

# Multiplying House Churches

Lesson 2: Early church gatherings and practices:

## *The Lord's Supper*



*Fractio Panis* ("Breaking of Bread"), Priscilla Catacomb, Rome, early 2<sup>nd</sup> century

Reread Acts 2:42-47. Take a minute to discuss what you learned in Lesson 1. What impacted you the most?

In Lesson 1, we learned how early church was never defined by place or by a particular event. Church was a lifestyle that developed out of genuine love for Jesus and for one another. Out of this love, the church met together at various times and places to remain devoted to knowing and obeying the apostles' teachings, breaking bread, eating together, praying, communing with the Holy Spirit, spreading the message, witnessing and performing miracles, and simply being a family that deeply loved and cared for one another. They longed to be together to share what God was doing in their lives and to express their love for Jesus and each other! Church didn't evolve because of structure, but structure took shape as the followers met to follow Jesus together. This study will examine some of the structures and practices of the early church that did develop, as each member contributed to the gatherings.

## The Lord's Supper

Aside from Acts 2:38-42, we can also examine Paul's epistles to gain some understanding of how church meetings [Figure 1<sup>1</sup>] were conducted and how the church functioned at large:

### I Corinthians 11:17-34

<sup>17</sup>In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good... <sup>18</sup>I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it... <sup>20</sup>So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, <sup>21</sup>for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry, and another gets drunk...

<sup>23</sup>For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup>and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup>In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup>For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

<sup>27</sup>So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup>Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. <sup>29</sup>For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. <sup>30</sup>That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. <sup>31</sup>But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. <sup>32</sup>Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. <sup>33</sup>So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.

What is this practice describing and how is it described? Where does this practice come from?

This passage describes what is today called the Lord's Supper, or Communion. Paul describes it as a time when the believers meet to have a meal together that included wine and bread. The followers would eat bread and drink wine to remember the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for our sins. The practice comes from a passage in Luke 22 where Jesus asks his followers to have this supper together to remember him and all that he did for them.

What problems were occurring during this practice? What were the roots of those problems? (vv. 17-21).

Based on this passage, describe what you think this gathering should have looked like.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fractio Panis*. Original image by Leinad-Z-commonswiki. Uploaded by Kim Martins, published on 01 April 2019. Public Domain without restrictions. See also <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/10350/fractio-panis-fresco-rome/>.

The problem in the Corinthian church is that there are divisions among the followers. Some people are eating all the food, others are getting drunk on the wine, and still others are eating all by themselves and not trying to build relationships with the other believers. The main root of this problem is that the members were not addressing divisions with each other. The roots may have been conflict avoiding, people pleasing, selfishness, or simply unwillingness to address sin in their own lives and the lives of each other. The purpose of the time was to come together as the body of Christ over a meal, out of sincere love for one another and Jesus to honor the Lord's sacrifice and to reflect on their personal relationships with Jesus and each other.

When taking the Lord's Supper, Paul instructs the followers to practice self-examination. Reread vv. 27-32. How does Paul describe this practice?

Paul instructs the followers to "examine" themselves during this time and "discern" the body of Christ. The word "discern" [Gk: diakrinó] means to judge.<sup>2</sup> So, which body should we judge? Certainly, not Jesus's body! We are to judge ourselves, as our relationship with Jesus and with the body of Christ. We see this more clearly in verses 31-32 where Paul says, "<sup>31</sup> But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. <sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world." In the second letter of Corinthians, Paul again tells the church to "examine" and "test" themselves to see if they are "in the faith" (13:5, NIV). He goes on to urge these followers to do what is right out of a sincere heart to follow Christ. As each of us take responsibility for our own sins, lives, attitudes, actions, and relationships, we grow and we stay alive in Christ, instead of falling asleep. This is God's plan for personal discipleship – teaching and training ourselves to follow Jesus well – over and above others having to push us or coerce us to honor Jesus with our lives. In II Corinthians 13, Paul says that if each person tests himself in this way, then he as a leader will not have to come and exercise strong spiritual discipline over the members of the church, which would be discouraging for everyone. Paul would rather spend time with his brothers and sisters encouraging them and building them up, which would in turn encourage him, rather than challenging them on things that they already know they need to do (13:10).

