

## A Meal of Fellowship

**1 Corinthians 10:16-17** <sup>16</sup> *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?* <sup>17</sup> *For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*

In many a church building, you have what they call 'the fellowship hall'. This is the place where coffee and tea is served, where meals might take place, where people might mill around after a service and enjoy some conversation. I'm all in favour of such places and times, but I think the name we give to those places is a little misleading. "Fellowship hall"- as if you go into that large auditorium to do your worshipping, and then once you've finished worshipping, you go into this room to do your fellowshiping. Now I don't want to be unfair, people use that term loosely, just like we do, and nothing sinful with calling a place a fellowship hall. But perhaps it does show that we tend to think of fellowship in a somewhat different way to the biblical definition.

For example, what comes into your mind when I say the words Christian fellowship? If you're like me, you see people talking, chatting, being together. In other words, fellowship equals something like friendliness, togetherness, maybe even cooperation. For us, fellowship is a kind of social friendliness that Christians have in each other's company.

But I want you to know that that would be an incomplete idea of fellowship as far as the Bible is concerned. That idea comes more from our culture, where we have various social contracts, and social arrangements, and we tend to import these into the church, and then label them, fellowship.

For example, some Christians might unwittingly think of the church and fellowship like their experience of the mall. People come in large numbers to a central location, where all kinds of attractions and activities are present. The people who attend are basically consumers, and the leaders of the church are service-providers, who meet the needs of their target market. People come, get what they pay for, are satisfied, and go home. It's a social experience, and you are friendly with the other shoppers, but there is no sharing beyond the shopping, no obligations to the other shoppers.

Some might imagine church like a theatre. You come, take your seats, while some really good music is performed, to which you can sing along if you choose, and eventually a really dynamic, funny, interesting speaker amuses you with stories and clever sayings. It's a social experience, and it is much better than just watching the speaker alone at home on DVD, but you don't have any serious partnerships with the people you're watching the film with. You laugh at the same jokes, you might comment on your mutual enjoyment of it later, but you don't belong to those people or need them.

I think many a Christian imagines fellowship much like this: friendliness, being with others for a limited public event, and then fellowship is over. You switch it off, get in your car, and go home.

But all this would go out the window, if we thought again about a meal – inviting people to your home for a meal. I understand you might have a business associate over, but for the most part, who do you invite into your home for a meal? Who shares your table, and your food? You don't invite people who queued with you at the mall over for lunch. You don't invite a stranger who happened to watch the same film with you over for lunch. You don't invite people who provide you with goods and services over for a meal. You invite family, and friends over for a meal.

What we Christians have to realise is that we are all invited over to an intimate meal at God's house. He is the host, it is His Table, and we are the guests. And as we sit around that Table, it underlines and expresses what true fellowship is.

The Lord's Table is not only a feast of worship, it is in many ways, the ultimate expression of fellowship. What you think fellowship is will be fleshed out at the Table. You will bring your right or wrong views of fellowship with you to the Table. If you misunderstand fellowship, you will misunderstand the Table. To misunderstand the Table is to misuse the Table. And to misuse the Table is to run the risk of abusing the Table.

From this Scripture in 1 Corinthians, and from a few others, I want us to see what Christian fellowship really is. And side-by-side with this understanding, we will see what we are doing at the Lord's Table – our meal of fellowship.

## **I. We Partake of a Common Saviour**

**1 Corinthians 10:16-17** <sup>16</sup> *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?* <sup>17</sup> *For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*

Christians lift up a cup, and break bread and then ingest it, symbolising that they have together, all taken in Christ. They have at different times, in different places, through different circumstances all placed their faith in Christ. They have received Him.

**John 1:12** <sup>12</sup> *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:*

Having done so, they together share in Jesus Christ. This word in verse 16, *communion*, is the Greek word *koinonia*. It is not a mysterious word. It is not even strictly a religious word. It simply means sharing, commonly shared partaking. Surfers have fellowship. They have fellowship around and in surfing. Bird-watchers have fellowship. Bird-watching is what they hold in common, it is what brings them together. Stamp collectors have fellowship. They together partake in collecting stamps, and their shared interest is where their fellowship is. It is what they hold in common.

What do Christians have in common? What do we share together? What do we partake of together? Not church activities. Not an academic interest in theology. Not in humanitarian goals. We share together in nothing else except the most important Person in the Universe.

**1 John 1:3** <sup>3</sup> *that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*

The goal of Christ coming to earth was to turn rebels into worshippers. People who would together share in the fellowship that has always taken place within the Trinity.

**John 17:21** *"that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.*

Now I do not disparage your membership in the rock-climbing club, in the chess club, in the astronomy club, in the doily-appreciation society. But those items or interests when placed next to the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God, the Word, the one who spoke all things into being, the one in whom all truth, and goodness and beauty resides, the one from whom and through whom and to whom are all things, do they not pale in significance? And if the thing held in common is great, what ought to be the bond between those who share it?

