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THE LORD'S SUPPER

Those who visit our church will notice quickly an aspect of our meetings that one might call “non-typical.” We eat a full meal together every Sunday. This brief statement describes why we put so much emphasis on eating our Sunday meals together, and what those meals mean to us.

When we eat together on Sundays, it is not because our meeting just happens to coincide with a meal. We intentionally schedule our meeting around a meal (typically lunch or dinner). For Christians, eating a meal together during their regular weekly gathering is a way of participating in a special, meaningful time of fellowship with each other and with Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul refers to this weekly meal as “the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20).

Our meals involve many kinds of “potluck” food, and each member makes every effort to provide plenty to share with everyone else. But one part of the meal, though not as typical in our western society, is also provided due to its special significance for Christians: a loaf of bread and pitcher of grape juice (fruit of the vine or wine). Bread and wine, common elements of the Jewish Passover meal and of many Mediterranean meals, were assigned a special significance by Christ when He referred to them as representing His “body” and “blood” (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20). Because Christ did this, and because the early church seemed to follow this pattern by also assigning special significance to “the cup of blessing” and “the bread that we break” (1 Cor. 10:16), we do the same by including bread and grape juice in our meals. They serve as visible, tangible symbols of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross and of Him being spiritual food and drink for believers (John 6:26-35, 52-59; 1 Cor. 10:17). By eating this meal together with the church—the body of people sharing life together as those redeemed by Christ’s sacrificial death—we participate in fellowship with each other and with Christ Himself. Also in connection with the Lord’s Supper as a full, festive, fellowship meal, these elements encourage us as we look forward to His return and to the glorious wedding banquet all true believers will enjoy with Him at that time (Matt. 26:29; Luke 22:16; Rev. 19:9). By sitting around tables while sharing this meal with these symbolic elements each week in love and unity, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “Because there is one bread [i.e., Christ], we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Paul was not physically with the Corinthians when he wrote this (he was writing from Ephesus), yet he seemingly included himself and all other true believers as part of the “many” who are “one body” partaking of “the one bread.” Because of this, and because there are examples in the New Testament of visiting Christians being included in the fellowship of a local church (e.g., Acts 20:1-12; Rom. 16:1-2), we welcome all who are part of the body of Christ (i.e., all true believers) to eat the Lord’s Supper with us when visiting our church.

Certainly there will often be non-Christians in our meetings (e.g., unconverted children of members, guests who are interested in learning about Christ, etc.). They too are welcome to eat with us. However, due to the special significance of the symbolic loaf of bread and the special cup we share as believers, we ask that non-Christians refrain from participating in this aspect of the meal. We appreciate everyone's understanding and cooperation here, because the precious meaning of these symbols can easily become blurred, confusing or even irrelevant if no distinction is made.

One category of person who is not welcome to partake of our meal is the person who is currently under church discipline, having been expelled from any true Christian fellowship due to gross or habitual sins or heretical beliefs. We are not permitted to have fellowship with such "so-called Christians" because their lifestyles and/or beliefs make them indistinguishable from the rest of the world or from those adhering to non-Christian religious groups. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5, we are "not even to eat with such a one" (v. 11). Professing Christians in this category will not merely be excluded from sharing the bread and the cup or from eating the Lord's Supper with us. They will not be welcome to attend our meetings.

One final admonition needs to be given concerning participation in the Lord's Supper. It relates to professing Christians who are behaving in ways that reveal, or could lead to, divisions in the church. Many of the Corinthian Christians were maintaining distinctions between themselves and other believers. These divisions likely involved separations due to social status or levels of income. Because they were failing to treat all who were in Christ as equals, the meal they were eating when they came together as a church was anything but "eaten together." Instead, they magnified their separation by not welcoming each other through sharing their food and fellowshiping as one body. They were all in the same place, thus giving the appearance of being one body, but in reality they were divided rather than unified.

In addressing these misbehaving believers, Paul issues a strong rebuke (1 Cor. 11:17-22), followed by this warning: "Whoever therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged." (1 Cor. 11:27-31)

Paul's warning is strong: those who give the appearance of being a part of the body by coming together and eating this meal, but who are in truth causing or promoting division in the church through their selfish actions, are exposing themselves to God's judgment. They are eating "in an unworthy manner," which means in a manner that does not correspond to the sacrificial nature of Christ's death, which Paul had just highlighted. His warning was not intended to turn this festive, fellowship meal into a somber time of self-examination as all present hung their heads, trying to think of any unconfessed sins or personal shortcomings. It was rather a warning for self-seeking

individuals or groups of believers (i.e., cliques) not to “despise the church of God” (11:22) by treating themselves as more important than others. God will judge such people, possibly even through sickness or death! (1 Cor. 11:29-31).

In summary, the Lord’s Supper is a full, fellowship meal that Christians share together when they gather for their weekly meeting. The meal includes the commemorative elements of bread and grape juice, which represent the body and blood of Christ. When Christ Fellowship gathers for weekly meetings, all who are present, and who are true followers of Jesus Christ, are welcome to participate fully. Non-Christians who are interested in learning about Christ are welcome to attend and eat with us as observers, though we ask them to refrain from partaking of the symbolic elements of bread and grape juice. Professing Christians who are thinking or behaving in ways that would tend to produce or promote division in the church are warned to examine themselves and repent before God (even, if necessary, making amends with an offended brother or sister at that very moment), and then to partake humbly and joyfully as true members of the body of Christ.

We invite anyone who reads this article and is interested to know more about what it means to be a true Christian to contact one of our members or elders.

****We have slightly modified this statement which was created by the elders of ChristFellowshipKC.org.*