THE LORD’S SUPPER – Session Five

## Introduction

[RECORD] The summer has well and truly arrived, and with it quite possibly my favourite sporting occasion of the year. The Lions tour was fantastic, with an epic conclusion yesterday, but I still think my favourite annual sporting occasion is the Tour de France. This year over a period of 23 days, only two of which the riders will have off, the Peloton of 198 riders will cover 2,200 miles, riding up to five and a half hours every day. Across Europe, through Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, covering 5 different mountain ranges, including the Alps and the Pyrenees, finishing in Paris on the Champs-Elysees. This has been happening every year for over 100 years and is perhaps the most sought after prize in endurance sport.

During a period in university I got quite into cycling – I still have the road bike, and the lycra! If I was to stand up here today and tell you all about cycling I could take a number of different approaches. I could tell you about the history of the bicycle – how started with a German contraption called the running machine, morphing into the well-known penny farthing and finally arriving at the carbon-fibre aero-dynamic machines we have today. I could tell you about how to ride a bike, putting your feet on the pedals, changing gears at the correct time depending on the terrain. Or how to fix a bike, fix a delinked chain, change a broken spoke or repair a puncture.

I could do all that without telling you probably the most important thing about a bike. The central point about cycling, the principle by which a bike operates. What is this underlying principle? Well it is the transformation of circular motion to linear motion. The bicycle, and everything about it, was created and developed to provide transportation by means of transforming circular motion into linear motion. The creator asked himself how can I create a machine that will transfer what I do with my legs into a set of wheels. That is the underlying principle behind the bicycle.

This is the last week in our series on the Lord’s Supper, and over the previous four weeks we have looked at all kinds of things. The history and development of the Lord’s supper, how to practice the Lord’s Supper and above all the problems that can occur at the Lord’s Supper. Provision, Practice and Problem – we have spent time dealing with each of them, if not from Acts and the Gospels, from 1 Corinthians 11. Now we finish by looking at the **Principle of the Lord’s Supper**. The central truth of the Lord’s Supper, the whole point of it. Today we are going to pull back the physical realities of the Lord’s Supper and see the spiritual realities. The principle, the mechanical workings right at the heart of the Lord’s Supper.

I believe that we will see that – ‘*The Lord’s Supper is the gathering of believers to break bread together. In partaking of the bread and the cup they have fellowship with Christ and one another, forming one body.*’

We shall see this from our passage today, 1 Corinthians 10:14-22. The Lord’s Supper is explicitly dealt with in verses 16 and 17, but we shall read the wider paragraph in order to ensure we understand the context, frame the verses correctly.

[READ 1 CORINTHIANS 10:14-22]

THe Principle of the Lord’s Supper

As we come into the passage now, I want to give credit where credit is due and thank David for his help in wrestling through this passage. Just under a year ago we had a number of long discussions, naturally involving lots of heat both in the food we ate those Friday lunchtimes and the debates we had. The position I am arguing for today is not where I naturally fell, instead it has been a result of David asking me questions that I could not answer, even if at the time I pretended to. So thanks must go to David, a more than able sparring partner. However, with credit, also comes responsibility, for if you disagree with me you really have David to blame and should take it up with him!

*Passage*

The passage read is the conclusion of what has been a long discussion for Paul on the freedom of the Corinthians to eat food that has been offered to idols. The discussion began at the start of Chapter 8, ‘Now concerning food offered to idols…’. The church at Corinth had asked Paul whether they were permitted to eat the food that had been sacrificed and offered to the God’s in the numerous temples across Corinth. For two and a half chapters, Paul reasons through this problem, reasoning that for us is perhaps less important for the conclusion he reaches and more useful in the principles he touches on and deploys to formulate an answer. He covers issues such as Christian freedom, focus, firmness and forbearance and in 10:14 arrives at the command that answers the Corinthian’s question. ‘Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.’ As one commentator comments, Paul commands them to treat idolatry, and the meat that is connected to it, like radioactive waste. They should bolt immediately from the area in order to avoid contamination and certain death!

