



# BIBLICAL Theology

## *A Right Estimation of The Lord's Table*

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One of the themes that stands out in 1 Corinthians is the way in which the Corinthians church had desecrated the Lord's Table. Some overestimated it by treating it as a spiritual prescription for dealing with the effects of mingling with idolatry (10:14-22); others underestimated the Table by treating it simply as another meal (11:20-22). Paul took the Corinthians church to task on both these issues and every believer needs to examine themselves as well to see whether they have done the same.

***The Lord's Table is not a spiritual prescription to cure the effects of mingling with idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14-22)***

The Corinthian church had the idea that so long as they were baptized and partook of the Lord's Table, they were secure in their salvation. They believed that they could mingle with idolatry and not be touched by it.<sup>1</sup> At this point, it is necessary to define what idolatry is. According to the first commandment, idolatry is defined as having other gods before God (Exodus 20:3). Idolatry is giving the worship and glory due God to anyone or anything else (Romans 1:25).<sup>2</sup> Thus, someone is guilty of idolatry when he elevates anyone or anything over God.

Idolatry can take one of two forms: literal idolatry or figurative idolatry. Literal idolatry is the worship of icons or images. This is typically how idolatry is viewed. To this end, believers would balk at the idea of succumbing to idolatry. However, figurative idolatry desires someone or something above God. This could be any number of seemingly positive or negative things, such as: family, job, wealth, depression, selfishness or loneliness.<sup>3</sup> The believer must be on guard against these things, because Scripture is clear that this form of idolatry leads to sexual immorality, drunkenness and reveling (Romans 1:18-32).<sup>4</sup>

In response to the Corinthians false idea, Paul used three Old Testament similitudes: the Red Sea crossing, the provisions of water and manna. Paul states that all of Israel passed through the Red Sea, drank the water and ate the manna. Yet in spite of these three wonderful provisions of God's grace and mercy, the people of God fell into idolatry (10:5). Indeed, they had no sooner crossed the Red Sea and had settled at Sinai when they crafted a golden calf to worship.

Paul compares Israel's crossing of the Sea to the believer's Baptism and the provision of water and manna to the elements of the Lord's Table. Like Israel, just because the believer is baptized or partakes of the Lord's Table, does not mean they will not fall into idolatry. The Lord's Table is not a Pez dispenser of God's grace and mercy. It does not cure the effects of mingling with idolatry! Indeed, if someone thinks they are somehow immune to idolatry's effects, they need to take heed because they will fall (10:12).

Partaking of this Table does not give security to someone in idolatry. Rather, It should make one want to flee from idolatry. Note the command in 10:14, "*Flee from idolatry.*" To 'flee' means, "to keep from doing something by avoiding it because of its potential damage."<sup>5</sup> Interestingly in light of the connection between idolatry and sexual immorality, Paul used the same term in 1 Corinthians 6:8 - "*Flee fornication.*" If someone wants to be secure from idolatry's effects, then that one should never mingle with it in the first place.

Again, look at Israel (10:18). When they ate the sacrifices of old, they were partakers of the altar. The term 'partake' (κοινωνος - *koinonos*) literally means 'to share in'<sup>6</sup> and it is the same Greek term translated as 'fellowship' or 'communion'. When Israel ate the sacrifices they were literally 'sharing' in what the altar accomplished. What did the altar accomplish? It accomplished the forgiveness of sin and the removal of guilt thus establishing 'fellowship' between God and man.

To take part in any form of idolatry then is to fellowship (share) with demons (10:20). Idolatry entangles believers with the things of demons. This makes the believer vulnerable to their influence and ultimately prone to submit to them.

When believers partake (share) in the bread and cup of communion, they are acknowledging that they have shared in what Christ's accomplished on the cross - the altar of Christian salvation (10:16). It is the cross of Christ where once-for-all time, sin was forgiven, guilt removed and eternal fellowship between God and man made possible. The Lord's Table is the place where believers 'share in' the blessings of salvation. It is where they become entangled with the things of Christ. It is where believers are vulnerable to His influence and are submitting to Him. The Lord's Table is not a cure all for idolatry nor demonic influence. It is however the place where believers can be nourished in fellowship with Christ.

***The Lord's Table is not a common meal to cure the effects of physical desires (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).***

The purpose of partaking of the Lord's Table is to nourish one's spiritual hunger and thirst for the blessings of fellowship with Christ. However, the Corinthian church had made a mockery of the Table because they had made it a place of gluttony and drunkenness. This led Paul to make the command - "eat at home" (11:22). Paul did not mean that it was wrong to have a church suppers.

In fact, the early church often ate together in what were known as 'love feasts' (Jude 12). Each person within the church brought something to share. The provisions were pooled together and the church gathered for a common meal. In fact, these meals were usually enjoyed by the church when they met together to observe the Lord's Table.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of such meals was to provide an illustration of oneness within the church. It provided an opportunity for the church to gather outside of worship and minister to one another.

Again, the problem was not that they were eating meals together as a church. This issue was that they were turning the Lord's Table into a common meal by their unbecoming behavior during the church supper. The supper or 'love feast' was supposed to be a time of unity. Sadly, it was a time of disunity (11:18). How could they claim fellowship or communion with God, when they could not even have civilized fellowship with one another?

The problem was that the more affluent members of the church refused to share their food with the less affluent. In fact, they not only did not share their food, but gorged themselves on the food brought by the less affluent. In 11:21 the phrase 'taketh before' renders the idea of 'devour'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there were those who had eaten in excess and those who had eaten nothing. This was more than just poor social etiquette; the atmosphere leading up to the Lord's Table had become one of gluttony, drunkenness and greed.

