

That Night, At Table With His Friends

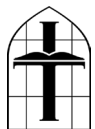
Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

That night, at table with his friends,
our Lord took bread, and blest, and broke:
what love through all his actions ran!
What wondrous words of love he spoke!

“This is my body, given for you;
receive, and eat the living food.”
He took the cup and blest the wine:
“This the new covenant in my blood.”

“Do this,” he said, “till time shall end,
in memory of your dying friend;
meet at my table, and record
the presence of your loving Lord.”

Jesus, your feast we celebrate:
we show your death, we sing your name
till you return, that we may eat
the marriage supper of the Lamb.



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In the Nick of Time

The Cup and the Bread

Kevin T. Bauder

One of the oddest mentions of the Lord's Table in the New Testament occurs in 1 Corinthians 10:15–22. It is unusual because it does not occur in a discussion of church ordinances. Rather, Paul is examining the question of whether Christians may eat meat that has been offered to idols. It is also odd because it reverses the order of the ordinance. Everywhere else, the bread is mentioned first, followed by the cup. Only here does the New Testament put the cup before the bread.

This order is deliberate. It is a necessary step in Paul's argument. If he were to use the traditional order (bread then cup), his message would be lost.

May Christians eat meat that has been offered to idols? Paul takes three chapters to answer that question, and he answers it in more than one way. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul notes that an idol is nothing in the world (8:4). One might reason that if an idol is nothing, then meat that has been offered to an idol has been offered to nothing. It is no different than meat that has not been offered at all. It is not polluted; it can do no harm. Therefore, Christians must have the liberty to eat it.

This argument is valid as far as it goes, but it overlooks two factors. The first is that some believers cannot eat idol meat without being conscious of the idol. They would violate their consciences by eating, and violating one's conscience is never right. To participate against one's conscience is to defile it (8:7).

Believers who understand their liberty still have a responsibility to believers who do not. They must not embolden their brothers to defile their consciences (8:9–12). To cause a brother to stumble is to sin against him. Paul concludes that, “if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth” (8:13).

This statement seems extreme. A reader might be tempted to take it as hyperbole. It is not. In fact, Paul offers an extended explanation of this precept in 1 Corinthians 9. He makes it clear that he is willing to suspend any liberty that gets in the way of ministry.

Paul returns to the main question in 1 Corinthians 10. He adopts a strange tactic, which he uses to introduce the second overlooked factor in his original argument. He begins talking about Old Testament examples of eating and drinking. The thrust of his message is that eating and drinking can be significant acts. They can carry meaning beyond the mere consumption of food and drink.

A special example of eating and drinking that carries meaning is the Lord's Supper. Paul wants to argue that participating in the Lord's Table is a highly significant act. To explain the significance, he begins with the cup.

The cup, he observes, is the "communion of the blood of Christ" (10:12). In other words, the Lord's Table is more than a memorial, more than a symbol. When we drink the cup, the act of drinking brings us into identification with the blood of Christ. Our drinking is a profession that we hold the blood of Christ in common (*koinonia*).

Obviously, the blood that Paul is talking about is the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. It is the literal, material blood of Christ. The Lord's Table identifies us with this blood.

It also identifies us with the body of Christ. Just as the blood was the material blood, so the body must be the material body of Jesus. It is the body that was crucified for us and that died on the cross. The Lord's Table brings us into participation or identification with this body. We enter a fellowship or communion (*koinonia*) that involves the body of Christ.

The order in which Paul discusses the elements is what tells us that the body is Christ's material body. We must be clear on that point, or we will miss the way that Paul trades on an ambiguity. The cup identifies us with the material blood. Therefore, the body with which the bread identifies us must be the material body of Christ.

But Christ also has another body. It is a spiritual body. It is constituted by the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). This spiritual body of Christ is elsewhere identified as the Church (Eph 1:22–23). Part of Paul's point is that the Lord's Table also identifies us with this spiritual body of Christ.

Identification with the spiritual body of Christ is the point of 1 Corinthians 10:17. Many individual kernels of grain go into making up a single loaf. By analogy, many individual believers go into making up Christ's body.

Notably, Paul must be referencing the local congregation and not the universal Church. The universal Church has never observed a communion service. If you want to participate in the Lord's Table, you must attend a local congregation. Such a congregation is what Paul has in view. The Lord's Supper identifies us with the body of Christ that hung on the cross, but it

also identifies us with a particular body of believers. It is a reminder of our covenant obligations toward each other.

The immediate application of this teaching is that we must be careful of what we eat and where we eat it. Eating the Lord's Supper identifies us with the blood and body of Christ. Eating meat offered to idols identifies us with the demons who lurk behind those idols. If we have identified ourselves as belonging to Christ, then we must never identify ourselves with demons. To do so would provoke the Lord to jealousy, and that is hazardous business. As Paul asks, "Are we stronger than He?" (10:22). We must never overlook the principle of identification.

Later, Paul again appeals to this principle of identification. In 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 he offers the most sustained reflection on the Lord's Table in the New Testament. There he writes about a particular situation. The Corinthian church was attempting to observe the Lord's Supper. Because of the division within the church, however, Paul tells them that what they were doing was *not* the Lord's Table (11:20). They were merely going through the motions.

The fundamental problem is that they were not discerning the Lord's body (11:29). They were not recognizing that the Lord's Table identifies them with Christ's body—in this instance, with the local assembly at Corinth. They were behaving like individuals who are not united in one loaf. This failure of unity at the Lord's Table brings them under severe temporal judgment (11:30).

The Lord's Supper is more than a memorial. It is more than a symbol or picture. It identifies us with the physical blood of Jesus. It identifies us with the material body of Jesus. Just as seriously, it identifies us with the spiritual body of Christ in its local expression. We cannot rightly observe the Lord's Table while we are allying ourselves with Christ's demonic opponents. Neither can we worthily observe the Lord's Table while we are behaving divisively toward our brothers and sisters in the local church.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
