

OUR PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Each month when we celebrate the Lord's Supper at Cornerstone, we practice what is known as Open Communion or Open Table. "Fencing the Table" is a term sometimes used to describe the practice of limiting people's access to the Lord's Supper for various reasons. We do little to "fence" the Table at Cornerstone. We simply say, **"All who wish to draw near to Jesus are welcome to partake."**

WHY DO WE DO THIS?

Our approach to communion is driven by a biblical vision of "embrace", rooted in Jesus' radical inclusiveness and welcoming of sinners. In Luke's gospel especially, there is a strong theme of Jesus eating — or having table fellowship — with sinners and religious outsiders. As such, we view the Lord's Supper not only as a meal to nourish believers in Christ (which it certainly is), but also as a potentially converting or evangelistic sacrament where pre-Christian spiritual seekers can meet Jesus at his Table and be changed by his grace. As noted theologian Gordon T. Smith writes:

There is something valuable in the perspective of those who insist that we should welcome whosoever should come to the Table. This is based largely on how Jesus approached those with whom he ate. Jesus intentionally ate with those on the margins — outcasts and tax collectors — as an act of compassion and also empowerment. By doing so, he proclaimed the in-breaking of the kingdom. Such meals were integral to his mission, for they

celebrated what God was already doing and what God would do. They were demonstrations of the inclusive love of God. Meals with Jesus were not reserved only for those who demonstrated an adequate level of holiness or sanctity.¹

It is noteworthy that the great theologian John Wesley spoke of the Lord's Supper as a converting sacrament, pointing out that for many their first experience of the love of God and their first sense that they are sinners in need of grace come during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For example, one pre-Christian woman who had begun attending Sunday worship at Cornerstone took part in a communion service where we invited "all who wish to draw near to Jesus to come to his Table." She wished to draw near, so she came, and later would tell us how she met Jesus at his Table that day: "His body was broken for me! His blood was shed for me!" Shortly thereafter, we verified her faith and she and her husband were baptized. Others have had similar experiences during the Lord's Supper at Cornerstone.

¹ Gordon T. Smith, *A Holy Meal: The Lord's Supper in the Light of the Church*, p. 77-78.

What, then, are we to make of the Apostle Paul's warnings in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 against partaking of the Lord's Supper in an "unworthy manner"? To do so, says Paul, is to risk God's judgment (29), so participants should "examine themselves" before eating the bread and drinking the cup (28, 31). This passage is often understood to mean that we need to address issues of personal sin in our lives in order to be worthy to partake at the Lord's Table. While there is no question that we need to take personal sin seriously, such an emphasis leads to a misreading of this particular passage. Paul's intention was to address socioeconomic divisions in the church of Corinth. The wealthy homeowners who hosted the house churches in Corinth would sometimes have private meals with their peers just before the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Those who weren't included in the private meal would then be seated separately for the common meal that followed, during which the Lord's Supper was celebrated. This resulted in the rich and the poorer folks being segregated from each other. Smith writes that Paul was addressing the fact that, "The wealthy were hosting the Lord's Supper without regard to the whole body of Christ, highlighting differences rather than unity."²

Thus, what's at issue in this passage is not whether we are individually worthy of partaking in the Lord's Supper — no one is. It is always by mercy — not merit — that we come to the Table, to receive the emblems of the grace that is greater than all our sin. What the passage is getting at is whether the mode or manner of observation is worthy of the meaning of the event of communion. So "discerning the body" (1 Cor. 11:24) has a double meaning. It refers to the bread — the body of Christ, broken for us — and it refers to the fellowship of believers — that we are one united body — and should partake of communion in a mode and manner that emphasizes our unity and equality in Christ.

Our conviction, therefore, is that communion can function as a converting or evangelistic sacrament while at the same time emphasizing our unity in Christ as a body of believers. It is the Lord's Table, after all, and Jesus was radically open in his practice of table fellowship.

² See Smith, *A Holy Meal*, p. 52.