If you dislike one the members of the bridge club, you can probably walk away without much lost sleep. But an argument with your parents or siblings or spouse is more serious. Why? Because the

bond is more significant. So then, what is our bond as Christians? How deep is it?

**1 Corinthians 12:13** <sup>13</sup> *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free -- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.*

To share Christ is to share the deepest commonality. The least saint has more claim on your affections than the greatest sinner. The greater you value Christ, the greater you will value those you share Christ with.

Christian fellowship is partaking of a common Saviour.

And here is why the Lord's Table is the best image of fellowship. Meals are places where we try to enjoy what we have in common, not what divides us. When you sit around the table, do you not try to talk about what you both know, and have both experienced, and encountered? How would the meal go if you kept bringing up subjects that you didn't know about, or didn't agree on? I suggest soon the only sound you'd hear would be chewing and swallowing. Meals are celebration of what we hold in common – family bonds, friendly bonds.

So as we gather around the Lord's Table, what is it that we share? The very elements shout loudly what we hold in common: Christ. Our crucified and risen Saviour – His body broken, His blood shed, so that we could live.

Why don't we partake at home? Why don't we supply everyone with their own communion kit? Because that would destroy the image of fellowship. Our text says, **“for we all partake of that one bread.”** We are deliberately saying: we together share Christ. He is what we hold in common. That's why we partake together, with each other. The Lord's Table is a meal of fellowship. Christian fellowship. We share a common Saviour. But those of us in Christ, share and partake of something else.

## II. We Partake of a Common Status

**Galatians 3:26** *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.* <sup>27</sup> *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.* <sup>28</sup> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Christians, once they are Christians share a common status, once we are in Christ. Our ethnic differences are not a barrier to this. Jews and Gentiles, black and white do not have different rights in Christ. We share the status of being in Christ.

Economic differences no longer separate us from one another. Slave nor free. Whether your income barely puts food on the Table, or whether you could stop working today and live easily till you die, your status as worker or employer, business owner or salaried worker does not give you a high or low status at God's Table, or separate you from these that you share Christ with. We share the status of being in Christ.

Cultural or educational differences do not form a barrier between Christians. **Colossians 3:11** *where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*

Barbarian or Scythian was a reference to those uneducated in the Greek or Latin language of the day, strangers to its art and philosophy and understanding. Scythians were rough, barbaric, warlike people from the north. Whether you have a Ph.D in Linguistics or Applied Calculus or whether you did not pass grade seven, whether you are a conductor of orchestras or a rough-around the edges man from the gangs, in Christ, these things don't matter.

Male nor female shows that the struggle between the sexes is not one that should take place in Christ. No spiritual privileges are reserved for one sex over another – all have equal access to Christ.

Now sharing the same status does not mean that our differences disappear, or no longer exist. We will still be rich or poor. We will still be husbands or wives. We will still have our home languages and our preferred foods. What it does mean is that being in Christ means these things do not separate us from each other. It is not that the distinctions are erased, or that they disappear. It is that they don't matter beneath the cross.

And so, when we sit around the Lord's Table, we confess that we share this status. There are no seating arrangements at the Lord's Table. No places of honour, no VIP or reserved seats. We sit down to eat with the people that we share a common status with.

It took the Jews a long time to understand this. Jews had no table fellowship with Gentiles. So how could you have Jew and Gentile in God's House, sitting down to one Table? Some answered that Gentiles ought to be circumcised. The Biblical answer was that those old distinctions no longer mattered.

Peter had a vision of animals on a sheet, and God told him not to call profane what God had cleansed. When did Peter come to apply this? When he was called to the house of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert.

**Acts 10:28** <sup>28</sup> *Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.*

Now in the church, Jews would have table fellowship with Gentiles. They would sit around one Table – the Lord's Table, and thereby confess that their new status, being in Christ, was much greater than their old – Jew and Gentile.

Around the Table, we share a common status.

The Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon, and went on to become Prime Minister, once was at his parish church to take communion. And as was the custom in his church, you would approach the Table, kneel down and receive the elements. But on that day, a very poor old man, went up at the same time, going up the opposite aisle, and ended up next to the great Duke of Wellington, and knelt down next to him. When people saw this, there were whisperings and gasps and tension. Someone got up, and touched the poor man on the shoulder, and whispered in his ear to move further away from the Duke, or to wait until the Duke had received his bread and wine.

But the Duke knew what was going on. And as the old man started to get up, the Duke grabbed his hand, and stopped him, and he said to the man in a soft but clear voice, "Do not move; we are equal here."

Why are we equal around the Table? Why are there no chief seats, such as the Pharisees loved, at the Lord's Table?

