Who should come to The Supper?

Text: 1 Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Psalm 119:9-16; 1 Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 307, 73c, 103, 310, 529

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD30)

**Theme:** Who should be admitted to Lord’s Supper?

**Proposition:** The Biblical answer necessitates balancing various Scriptural principles

**Introduction**

We invite anybody and everybody to come and worship with us on the Lord’s Day: whether they believe in Christ as their Lord and Saviour or not, whether they are seeking to live a godly life or not, whether they are a member of this church or another church or not. We strive to show no partiality, favouring one person over another (ref. James 2: 1-13), but we welcome all to come and hear the gospel. Why? Because ‘*it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*’ (Rom 1:16).

However, we **do not** invite everyone to come to the Lord’s Supper table. Why is that? Because the Word of God reveals that participation in this holy supper is **not** for everyone. We see this from our texts in 1 Corinthians 10:16-22 and 11:23-34 which are reflected in the Heidelberg Catechism Q&As 81&82. In particular, here are some questions that may come to mind, and that this sermon seeks to answer from Scripture.

* Does ongoing ungodly behaviour, as a result of unrepentant sin, have a bearing on whether a person should partake of Lord’s Supper?
* Is public profession of faith important before a person should partake of Lord’s Supper?
* Is Lord’s Supper for the individual believer or for the whole body of Christ? Or both? If both, what does this mean for admitting visitors/guests at Lord’s Supper?
* Should visitors to the local church be able to take part in Lord’s Supper? If so, should all, or only some. If some, on what basis?
* What is our practice for admitting people to the Lord’s Supper here {in the Reformed Church of Christchurch}?

Like the psalmist who delights in the way of the Lord’s testimonies as much as in all riches (Psalm 119:14) we will gain insight when we meditate on the Lord’s precepts and fix our eyes on His ways (v15). There are the three points in this sermon:

1. Member and body
2. Confession and conduct
3. Open and closed
4. **Member and Body**

Think about this truth about the celebration of Lord’s Supper. The same piece of broken bread does not enter more than one stomach. The same molecules of liquid wine do not get absorbed into more than one human body. Lord’s Supper is an **individual** communion with the Lord. Each member of the body of Christ who partakes does so separately. There is a very intimate, personal, individual aspect to the celebration of Lord’s Supper. As we sit around the table, many pray silently, and we each remember the death of our Lord as individual believers. By faith, each of us believes that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our own individual sins.

Our personal faith is nourished and refreshed through participation in the sacrament (ref. HCLD28A75). Our individual, ‘vertical’ relationship with God is strengthened. There is an individual call to self-evaluation: *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup*” *(1 Cor 11:28).* The Scriptures clearly reveal that Lord’s Supper relates to the individual Christian. But this is not the whole truth – we must consider the whole counsel of God.

Lord’s Supper also portrays the ‘horizonal’ relationship that believers have with each other in Christ. The church body joins together to celebrate Lord’s Supper: “*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*” (1 Cor 10:16-17). The Greek word translated ‘participation’ here is ‘koinonia’ – also rendered in English versions of the Bible as ‘communion’, ‘sharing’ or ‘fellowship’. Koinonia means ‘*that which is in common*’ and describes a ‘*close association involving mutual interests which are actively shared*’.

Notice the word ‘body’ appears twice in 1 Cor 10:16-17 and is also in 1 Cor 11:29: *“For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge* ***the body*** *rightly”.* You might ask ‘what does “The body” mean here?’ There are two possibilities:

1. The body refers to the Lord’s physical body. In which case 1 Cor 11:29 would mean that a person does not recognise that the bread symbolises Christ’s crucified body. We might expect a reference to the blood of Christ if this were the case.
2. The body refers to the church. In which case 1 Cor 11:29 would mean that a person does not recognise the church as the body of Christ – collective, corporate, group of God’s people.

The second option is the most likely interpretation of ‘body’ here because this view is consistent with what Paul writes about in 1 Cor 11:20-21: “*When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk*”. Some in the church in Corinth were being individualistic and self-centred. They were ignoring the ‘horizontal’ dimensions of the Lord’s Supper’. It is worth noting that the Old Testament Passover celebration also had a ‘horizontal’ aspect; whole Israelite households celebrated together (Exo 12:3). Non-Israelite ‘guests’ were also permitted to participate in the Passover if the males were circumcised (Exo 12:48).

Some say there was more of a corporate/communal aspect to faith in the Old Testament times but a more individual emphasis in the New Testament. They may point to Scriptures like the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31, for example: “*In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.’ But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge*” (Jer 31:29-30). There is a case to be made that there is greater emphasis on individual faith in the New Testament than in the old. However it is certainly true that as a church body we are to be intimately connected to each other. All the ‘one-another’ commands in the New Testament bear witness to this.

