of his suffering and his death should certainly be in our minds, that is not the mandated discernment of the body to which Paul alludes in **1 Corinthians 11:29**. The body to be discerned is the body of fellowshiping Christians, the church which the Lord purchased and now owns – those who acknowledge and celebrate their togetherness, their unity and oneness in him: those who have obeyed the gospel (**Acts 2:36-40**,

**Romans 6:17-18**) and are thus recipients of the sacrifice made for them, who are added together as the saved/purchased possession of the Lord (**Acts 2:41 and 47, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20**) into one body (**Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Corinthians 12:13-14**). In the context of **1 Corinthians 11:17-30** (now read **1 Corinthians 10:16-17**) Paul makes it clear that the bread, symbolic of Jesus' body, not only refers to his sacrificed physical body but, more particularly in this context, to the resultant body of saved purchased people added into and constituted as the Lord's church: *We are one bread and one body and we participate and share together in and as the body of the Lord (17)*.

Why did Paul object to and invalidate the Lord's supper as practiced in the Corinthian church? What was wrong in what they did? (**11:20** – what you do when you come together *is not the Lord's supper*). Not only were they divided into sectarian group cliques (**1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:1-3**), but those heretical divisions continued on an individual level: each one takes his own supper; one eats and another doesn't, one drinks and another doesn't – but when you come together, wait for each other – eat and drink together, with each other, considering each one's place in the gathering and the supper; do your private non-communion eating and drinking at home in your own houses and not as the church of the Lord (**11:33-34, 22**). By your non-communion in the Lord's supper you are not discerning his body – either his sacrificed physical body, which was for all and not for you alone, or his spiritual body the church which contains all those he has added to it with equal place and equal rights in it. By your failure you despise and show disrespect and dishonor for the Lord and his body the church (**11:33**). For that undiscerning of his body and your improper participation in his memorial supper you eat and drink condemnation to yourself (**11:29**). God will not only reject such a travesty of the Lord's supper but will also reject those who participate in it. Do it properly or – say it thoughtfully and fearfully – it may be better not to do it at all.

Now we come to the other parts of your question. Is eating the Lord's supper optional or is it required? Are we commanded to eat it every Sunday or is it optional? Is it a sin to fail or refuse to eat it every Sunday? The importance of it and the purpose of it, even the proper method of it, are easily established. There seems to be no expressly stipulated command to do it, but approved example and explanation and necessary inference may have the impact and authority of specific command. When one does it, and as often as it is done, it should be done properly and with the right attitude (**11:25-26**). It is a gracious privilege and opportunity to declare one's faith and relationship to the Lord and Savior Jesus and the God who sent him. One who deprives himself of the Lord's supper must explain why, but will not be able to justify it. Eating and drinking *unworthily* (**11:29**) does not refer to the worthiness or unworthiness of the one who eats, but rather to the way, the action and intent, of the eating and drinking – it refers to the way it is done and not to the person who is doing it. Refusing the supper may result in inability to give proper witness to the Lord's death and resurrection and his eventual return to consummate the full plan of God for His people (**11:26**).

Are non-Christians allowed to eat the Lord's supper? Of course anyone can eat and drink the elements of bread and fruit of the vine. But they do not have *communion* with the Lord and his people by such eating and drinking. The bread and cup do not save one or make one a Christian – they do not give spiritual or life secure one's place in the body of Christ. Eating and drinking by non-members/non-Christians does not pollute or defile the supper or its elements, as taught by a major theological group that makes the supper the centerpiece and purpose of their worship, the so-called Mass or Eucharist. Allowing non-communicants to commune is

sometimes excused by saying, “**It does not hurt them.**” That is not really true. Being allowed to “take communion” without commitment to the Lord and his words can prevent one from making that necessary commitment and, perhaps, to feel it is not necessary to obey the gospel — so they remain lost, never saved — the only benefit they receive is nutritional from a bit of low calorie bread and a little high calorie grape juice. **Even though it does not hurt them, the more salient fact is it does not help them and may prevent them from getting the help they need.**

Providing for those who have not yet communed is simply and consciously sharing with them while they do it, though you have done it earlier, does not violate any principle of the supper and shows continued mutuality, unity, and fellowship with them. It is no different than passing the bread and cup to all present at a given time — the passage of a few hours does not change the meaning of *waiting for one another* (**11:33**), but it avoids the selfishness of separation and isolation from each other in the body of Christ (this would be a good time to read more about the oneness of the body and all its members, in chapter **12** of this same **1 Corinthian** letter).

It may not be a sin to miss a communion service — it may be unavoidable, due to situation or circumstance. But choosing not to participate and join with others when one has opportunity is — in my understanding of the matter — a sin of attitude, showing disrespect for the Lord, for his word, and for his people.

There’s more that could be said — such as the relationship of the Passover to the Lord’s supper, the acceptability of pre-packaged bits of imitation bread and preserved juice, the disposition of leftover bits of bread and juice or wine, “communion in one kind,” how the Lord eats and drinks with us now and when he first did so, the use of multiple containers/cups rather than one — and what the cup is that we drink, not what we drink from, etc. But those questions weren’t asked and aren’t answered in this essay.

—- Gerald Cowan, *Personal Periodicals Number 632, April 21, 2021*