During the Lord's Supper, what specific things do you think we should examine in ourselves? Can you think of some verses to guide us during this time?

Based on this passage about the Lord's Supper, we might examine our personal commitment and relationship with Jesus. Are we spending time with him and staying connected to his Word and the Holy Spirit in prayer? Are we divided from our brothers and sisters in Christ? Is there unforgiveness or resentment? Have we pulled away from someone because they offended us? Is there sin in our lives or in the lives of a brother or sister that we are unwilling to confess or address? During this time of communion, we can meditate on passages about relationships, sin, and fruits of the Spirit to check ourselves, such as Galatians 5:13-26 or Ephesians 5. There are many passages we can use to help challenge ourselves to follow Christ more closely.

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<sup>2</sup> "1252, diakrinó," Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database, 2011, BibleSoft, <https://biblehub.com/greek/1252.htm>.

Why do you think this practice is important, and how might it help with problems in the church?

Paul says that if we follow this practice regularly then we will not be weak and sick and divided in our relationships. We would even avoid being condemned with the world. Imagine if every member of the church regularly resolved sin in their lives, apologized to others for the way they hurt them, resolved issues in their heart, confessed their own sins to the Lord and to each other, and recommitted themselves regularly to their personal walk with Jesus and with the believers in their church. What a happy, unified, and joyful place house church would be! Yet, if we neglect this practice of remembering the loving sacrifice of Jesus and fail to examine ourselves, then we risk being judged by Jesus in the same way he will judge the world. Why? Because we are not truly following Jesus but following the world in our hearts and in the life that we live (vv. 30-32).

To ensure that we stay fresh on our relationship with Jesus and each other, how often do you think we should practice the Lord's Supper in this way? Can you think of any verses to guide you?

While Jesus never tells us how often we should take the Lord's Supper together, we learn in Acts 2:42-46 that the early church was devoted to the breaking of bread as a community and that they also broke bread together in their own homes. Later in Acts 20:7, we see the early believers coming together at the beginning of every week to break bread as a body. So, we can gain some idea of God's heart about the Lord's Supper from these verses.

By the early second century, we learn in an historical account of a Roman governor in Asia Minor, Pliny the Younger (112 C.E.), that because of persecution, Christians were meeting in secret places to eat, worship, and celebrate the Lord's Supper, just as we see in I Corinthians 11. In an ancient fresco found in a Roman catacomb, the *Fractio Panis*, or *Breaking of Bread*, dated near the time of Pliny's account, we also see men and one woman together partaking in a simple meal of fish, bread, and wine. In a letter to emperor Trajan, Pliny uncovers that during their secret meetings, believers also sang songs to Jesus, vowed not to sin, steal, commit adultery, or deny their faith, and promised to attend the next meeting. From this letter, we see how the believers were examining themselves and their devotion to Jesus and to each other. To the Roman pagans, these people were the only true Christians (Pliny's Letter to Trajan).

### Further discussion:

1. Take a minute to read Galatians 5:13-26. Take a few minutes of silence to remember Jesus and what he did for you personally on the cross. Then examine yourself as you meditate on the passage. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind anything the Lord wants you to see.
2. When you have finished this time, take the Lord's Supper as Paul instructs. If you feel you are not ready to participate in this way, then please use this time for quiet meditation.
3. Break into small groups to share what the cross means to you and what you see in yourself that the scriptures and Holy Spirit revealed to you, if you feel ready to share. Talk about what steps you will take this week to grow in following Jesus. Encourage one another over whatever is shared and pray for each other's strength and ability to obey.