

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 1, 2024

Bonding Time

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

“Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (v. 17). It can be harder to resonate with Paul’s statement when you’re holding your own personal prepackaged wafer and juice set. Thanks to Lifeway Christian Resources, we recently received our latest shipment, which should keep us supplied through the rest of this year. I looked up the product summary on Lifeway’s website. The bullet points are as follows: Prefilled, ready-to-serve communion cup with juice and soft wafer. No refrigeration needed. Easy access to elements. “OnePass” serving – Designed to perfectly fit in communion trays. The *Fellowship Cup*® is guaranteed to be fresh if used by date stamped on the box.¹

Somehow, I can see Paul with a puzzled look on his face, saying “What? I said one loaf.” I at least try to capture the emphasis by providing a single loaf here on our communion table on the first Sunday of the month. Thank you Giant Food in LaPlata for your assortment of rolls.

Centuries before Lifeway and Giant, the Lord’s Supper Committee at First Baptist Church of Corinth made sure the bread was ready. In their congregation, the debate wasn’t over whether to go with prepackaged, store bought, or homemade. The issue, from Paul’s perspective, was the other meals that some in the fellowship were attending when they weren’t at church.

Some of the Corinthians were participating in meals and festivities in the temples of pagan gods, just as they had done before they became Christians. The way they see it, this is just part of normal social life in their culture. Plus, they have knowledge that these pagan gods don’t really exist to begin with. Maybe these Corinthian Christians even think that having entered such a state of spiritual blessedness through baptism and their participation in the Lord’s Supper, they’re not vulnerable to the destructive influence of false deities. Whatever the details of their reasoning, these particular folks in the Corinthian church believe that they can just go about business as usual, ignoring what seem to them like minor religious regulations. To them, there’s nothing wrong with accepting an invitation to a meal at a pagan shrine.

But Paul pushes back against their way of thinking and behaving. He draws on the story of Israel to remind the Corinthians that when God’s people were in the wilderness they learned the hard way that God is a jealous God who condemns idol worship. The Corinthians should therefore learn from Israel’s experience and avoid participating in festivities at the temples of pagan gods. For by participating, they’re dabbling in idolatry and bringing God’s judgment upon themselves.

Rather than toy around with idolatry, the Corinthians should flee from it, says Paul. To make his case, Paul compares three different types of meals: the Lord’s Supper, Jewish meals in conjunction with sacrifice, and meals at the table of a pagan god. According to

Paul, all three meals have something in common. They all create and cultivate a relationship of fellowship between the participants and the deity they worship, as well as between the participants themselves. If that's the case, the Corinthians need to beware of participating in things that establish a bond between them and any other gods or powers. True, the gods themselves don't really exist, but the way Paul sees it, there are hostile spiritual forces, demonic powers associated with these pagan practices, powers that the Corinthians must avoid. So Paul brings his argument to a close: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (vv. 21-22).

God is so determined to have and uphold a relational bond with his people that he warns us about cultivating such a bond with other idols or powers in our lives. We have a word for this relational bond. It's called "fellowship." The word that often gets translated as "fellowship" appears in our Scripture passage. It's the Greek word *koinonia*. *Koinonia* was primarily about partnership. It was about sharing in a common enterprise. *Koinonia* was about interconnectedness and interdependence. It was about communion. So in our text, Paul refers to the Lord's Supper saying, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in (*koinonia*) the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in (*koinonia*) the body of Christ?" (vv.16-17).

When we share the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper, we're remembering, expressing, and cultivating the communion, the spiritual fellowship, that we have with Christ and with one another. It's not the only way we do so, but it is one of the most important ways we do so. This communion, this relational bond, is a gift that we easily take for granted. So it's good that we have a Scripture passage like today's text to help us return to fundamental questions like, What is Christian fellowship? What is it for? What does it do? Why do we need to practice it? Why do we need to cultivate it?

