

## “Where’s the Body?”

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1 Corinthians 11:23-29

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The year was 1933. The Great Depression was approaching its lowest point. The clouds of war were building over Europe with the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany. The world was gripped by fear – fear about money, fear about politics, fear about the future. In the face of worldwide fear, one pastor and his congregation decided to respond to fear with hope.

Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr was the pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. By 1933 he had been the pastor at Shadyside for twenty years and he was a man with great vision and insight. For example, Dr. Kerr was the first pastor to recognize the power of the new technology of radio and under his leadership Shadyside’s worship services were the first ever to be broadcast on the radio, on the world’s first commercially licensed radio station. His sermons were also the first ever to be broadcast to the Arctic in 1922 and to the Antarctic in 1929.

So in 1933, the stewardship committee of Shadyside decided to find a way to remind the world that God is God. But how could one congregation go about making a difference in the world? What they wanted was a way to bring together churches of every denomination, all over the world, to remind the churches and the world of our unity in Christ. And so they began what is known today as World Communion Sunday.

As we celebrate the Lord’s Supper this morning, we are joining thousands of congregations all over the world who are doing the same thing, recognizing and celebrating the fact that we are connected to each other in Christ.

So it seems rather ironic that instead of uniting us together, the Lord’s Supper is what divides many Christian churches. The issue is not whether to celebrate communion or even whether or not we call it a “sacrament.” Virtually

every Christian church includes the Lord’s Supper in some way. No, the breakdown comes when we try to understand exactly what is happening in the sacrament. In other words, what did Jesus really mean when he said, “this is my body.”

This morning, as we look at this passage from First Corinthians that deals with the Lord’s Supper, we are going to try to answer the question, “where’s the body?” However, if you were hoping to leave today with a clear explanation of the subtle, nuanced differences between the transubstantiation, consubstantiation, pneumatic and memorial understandings of the Eucharist, you will probably leave disappointed. Instead, I want us to look at four points from today’s passage – the *context*, the *command*, the *covenant*, and finally the *consequence*.

The first thing we need to know about this passage is the *context*. Why did the Apostle Paul even write this? In Paul’s time, Corinth was a large, cosmopolitan city. It was a Roman colony, the capitol of the region, and a large seaport. The city was a very wealthy one, with many upscale neighborhoods. The residents were primarily Greek and Roman but there were large populations of people from various parts of the world. So the people who became Christians and were part of that church didn’t have the Jewish background of the Christians in the eastern Mediterranean. So as problems arose Paul had to write letters to correct them.

Their celebration of the Lord’s Supper was no different. The practice in many of the churches was to come together to share a meal and worship together and as a part of that meal they would include the Lord’s Supper. This was the original potluck supper. The problem in Corinth was that in Corinth the people were bringing food only for themselves. The wealthier members brought elaborate meals while others went hungry. Paul tells them in verses 20 and 21,

“When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.<sup>21</sup> For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.” So Paul lays out what Jesus had taught him.

One other important point about the context of our passage – Paul wrote this letter some time between 53 and 55 A.D. That's only 20 years after Jesus ascended to Heaven, making this the earliest recorded account of the practice of the Lord's Supper in the churches at the time, and it had been around long enough to become corrupted. In other words, this has been an important sacrament since the very beginning of the Church. So that's our context.

The next thing I want us to see in this reading is the *command*. Paul's emphasis in describing the Lord's Supper is that it is the *Lord's* supper. Jesus is the one who has instituted this ritual, he's the one who invites us to participate, he's the one who has given us the pattern. Paul says in verse 23, “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.” Then in verse 24 and 25, after giving his disciples the bread and then the wine, Jesus says, “do this.” He is giving us a command to do it.

Jesus commands us to do this “in remembrance of me.” As Paul summarizes in verse 26, “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” As one commentator pointed out, Jesus is calling us to an involvement with the Supper that will take any focus off ourselves as we remember that our participation is done in remembrance of Christ and as an act of proclaiming his saving death and his return. In other words, Communion is not about me and Paul is making it clear that if I try to make it about me or what I want then I am participating in an unworthy manner, which is a bad thing. Instead, Communion is essentially missional. It calls us to a relationship with each other and with Jesus.

So Jesus commands us to participate in the Lord's Supper, but he also makes promises to us in the Supper. This is the *covenant*. In verse 24 Jesus says, “This is my body which is for you.” Then in verse 25 he says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” When he says that we're

reminded of the promise God made in Jeremiah 31 that we just heard a few moments ago. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

The promise of this covenant is to forgive us and in Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, we are forgiven. That's what it means to say we proclaim the Lord's death. When we come to the table we are proclaiming the forgiveness that comes through faith in Christ. So eating the bread and drinking the cup in an unworthy manner means denying Christ's work on the cross, in which case you are still guilty of your sin, thereby bringing judgment on yourself.

This brings us to my final point, the *consequence*. Paul tells us to examine ourselves before we eat and drink and to “discern the body.” This is one of those verses that is difficult to understand and going back to the original Greek doesn't make it any clearer. But we'll try anyway. There are several “layers” of meaning to this phrase, “to discern the body.” The first layer is, as we've seen, to know in faith that when we participate in Communion by eating the bread and drinking the juice that these things physically represent Christ offering his body and blood to us spiritually. In other words, when we eat the bread and drink the juice we really are receiving him.

But there's another layer of meaning here also. As I mentioned, we don't take the Lord's Supper by ourselves. It's an outward sign of our union with Christ and therefore our Co-union with all other Christians. That's why it's called Communion, which means “joined with.” We are joined with Christ and joined with each other. So to discern the body in the Lord's Supper is to see the reality of Christ in each member of the body, which is the Church. Paul makes this exact point in chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians. He says, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and

all the members of the body, though many, are one

body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”

So as we come to the table, remember Christ’s *command* to “do this in remembrance of me.” Remember his *covenant*, his promise that he loves you and forgives you. And remember the *consequence*, that together we are the body of Christ and that when we come to his banquet table we are to see him at work in each other. That’s a message the whole world still needs to hear.

*Amen*