This is the purpose of the paragraph, commanding the Corinthians to flee from idolatry. But Paul doesn’t just command, but spends the rest of the paragraph convincing them. Verse 15, he tells them that they are sensible enough to listen to his reason and understand why he would command them to flee idolatry. The reason for his command is most clearly summarised from verse 20, ‘I do not want you to be participants with demons.’ Paul wants them to flee idolatry because to be involved in it is to participate with demons.

So far so good. But what has this to do with the Lord’s Supper? Well in verses 16-17 Paul uses the Lord’s Supper as an example, or perhaps more accurately as a comparison. He argues that partaking of the Lord’s Supper is incompatible with partaking in idol sacrifices as one involves participation with Christ’s body and blood and the other participation with demons. And as he concludes in verse 21, ‘You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.’ Participation in one is incompatible with participation in the other, therefore flee idolatry and, by implication, continue with Christ.

In using the Lord’s Supper in the argument, he reveals the principle behind it. Garland states that ‘Paul develops the theological significance of participating in the Lord’s Supper’. What is the theological significance of participating in the Lord’s Supper? What is the principle behind it all? Paul says it is the **Principle of Participation.**

*Participation*

Participation, the idea not only dominates the paragraph, but also verses 16-17. ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.’

The principle of participation is there both in the use of the word, ‘*koinonia*’ in relation to the body and blood of Christ, and the whole idea of many becoming one and sharing, participating, partaking of the one bread.

The Principle of Participation. The word could also be translated communion, fellowship, sharing. The idea is regularly used throughout the Bible in order to describe the relationship between two or more people. They are in participation, fellowship, communion with one another.

We need to make sure that in our day of fleeting relationships and loose connections, where relational intimacy is rare, that we get the full weight of what is meant. It isn’t just a connection, it’s communion. It’s not just have something in common, but being in union. It is fellowship, not just friendship.

What do I mean. Well, we could take any number of examples. You could think of JRR Tolken’s The Fellowship of the Ring. 9 individuals, 4 hobbits, two men, a wizard, an elf and a dwarf, all coming together to participate in a mission. They commit to achieve this mission alongside one another, do all they could to complete it, lay down their lives for it if necessary. They weren’t going on a holiday to Mordor, see how far they get together, what they feel like doing at various points on the way. Absolute commitment to the mission and one another.

Best example would be an economic one. Indeed, the word is loaded with economic connotations and it was ordinarily used in that way. Think of the difference between a shareholder and an employee. Or perhaps even better, in a law firm like where I work, between a partner and employee. There are some similarities: we both work in offices, serve clients, have relationship with others members of the team and firm. But ultimately, it is the names of all the partners that is on the bottom of the letterhead. They aren’t just an employee of the law firm, they are a partner in it, a part of it, a member of the body that is the firm. They and all the other partners combine together to make us the firm. They are partners with one another, participating with one another. If the firm has a good of results, I’m pleased. I might get a pay rise. But the partners, they are thrilled because they share in all of the profit with the other partners. If the firm has a bad year, I’m maybe worried, a few bad years in a row and they might start cutting jobs. The partners, they are devastated. The debts of this firm are their personal debts. Their homes and possessions can all be put and risk if the firm goes under. They have a stake in the success and are on the hook for the risks. They are partners with each other, participating. I’m just employed.

The economic example is the perfect example, for that is how Luke uses the word in Luke 5:10. After the miracle of Simon Peter’s full catch, Luke says that ‘he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.’ Partners, again koinonia, John, James and Peter were participating in a fishing business together. If the business went well they benefitted, if it didn’t, they bore the cost. They were working together for a greater purpose, stakeholders in a joint group. The principle of Participation.