Above all, fellowship is about people living in right relationship with God and with one another through Christ. And the church is the community of people called together in Christ to do just that. Note the emphasis on how all this happens because of Christ. In other words, Christian fellowship isn't a human creation. We're here together in the body of Christ not because we all come from the same socioeconomic background, or have the same race or ethnicity, or share the same political affiliations and opinions, or even enjoy the same interests. We're together because we have the same Lord, and because we all stand in need of his saving grace. That's the source of our unity. That's the basis of our relationship with Christ and with each other.

Pastor and author A. W. Tozer wrote:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So, one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become "unity" conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.²

Tozer reminds us that the bond we have with one another, in worship, and in every other part of church life, isn't something of our own making. Fellowship is only possible because of God giving up his only Son for us, an act that calls for our complete love and allegiance. That's why the Lord's table is set for us again today.

It's a meal that we should eat together. In the midst of ongoing, centuries-old disputes about the nature and meaning of the Lord's Supper, Christians have consistently agreed that it's a sign and expression of our unity. As one person has put it, "It's important to note that the words etched on Communion tables ... say, do this, not debate this."³ And as we do this, we do it with one another, because coming into relationship with Christ automatically brings you into relationship with the rest of Christ's people. There is no such thing as being the church without getting bonded to other believers.

Pastor Mark Dever tells about a friend he had during graduate studies. They both attended the same church, which Dever eventually joined. His friend, however, never joined, and would usually slip into the service just in time for the sermon. When Dever asked him about his halfhearted attendance, he replied, "I don't really get anything out of the rest of the service." Then Dever asked him about the possibility of joining the church. The man looked somewhat surprised and responded, "Join the church? I honestly don't know why I would do that. I know what I'm here for, and those people would just slow me down."

According to Dever, his friend didn't say it with disdain. He had simply given some thought to what he was looking for in a church, and in this case it didn't involve the other members of the congregation. Instead, he was looking primarily for a place to be nourished with God's Word and to get spiritually recharged for the week. Yet his words still reverberated in Dever's head: ". . . those people would just slow me down." Though there were a number of things Dever wanted to say, all he said was, "But did you ever think that if you linked arms with those people, yes they may slow you down, but you may help to speed them up? Have you thought that might be a part of God's plan for them, and for you?"⁴

Though it's tempting to keep a safe distance from the church because it requires you to get deeply involved with real, live human beings, and all the joys and sorrows that come with that, remember that the church always has been and always will be a community where God continually works to bond our lives to Christ and to each other. Every church is involved in the work of weaving people's lives together for the glory of God. "We, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

I was once at a meeting where a fellow pastor spoke about overhearing a conversation between some prospective members of his church and another member who was accompanying them as they explored the possibility of joining the congregation. They were passing through the food and drink line at a church gathering when the new folks asked, "So then, what is fellowship?" And their guide answered, "Well, that's when we get together to eat and talk." My pastor friend said he just wanted to squeeze his coffee cup until it crushed. Why? Because yes, Christian fellowship does often involve food and conversation. But it's so much more. Christian fellowship is God's saving power uniting you and me to Christ and to one another. It's a relational bond that wouldn't exist without the cross, without the sacrifice of Christ. At the same time, what has Christ given us as the primary way of remembering his sacrifice? A meal. Food and drink. Bonding time.

The Fellowship Cup is actually a registered trademark of Lifeway. The name says more than they, or we, often realize. Christ died to make this fellowship possible. When we lose sight of that, we're more prone to wander into other temples where false gods and deceptive powers like self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, independence, wealth, power, or prestige try to claim our loyalty and determine our identity. But when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we remember that we belong to the Lord and to each other. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

¹ <https://www.lifeway.com/en/special-emphasis/fellowship-cup-prefilled-communion-cups> (August 28, 2024).

² A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (New York: Simon & Brown, 2018) 63.

³ John H. Armstrong, "Table Manners: Why WE Take Communion Every Week." *Christianity Today*. September 2014. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2014/09/table-manners-why-we-take-communion-every-week/> (August 28, 2024).

⁴ Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007) 33-34.