A church can go through all the right actions and say all the right words, but if the character and conduct of those partaking does not line up with the purpose, it is a contradiction.<sup>9</sup> To this end Paul said, "When you come together... it is not possible to eat the Lord's Supper (11:20).

When the church partakes of the Lord's Table it needs to be distinguished from that which is common. As well, the participants must properly conduct themselves. The focus should not be on one's felt needs or perceived needs, but on the Lord. Carelessness, as seen in gluttony and drunkenness, or in tolerating any sin for that matter should not be a part of this Table.

***The Lord's Table is a remembrance of the price paid and the responsibility incurred (1 Corinthians 11:23-32).***

A right estimation of the Lord's Table is two-fold: first, the believer must remember the price paid which enables him to partake of this Table; second, the believer must remember the responsibility that partaking of this Table incurs.

Considering the price paid, when Christ met with the disciple for His final Passover meal, He established this Table. He clearly took the Unleavened Bread and the Cup of Redemption and gave them new meaning (1 Corinthians 11:23-25). The Unleavened Bread came to represent His sinless body that was put to death. Just as the bread had been bruised in the kneading process, so the body of Christ was bruised for humanity's sin (Isaiah 53:4, 10).

Just as the bread was pierced through to allow air to escape, so the body of Christ was pierced. A crown of thorns pierced His head, the nails pierced His hands and feet, and a spear pierced His side. He was pierced so that His blood would freely flow; for without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness or removal of sin (Colossians 1:14).

Just as the bread had a marked or scarred appearance from the baking process so the body of Christ was scarred (Isaiah 53:5). Consider, that when believers are raised from the dead, their bodies will be made like Christ's body. The believer's new body will be incorruptible, free from blemish and spot. Yet, Christ willingly retained the blemishes of the scars. He kept them for the purpose of proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that the one who died as the substitute for man was the one who rose again.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Christ's scars guarantee that the believer is healed from the devastating effects of sin.

The Cup of Redemption came to represent the blood of Christ that was shed for sin. Believers are not redeemed by the blood of bulls and goats, by the precious blood of the Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:13-14). Christ had to shed His sinless blood, because it was the only means of satisfying the wrath of God (Romans 1:18; Colossians 1:14).

When believers come to the Lord's Table, a proper estimation must include a remembrance of the price paid for redemption. Salvation may be a free gift, but it did not come cheap. Its cost was so great no mere mortal could begin to pay it. Only the God-man could pay the cost with His life and blood!

Considering the responsibility incurred, approaching the Lord's Table is not to be taken lightly. 1 Corinthians 11:27 warns about the danger of partaking of the Table in an unworthy manner. There are four ways in which someone is unworthy to approach the Lord's Table.

First, if a person is not saved, they are unworthy. Believers have been made worthy, because they have appropriated the Lamb of God, Who is worthy. If a person has never repented of sin and placed faith in the finished work of Christ, they are unworthy.

Second, if a person knows they are sinning and plans to continue in the sin, they are unworthy. Believers do struggle with sin, but their attitude when they do should be one of guilt and remorse. The Lord's Table is not a means of grace for dealing with sin. Beware of continuing in sin under the guise that grace may abound (Romans 6:1). A desire to partake of the Table should cause the believer to strive against sin.

Third, if a person approaches the Table in a frivolous or flippant manner, they are unworthy. If someone attends a memorial service for someone, they do not attend in a frivolous or flippant manner. Great reverence and solemnity is displayed lest any dishonor might be given to the one memorialized. In the same manner, believers come to memorialize what Jesus has done! Anyone with a flippant attitude regarding what Christ has done, needs not come to partake.

Fourth, if a person does not remember or understand the significance of the event, they are unworthy. The Lord's Table is a reminder of Christ's death and shed blood. To partake of the Lord's Table without giving any consideration of Christ and His work, is to undermine its significance. Christ's statement, "Do this in remembrance of Me", is not a suggestion. It is a command... a command to focus on Christ. When the elements are passed and partaken, Christ and His work must be at the center of one's attention.

### ***Conclusion***

The Lord's Table is a time to gather as believers and solemnly celebrate Christ's sacrifice for sinners. Such an event cannot be overestimated. While there should be great reverence, please understand that partaking of the Communion event has no mystical powers. The Table cannot cleanse or forgive someone of sin. Sin can only be cleansed through the blood of Christ and only forgiven through repentance (1 John 1:9). Do not think for a moment that mingling with sin and then partaking of the Table will give absolution.

The Lord's Table is not to be underestimated. This Table and the events surrounding it are not to be treated as commonplace. It is a place of spiritual nourishment and fellowship with God. The Table should not be approached carelessly, but with character and conduct becoming of the Lord.

### ***Endnotes:***

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- <sup>1</sup> Piper, J. (2007). Sermons from John Piper (1990-1999). Idolatry, the Lord's Supper, and the Body of Christ. Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God.
- <sup>2</sup> Vincent, T. (1996). A Family Instructional Guide (electronic edition based on the first Banner of Truth ed., 1980.) (p. 120). Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation.
- <sup>3</sup> Carpenter, E. E., & Comfort, P. W. (2000). Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrews words defined and explained (p. 307). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- <sup>4</sup> Geisler, N. L., & Rhodes, R. (1997). When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook on Cultic Misinterpretations (p. 229). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.
- <sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (3rd ed.) (p 1052). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid (p 553).
- <sup>7</sup> Youngblood, R. F., Bruce, F. F., Harrison, R. K., & Thomas Nelson Publishers. (1995). Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- <sup>8</sup> Garland, D. E. (2003). 1 Corinthians. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (p 540). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic
- <sup>9</sup> Chafin, K. L., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1985). Vol. 30: The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 30: 1, 2, Corinthians. The Preacher's Commentary Series (pp 137-138). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- <sup>10</sup> Schaff, P. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 1 (p 444).