How is this principle of participation manifest itself at the Lord’s Supper, well quite simply Paul says that at the Lord’s Supper we are in participation with Christ and one another. There are two relationship in view in these verses, the participation, fellowship, communion, is taking place on two planes. Christ in verse 16 and one another in verse 17. That is on the vertical plane, Chirst. On the horizontal plane, one another. At the Lord’s Supper we have fellowship with both Christ and other Christians. Let’s look briefly at both of these in order to understand what is happening.

## Communion with Christ

Taking each emblem in turn, Paul tells us that partaking of both the cup and the bread in the Lord’s Supper involves participation in what those emblems represent, the body and blood of Christ. The focus is undoubtedly on partaking in the Lord’s Supper – it is the cup that we bless and the bread that we break. Later, in verse 21, Paul describes it as the table of the Lord.

Partaking of the Lord’s Supper means participating the body and blood of Christ. That is fellowship, communion, sharing in. The idea is one that is central to the New Testament, pivotal in our salvation. The fact that we are united to Christ. To his body and blood. ‘We have been united to him in a death like his…‘ (Romans 6:5). ‘You also have died to the law through the body of Christ…’ (Romans 7:4). ‘For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end’ (Hebrews 3:14). We, as Christians, are sharers in Christ, united to him, participants in his death and life. All the benefits of the sufferings of his body and the covenant in his blood are ours. Our life is caught up in his, we are describe and being with Christ, in Christ and even Christ being in us. Participation, sharing in, Christ.

*Timing*

Maybe you are thinking, well that’s all very good Alex. But the problem is that all you are talking about, being united to Christ, participating in his body and blood, that all occurs at the point of justification. When we become Christians, when through faith we are united to him and share in his death and life. If you aren’t thinking that, you should be. If we are already participants with Christ, in what sense is it that partaking of the bread and cup participation in Christ. Is it, like Catholics would say, the way in which we become participants with Christ? In that the Mass is communicating grace to us, making us sharers in Christ’s body, atoning for our sins, because it is the actual body and blood and Christ? Perhaps we should go back to our example.

Peter, John and James get together and decide to go into partnership together to fish. In those days I doubt they would have a written contract, but they almost certainly would have had a verbal agreement. From the moment they come to that agreement, that verbal contract they are partners. If it was written, they would be able to point to it and say, look see it says here we are partners. Immediately from signing the contract they would step into both the risks and rewards of being participation with each other. Immediately all money will be split, catches spread around, they would be able to call each other for help. Partners. But each morning they get up at 4am, creep out of the house, walk down to the beach, drag their little boats into the water, set sail together and head off into the middle of the sea of Galilee, surely you would say that they are partnering with one another. That they are participating, sharing. In some sense they are no more partners at 2am when they are fast asleep than at 4am when they are dragging each other’s boats down the beach. But in another sense, it’s only when they are dragging the boats down the beach they are actually actively partnering with one another.

When trusted in Christ for salvation, we became sharers in him. The moment we became Christians, we were participating in the body and blood of Christ through faith. And yet, in one sense, partaking of the Lord’s Supper is the active, actual, outflow of that. By faith we come together and believe in him, trust in him, are united and participate in him. In one sense we are just as much Christians as we were in the car on the way to the Lord’s Supper. But in another, we are exercising our faith in an particular, active instance. We became Christians then, and now we are being Christians. Doing what Christians do. In theology it is described as a distinction between union and communion. The legal status of being united to Christ. The real relationship aspect of communing with Christ. Just as I am a husband 24/7, but am being a husband when I do the things husband should do. We are in union with Christ, and when we come together we have communion with him.

*Sunday morning workout*

As you come here on a Sunday morning for the Lord’s Supper, you are walking down that breach, grabbing the boat of your faith and once again launching out in trusting and believing in Christ. It is the exercise of your faith, the exercise of being what you are already, a participant in Christ’s body and blood.