Some people say ‘*we are all part of universal church*’ – the worldwide body of true believers who have come to faith in the past or have yet to do so. This is true, but the New Testament Scriptures repeatedly place emphasis on the local body of believers in churches gathered together in particular geographical locations, for example: “*To the church of God that is in Corinth*’ (1 Cor 1:2); “*To the saints who are in Ephesus*” (Eph 1:1); “*To the church of the Thessalonians*” (1 Thess 1:1).

Lord’s Supper is a sacrament celebrated by the local church together in a particular location at a particular time. The local church is to be united as a body (e.g. Eph 4:4-6; Phil 2:2). This unity is expressed visibly as we partake of Lord’s Supper. To sit at Lord’s Supper as a guest/visitor is an occasional (not regular ongoing) situation – to do so the guest/visitor is really saying: “*I have a true unity with you people in this local church. If I lived here, I’d be a member here if I could be*”.

We must be careful not to view Lord’s Supper in isolation from the collective body of Christ. In 21st century New Zealand, we live very much in an age of individualism. The spirit of this age says ‘*MY rights are of utmost importance. It’s all about ME*’. Many Christians view access to the Lord’s Supper as being their right, whether they are known to the local church they are visiting or not. When Christians from other churches visit, they sometimes expect to be automatically admitted to Lord’s Supper and may be offended if they are not. Perhaps saying (or at least thinking): “*How dare the Elders bar anyone who wants to from participating?*”

Brother and sisters, we need to be very careful that our view is not driven by the culture around us. Our view must be formed by careful, balanced, consideration of the Word of God which speaks of both the individual member and the collective body. With this in mind, now let’s consider confession and conduct:

1. **Confession and Conduct**

I have heard some people argue that we should allow anyone who wants to come to Lord’s Supper to come because Judas Iscariot was present when Christ first instituted this sacrament. But is this really a valid line of Biblical thinking? Should the Elders, who are called by God to ‘*shepherd the flock of God that is among (them), exercising oversight*’ (1 Pet 5:2), allow an openly known atheist to sit at the table? Should the Elders allow an openly unrepentant sinner to come? Should the Elders allow someone who openly doesn’t believe that Jesus rose from the dead or doesn’t believe that God is One in three persons? Should the Elders shift all responsibility for attendance just to the individual to examine themselves?

**Firstly**, we can’t be sure as to whether Judas Iscariot was present for that first Lord’s Supper because none of the gospel accounts give us all the details with a complete sequence of events. John does record that Judas Iscariot left ‘*after receiving the morsel of bread*’ (John 13:30). Many people think that Judas had the bread that Jesus broke saying ‘*take, this is my body*’, but not the wine. This is quite possible, but we can’t be sure. It is also worth noting that there was a uniqueness to the historical event when the Lord Jesus was with his disciples in the upper room before His crucifixion.

**Secondly**, the instructions for us in our text in 1 Cor 10 and 11 are part of Paul’s first letter to the “*church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours*” (1:2). This introduction points to the truth that the Lord’s Supper is intended **only for the truly converted** – those who have repented of their sins and turned to God in Christ for salvation. This is helpfully reflected in HCLD30A81: “*Who are to come to the Lord's table?”* With the answer: “*Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgement on themselves*”.

Therefore it is necessary for the church to seek to discern whether someone is a Christian. How can this be done? There are, broadly speaking, two ways revealed in the Word of God:

a) Confession of faith: Lord’s Supper is for those who make a public profession of faith with mouth: “*all who ...call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” 1 Cor 1:2.* That is one reason why only communicant members attend.

b)Christian Conduct: godly living. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about assessing Christian character by a person’s visible lifestyle in these words: “*But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler- not even to eat with such a one*” (1 Cor 5:11).

What exactly is the meaning here of “*not even to eat with such a one*”? There are at least three possibilities:

1. Sharing an ordinary meal at home
2. Joining in the ‘Love Feast’- an early New Testament church communal meal together on Lord’s day.
3. Lord’s Supper – which was celebrated by the early New Testament church in midst of the ‘Love Feast’.

In the context of the Corinthian church, the most likely meaning is joining together in the Love Feast and therefore also including the Lord’s Supper. Persistent sinful conduct without repentance shows a person not to be in Christ (ref. Jam 1:22; 2:26b). Unrepentant sin brings God’s judgement on the individual: “*For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself*” (1 Cor 11:29). Divine judgement may also extend to the congregation: “*That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died*” (1 Cor 11:30).