**Ephesians 2:14** *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, <sup>15</sup> having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.*

There are no chief seats because the cross has humbled us all. It has removed all boasting from all men. The cross took the Law away from the Jews, and took the wise philosophy away from the Greeks. All had to admit they missed it on their own works, on their own wisdom.

We share a common status – saved sinners.

Christian fellowship is partaking of a common Saviour. It is partaking of a common status. But the third aspect of fellowship is maybe the one we understand the least.

### III. We Partake of One Another

*<sup>17</sup> For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*

Here is a mingling of metaphors. Christ is the one whose body was broken for us, and we together partake of one loaf to symbolise that. But we in turn, are the one body of Christ, and in partaking of Him, we are reminded that we belong to each other. We partake of Christ, but there is now such an organic union between believer and Christ that you cannot partake of Christ without partaking of His people.

**Romans 12:4-5** *<sup>4</sup> For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.*

What does it mean that we partake of one another? It means that when God includes you in His body, He places you as one member of an intricately designed body. Without you, the body cannot function well. Without the body, you cannot function well. And since the body exists to commune with Christ, let's put it this way: you cannot know Christ without the body, and the body cannot know Christ without you.

**Ephesians 4:13-16** *<sup>13</sup> till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; <sup>14</sup> that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, <sup>15</sup> but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ -- <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*

Every Christian becomes a lens through which God can be seen. But God is so vast, so gloriously detailed and complex, that it takes hundreds, thousands, millions of lenses, over thousands of years to see Him perfectly. And we belong to each other in that each of us supplies some of that view of Christ which the others need. You cannot say, I have no need of him, nor can he say of you, I have no need of you.

That Christian you so struggle to even greet, that Christian you'd prefer didn't come here, what if God says "You need him to see Me"? You say you want to know me and see me? Well, I am not coming to you in a beautiful vision. I will show you something more of my self in that brother, in that sister. And if you want to see Me, you will see it in him. How would that affect your forgiveness, your patience, your attitude with that Christian? If he or she became indispensable to your own worship, how would it affect how you love, forbear, forgive, suffer long with him? Do you see why John says to us *If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?*

This is why you misunderstand the Table if you think you can tune out these people, and have your own private little glass, and private little bread. No, they are part of the bread. They are the one

bread and the one body. And you need them to see Christ. We belong to each other.

This is why Jesus commanded us, “*Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,* <sup>24</sup> *leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*” (**Matthew 5:23-24**)

Don't come to eat and enjoy Christ if you despise those He died for. Don't claim to enjoy His life through His blood if you despise those in whom He now lives.

One of the oldest Christian documents after the completion of the New Testament is the *Didache*. It is a simple and short manual for Christian living and church order. It was written in around the year 110. Listen to what the anonymous author says about the Lord's Table.

“On every Lord's Day—his special day<sup>527</sup>—come together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone at variance with his neighbor must not join you, until they are reconciled, lest your sacrifice be defiled.”

How do you know if you need to be reconciled? Is there someone you would refuse to have in your home around your table? If you could not abide that, then you misunderstand the Lord's Table. It's still a Table! It's still a meal! It's just He is the host, and we the guests.

If I need you, since I belong to you and you to me, then my pride must go out the door. More important than who is right and who is wrong is seeing and knowing Christ. And if God sovereignly placed you in my life, then I must kill my pride, forgive, forbear, and know you and be known by you.

The funny thing about partaking of one another is that it's like any appetite. Partake more of believers, and your desire for more grows. Partake less, and the appetite weakens. Christians who separate themselves from real, frequent enjoyment of other believers find their hearts cooling. The cooling soon turns to indifference – I don't need them. And the indifference eventually turns into scepticism, cynicism or even bitterness – look at these unfriendly Christians. The Christian who seeks out enjoyment of others finds his heart warming. The warmth turns to desire – I want to be around them. The desire turns to delight – I will find ways and means and situations to be with them. Like the early church who met daily, and had all things in common. If you share a common Saviour, and a common status, and belong to each others as part of knowing Christ, you'll want to be with one another.

I read of some ridiculous church splits. One church split over whether to take the offering before or after the sermon. Another church split over the pronunciation of the word 'hallelujah'. I thought as I read that, how would that be possible if a church was rightly using the Lord's Table? If at every celebration they saw in it three marks of Christian fellowship: we share a common Saviour – we partake of Him for our life. We share a common status, His cross has broken down every wall, we are one and equal before the cross, and we partake of each other. We are indispensable parts of a body that needs one another to know and show Christ. If that's what you bring to the Table, you are not going to let petty and trivial matters become big. You will dismiss them as insignificant. The significant matters, you will deal with in a biblical fashion – reconciliation, forgiveness and re-establishing a relationship.

Fellowship is not something we do. It is something we have, and express. We share Christ. We share salvation. We share each other.