When we come here to celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, it isn’t just an intellectual time of think thoughts together. It is a time to worship Christ. To continue and affirm our trust and faith in him. To remember his death and continue to rely on it for our salvation. I’m not sure if you realise but on Sunday morning at 1030 you have an exercise class here at BGH, a spiritual workout, where you exercise your faith, where you continue to grow in that faith and trust, where you fight back the encroaching unbelief and allow yourself to be conformed into the image of the one you worship.

In 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, Paul declares that ‘we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another…though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day…as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.’ When you sit in the morning or evening and study God’s word, when you praying to him, when you are relaying on him in a tough situation or conversation and when you gather with his people and set the Lord before you in worship and wonder on a Sunday morning. When you remember what he accomplished and proclaim what he has done. When using your eye of faith to behold the glory of the Lord you are being transformed. ‘Changed from glory, into glory, til in heaven we take our place, til we set our crowns before him, lost in wonder love and praise.’

Sunday morning at 1030, that’s when we commune with Christ here at BGH, through the bread and the cup, in exercising the eyes of faith and challenging our hearts to worship, we are slowly all being transformed together.

**Fellowship with each other**

That’s the vertical, a participation in Christ’s body and blood. What about the horizontal? Well, Paul take that up in verse 17. ‘Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’. Now is should be admitted that the verse doesn’t actually say that in partaking of the one bread we have participation with one another – but in the context of the paragraph (given the principle of participation Paul is arguing for) that is clear. Indeed, looking not only at the context but also the content of the verse, being that many are considered one, demonstrates the nature of that participation among the many.

The verse is structure with a central statement, ‘we who are many are one body’, supported by a statement either side, ‘because there is one bread’ and ‘for we all partake of the one bread’. Straightened out into one continuous sentence – ‘*We who are many are one body because there is one bread which we all partake of.*’ It carries the sense of unity, many being included within one body shown by them physically taking a part of the one loaf. It also, particularly in the context, focuses on exclusivity, there is one bread, membership of this body is incompatible with participation in others, for example the table and cup of demons!

Therefore, in the Lord’s supper we are participating, partnering, sharing, fellowshipping, with both Christ and other Christians. Vertical and horizontal. The paragraph mostly leaves the horizontal behind in the rest of the argument, but Paul takes the opportunity to make the point nonetheless. A point that of course has clear implications for us, horizontally, as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper

*Principle*

The clear implication of the verse is this: **partaking in the Lord’s Supper is participating in the gathered body**.

I say gathered body as opposed to the ungathered body. I.e. when I used to read this verse I used to see it as saying that through the Lord’s Supper all Christians can express their membership in the universal body of Christ together. From that you get the idea that the Lord’s Supper is the expression of the unity of the universal body of Christ. Christians everywhere meeting in different churches all united together. It is upon that ground that people are then upset, opposed, to restricting the table. The argument is beautifully simply – all those that Christ has welcomed, we should welcome. If we are going to spend eternity with them in Heaven, can we not share the bread and cup with them now?

However, the principle that such arguments are founded upon is not found in the verse. While we acknowledge the existence of the body of the universal church – all Christians everywhere – from 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, nowhere is the Lord’s Supper linked to the universal body in the Bible. In fact, in each case, the Lord’s Supper is linked to a local group. It is a local group of Christians coming together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Here, Paul specifically says that it is those who have partaken of the one loaf who are the one body. Who is it that took of the one loaf in Corinth? Well from Chapter 11 we see it was those that gathered to that locality to celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. The Lord’s Supper is an expression of unity of a gathered body, not the universal body.

There a number of other interpretive tools you could try to argue that this is fact the universal body – but ultimately you can’t change the text. As David would say to me again and again – that’s not what the text says. The text plainly states that **partaking in the Lord’s Supper is participating in the gathered body**. And nowhere in the New Testament seems to indicate anything that is contrary to this.