The Love Feast (including the celebration of Lord’s Supper) was defiled when the unbelieving/ungodly participated. False teachers in 2 Pet 2:13 are described as being “*blots and blemishes, revelling in their deceptions, while they feast with you*”. There is an allusion here to the unblemished sacrifice of Christ. The Lord’s Supper should be unblemished by unrepentant sinners. Elders who knowingly permit an unrepentant man or woman to participate in Lord’s supper and so defile the feast are not faithfully ‘*shepherding the flock of God that is among (them)*’ (1 Pet 5:2).

The HCLD30 82Q&A82 helpfully highlights the importance of a true confession of faith and a godly lifestyle in these words: Q82 “*Are those to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper who show by what they say and do that they are unbelieving and ungodly?*” A82 “*No, that would dishonour God’s covenant and bring down God’s anger upon the entire congregation. Therefore according to the instruction of Christ and his apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives*”.

The importance of confession and conduct, raises the question ‘should everyone who confesses Christ be allowed to come to the Lord’s Supper? What level of detail is required in that verbal confession in order to address both the individual and corporate aspects of Lord’s Supper? How are the Elders – who are responsible for shepherding the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2) - going to obtain verbal confession of faith from a visiting believer? How can the Elders gain an understanding of the Christian conduct of the guest/visitor who wishes to partake? We’ll consider these last two questions in our third point:

1. **Open and Closed**

There are dangers when traversing a very narrow rock ridges which falls steeply away on both sides. To be safe, it is necessary to tread and clamber round rocks very carefully and watch your balance lest you slip and fall either to one side or the other. Somewhat similarly, there are dangers on two different sides with the question of guests/visitors at Lord’s Supper: too restrictive or too inclusive.

The point of balance is not necessarily the same for different churches, even within Reformed Churches of New Zealand. There are broadly speaking three different categories of practice:

1. **Open Table** – no one assesses the faith or conduct of a participant except the person himself. A total stranger to a congregation can then participate in Lord’s Supper.
2. **Restricted Table** – at least a profession of faith is required for admission.
3. **Closed Table –** only members of church who have professed their faith and guests from sister churches who have a letter from their session attesting totheir faith and conduct are admitted to the Table. (Biblical support for written attestation is connected to the concept of a federation of churches ref. Acts 18:27; Rom 16:1).

Variations in practice have existed historically in both Reformed and Presbyterian churches over the past few hundred years. The Reformed Churches of New Zealand have wrestled with the question of guests at Lord’s Supper over our seventy years of existence. The results of carefully seeking to find a Biblical balance of the principles we have briefly covered in this sermon. The RCNZ Synod of 1998 (following reports in 1992&1995) came up with a number of recommendations for churches.

This is a summary of the Synod 1998 decisions:

1. The Corporate unity expressed in the Lord’s Supper is also a unity in the truth that we profess.
2. Sessions should ensure that guests to the Lord’s Supper do not openly oppose the truth that is taught in our Confessions.
3. It is the responsibility of the session to ascertain the following before it grants permission to guests to participate in the Lord’s Supper:
4. That the guest trusts in Christ, and in Christ alone, for his salvation.
5. That the guest is a communicant member in good standing in his own church.
6. That the guest lives a repentant, upright and godly life.

Synod does not have authority over local churches, which are governed by Elders (e.g. 1 Thess 5:12-13), so each local church in RCNZ may work these principles out a little differently. They have Scriptural authority to do so. Each must aim for a balance of Scriptural principles.

What do we do here in the Reformed Church of Christchurch? There is a bulletin notice the week before the celebration of Lord’s Supper: ‘*If you are visiting and would like to participate with us, or expect visitors with you who would, please see an elder or the minister during the week*’. If you know that a visitor is coming, don’t leave it until five minutes before the service and see the Elder at the door. This does make it very difficult for the Elder on door duty to responsibly discharge his duty.

The Elder will meet with the prospective guest/visitor and seek to determine whether they can sit in unity with us round the table. When guests/visitors are not permitted to have Lord’s Supper with us, we are NOT saying that they are not Christians. There will likely be a range of viewpoints present here today amongst us:

1. Some may think that Lord’s Supper should only be for church members and visitors from sister churches who have a letter from their sessions to recommend them.
2. Some may think that Lords Supper should be open to everyone who visits, providing they have been commanded, from God’s Word, to examine themselves before the Lord.
3. Others may see our practice in this local church to represent a balanced view of the Scriptural principles which come to bear on this matter.

I would urge you to willingly accept the Scriptural policy of this local church to guests/visitors at the Lord’s Supper. Let each one of us bear in mind the words of 1 Thess 5:12-13: “*But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labour among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.*”

AMEN