

January 19, 2025

We Share the Lord's Supper

People have so many questions about Communion. Perhaps this is because there are so many different understandings of Communion in Christianity. Catholics believe in transubstantiation: The bread and wine transform into the body and blood of Christ. Lutherans believe in consubstantiation: The bread and wine still exist, but alongside those elements there also are the body and blood of Christ. Some traditions take a memorialist stance: There is no literal presence of the body and blood of Christ, but Communion is a moment when we remember the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf.

Some Communion traditions tend to be closed tables. That means only people who belong to those churches or are baptized in those traditions can take Communion there. Why are they closed? To offer a far too simplistic reason, memorialist tables are closed because memorialists argue that you can't remember something you don't know. Believers of consubstantiation or transubstantiation, however, believe that there is a great deal of preparation of our hearts and bodies that must take place if we are going to take in the body and blood of Christ.

First Corinthians 11:27-34 lends credence to those latter stances. Put the verses in the context of the letter though. Paul specifically critiqued the division among the family of Christ. Some viewed themselves as better than others, particularly those with higher social status and wealth. They were consuming the shared meal before some of the more economically vulnerable arrived, and then some were cut out of the meal altogether.

Paul was calling them out for misunderstanding the body of Christ. The Corinthians seemed to think this community worked on privilege when it did not. If anything, to live as Christ means to set aside privilege. It means to make a place for people who live and are different from us and to make sure that where they sit is as special a place as anyone else's.

My tradition understands Communion in terms of "Real Presence." Real Presence means that we recognize that Christ is there in the Communion moment but present in the hearts of those gathered as in the bread and wine. Because Christ is found in all already, Real Presence tables tend to be open to all. However, if we are to remember and be called to the kind of love and understanding that Christ calls us to and Paul reminds us to be, we must also make room at our table and in our hearts for those who understand Communion in other ways. That is the preparation we must do as we gather around the table.

1. What is your understanding of Communion (transubstantiation, consubstantiation, open table, closed table, memorialism, or Real Presence)? Why?
2. How do you prepare to take Communion?
3. How can we ensure that Communion reflects the values of unity rather than division?