Jamieson summarises the principle by stating that ‘The Lord’s supper marks off an entire group of Christians as one body, drawing a line between them and the world…the moment when a group of Christians become one body. The Lord’s Supper makes many one’. Gordon Fee, ‘It is the common sharing in the Lord’s Supper that binds them together as a unique community’. But perhaps it is unsurprisingly most clearly expressed by John Owen, a Non-conformist, a Congregationalist, the giant of the Puritans, unquestionably the greatest theologian that this country has ever produced, if not the greatest that any country has ever produced. When asked by his brothers and sisters whether when visiting an Anglican church whether they should partake in the Lord’s Supper, he would reply stating that to do so would be result in ‘a spiritual incorporation with those or that church…wherein they do so communicate’.

That breaking bread with a group of Christians results in ‘spiritual incorporation into that body’. Going back to the exercise theme – we should understand that **Breaking Bread is Body Building**.

**Conclusion**

There a numerous things we could spend time looking at now together – the history of what the early brethren and then open and exclusives did. Whether the Lord’s Supper creates or simply displays the body. What this means for us when we visit other churches (you will note that I believe that it means don’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper anywhere where you would be unable to become a ‘member’ of that local church). I’m sure we might deal with some of them on Tuesday night.

However, as we finish, I just want to sketch out what this horizontal principle means for our life together at BGH. Ultimately, it is the Scriptural basis upon which our reception policy is built. You can argue the need to fence the table (i.e. allow some partake in the Lord’s Supper and others not to), from all kinds of pragmatic angles, but ultimately when it comes to Scriptural basis for what we do – this is it. If anybody asks you about our reception policy, this is where you take them. You show them that **partaking in the Lord’s Supper is participating in the gathered body.**

I used to think that there were two types of people at the Lord’s Supper, those who were members of the body that gathered in that place. And then those that were not part of that body, they were just visitors there for a day or a week, and they were celebrating as they would do if there were back in their own local churches. But now I can see there is only one kind of person who takes the bread and cup, those who are participants in the gathered body. For because you partake of the one bread you are part of the same gathered body as all those other partakers. Therefore, when people gather to break bread on a Sunday morning, they must not only be seeking to participate in Christ body and blood, but in the gathered body around them. And that means that what they believe about that body is massively important.

People must not only be happy share in Christ on a Sunday morning, they must also be willing to share in our body. They may only want fellowship with Christ, but because of what the Lord’s Supper is, they are going to have to accept us as well. Imagine being Peter and getting up at 4am with John and James, dragging the boat down the beach only to have them question why you are getting a boat when they thought that they had agreed to partner together as farmers with you. Or members of the Fellowship all setting off in different directions from Rivendell! If you have radically different understandings of the nature of the partnership, the fellowship, you are not in agreement on the purpose and practices of the group , you aren’t really partnering with each other!

What you believe about the partnership is important. What you believe about the body you are incorporating into really does matter. That’s why, in the list of distinctive doctrines in the reception policy and this series, all you will find is the principles and practices of the local church. These are the things we have come together to participate in and practice. Mike cannot decide that actually he wants Jasper, Eve and Malika baptised. Martina can’t decide that she is going to become an elder. Joe can’t decide that he doesn’t believe in elders and so won’t submit to them (though he maybe can if Martina makes herself an elder). Silvia can’t decide that she is going to bring in incense next week and swing it about. What we believe about what the nature and practices of this body is massively important. If we aren’t participating in the same kind of body, if we don’t have a common understanding, we aren’t really partnering with one another.

That’s why to become a member of the fellowship here, we are asking people to ensure that they are willing to practice and participate in the principle and practices of the local church that we believe are found in the Bible. And that’s why to partake of the Lord’s Supper we ask the same, for to partake of the Lord’s Supper is to participate in the body. It is a spiritual incorporation, where the many become one.

The Principle of the Lord’s Supper, what is at the very core of what we do here on a Sunday morning? It is the Principle of Participation. We are participating in, partnering with Christ and one another, forming one body. ‘*The Lord’s Supper is the gathering of believers to break bread together. In partaking of the bread and the cup they have fellowship with Christ and one another, forming one body.*’

ANOUNCEMENT – End, David, policy