

A PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN

Unity

ADULT SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY

The Faith Formation Ministries Team, with special thanks to coauthors Irene Bakker (d. 2012) and Syd Hielema, offers churches this five-session, downloadable Bible study based on 1 Corinthians 11. We pray that it will serve to enrich and strengthen your congregation's participation in the Lord's Supper and lead to a healthy discussion of the topic of children's participation in the sacrament.

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INTRODUCTION

Participating in the Lord's Supper is one of the highlights in our walk with God. Every time I hold out the bread to a worshiper and say those precious words, "The body of Christ, broken for you," I'm deeply moved by what I see in the person's eyes: longing, hope, peace, hunger. What a miracle! Through that little piece of bread comes nourishment that provides healing for the past as well as "strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow" ("Great Is Thy Faithfulness," st. 3).

The main goal of this Bible study is to strengthen your congregation's participation in the Lord's Supper. Part of the blessing of communion is regular, frequent observance, but frequency may also serve to diminish the wondrous mystery of the sacrament. These five lessons reflect on the character of the church, the Old Testament roots of the Lord's Supper, and the traditional and contemporary practices of Reformed denominations, paying special attention to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

A secondary goal is to enhance the scriptural literacy that participants will need in order to address the topic of children at the Lord's Supper. Christian Reformed synods have examined the issue of children's participation in the sacrament many times in the past thirty years, and we have never been able to come to a clear consensus concerning this matter. Other Reformed denominations have also examined and debated the presence of children at the table. The issues are complex and are further complicated by the wonderfully deep emotional freight that the sacrament carries. It is our prayer and hope that these Bible studies will make space for gentle reflection on this important matter.

DISCUSSION TIPS

If you are working through this study with a preexisting group, dive in! If you are new to each other, begin by taking some time to share the things that have led you to this study. Are there particular convictions or experiences that are especially motivating you to examine issues related to the Lord's Supper?

The lessons do not assume that one person is the official leader of the group, but you may find it helpful to appoint a leader or take turns facilitating. These lessons do not require homework before meeting, but it would be wise to appoint one person to study each lesson in advance to provide guidance during the discussion.

These lessons provide suggested time limits for each section, and if you take them too seriously, you will likely find these suggestions frustrating. Your group will know which parts of each lesson need more time, and will adjust accordingly. If a particular lesson evokes a great deal of interest and discussion, feel free to use two sessions to complete it.

1 THIS IS CHURCH

CORE POINT

The church is called to be (among other things) the family of God where people find welcome and community.

FEELING WELCOME (10 MINUTES)

Some say the combination of good food, lots of fun, and loving friends makes for a welcoming atmosphere. I'm sure you have fond memories of times like that. Growing up, I experienced many celebrative Chinese banquets seated at round tables with family and friends. Conversation and laughter flowed freely as we enjoyed traditional ten-course meals.

- Take time to share a memory or two of a time when you felt welcomed, accepted, and at home. Recall the details: What specifically did people do that created such a warm and welcoming atmosphere?

Unfortunately, many of us have also experienced times of inhospitality. Once when I was visiting a church, no one extended their hand to me when it came time to pass the peace. What a contrast to another congregation in which all leave their seats to pass the peace to everyone else.

- Describe a situation in which you felt unwelcome and awkward at a worship service. What effect did those feelings have on your time of worship?

WHAT IS CHURCH? (5 MINUTES)

One of the finger plays that I recall reciting as a little girl goes like this: "This is the church, this is the steeple, open the door and see all the people." My mother would help me clasp my small hands to create a church building: the index fingers formed the steeple, the thumbs served as the door, and the rest of the fingers were the people.

Some of the many biblical images that describe the church include "the people of God" and "the family of God." Being part of a church community means being there for each other through life's circumstances. One night I listened intently as a friend shared her fears. Her daughter was about to leave home and start college. Would she make the transition? Would she seek out Christian friends? Just a few years earlier, I had been in the same space. After we talked and prayed together, I thought, "This is church."

1. Describe an incident or situation in which you thought, "Yes, this is church!"
2. How would you define church? What do you mean when you say, "I'm going to church?"

COMMUNITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH (10 MINUTES)

Let's take a step back to the beginning of the church and look at some of its earliest stories recorded in the book of Acts. Before Jesus left this earth to ascend into heaven and sit at the right hand of his heavenly Father, he promised to send his Holy Spirit to empower his disciples to be his witnesses. On the day of Pentecost this promise was fulfilled, and the Holy Spirit filled the disciple Peter with such bold speech that about 3,000 people believed and were added to the church. The believers then formed a community.

Read Acts 2:42-47 aloud.

1. List behaviors of members of the early church. Which words and activities emphasize the unity experienced in those days?
2. Many biblical commentators agree that the phrase “breaking of bread” in verse 42 refers to communion. How does participating in communion complement all the other activities that Luke mentions in this passage? Is there a direct connection?
3. How does the church in Acts 2 compare with the way you defined church in the previous section?
4. What positive behaviors were evident in the church of your childhood or the church you now attend?

UNITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH (10 MINUTES)

The importance of unity in the early church community is shown in the extreme discipline exercised in the case of Ananias and Sapphira and the revision of the “church order” when the Grecian widows were overlooked.

1. Read Acts 5:1-11. One of the central characteristics of the early church in Acts was caring for the poor and needy. Recognizing this, Ananias and Sapphira pretended to give all that they had earned to the church, thereby turning what was intended to be a selfless pointer to the deep love in the church into a selfish attempt to receive admiration. What does the severity of the discipline they received tell us about the character of the early church?
2. Read Acts 6:1-7. The “church order” was revised when the Grecian widows were overlooked. What does this indicate about the unity of the early church?
3. Recall a time when your church restructured its way of being church together in order to include everyone more fully in the blessings of life in Christ. What was done? What effect did this change have?

UNITY AND HOSPITALITY (10 MINUTES)

This series of Bible studies focuses on the relationship between unity in the church and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The specific Bible passage that deals most concretely with this issue 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, and subsequent lessons in this series carefully look at the ways in which this teaching addresses divisions in the Corinthian church.

To prepare for that discussion, this first lesson has focused on unity and hospitality. We’ll end by reading several New Testament passages. Invite various members of the group to read the following passages: John 17:20-26; Hebrews 13:1-3; Ephesians 4:1-5; Romans 12:9-16; James 2:1-13.

1. How does the combined effect of these passages encourage you to strengthen the unity and hospitality your church community practices?
2. What do you hear in these passages? Do you personally hear a call to repentance? If yes, in what ways?

CLOSING PRAYER (10 MINUTES)

1. Take time to share items of praise and concern.
2. Close with a prayer that focuses on God’s grace. Include prayer items that have been shared by the group.

2 “AND WHEN YOUR CHILDREN ASK YOU...”

(The Passover and the Lord’s Supper)

CORE POINT

The Passover was a family meal intended to celebrate God’s grace in redemption. Each time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, we are reminded of our identity as a people belonging to God and redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

In Lesson 1 we reflected on unity and hospitality in the church and noted that the Acts 2 church included communion among its most important practices--those practices that enhanced unity and hospitality. Though communion was a new practice for the people of God, it was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper, in which he transformed the Passover celebration. The Passover celebration includes a “what” and a “how.” The “what” refers to the Lord’s miraculous deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. And the “how” has to do with communing together as God’s people. The deep meaning of the Passover comes partially from the fact that God has created us as people who experience unity and hospitality in a special way when we eat together. Food lovingly prepared and eaten is a gift from God, a gift from the creation, and a gift shared by people in close relationship.

THE FAMILY MEAL (10 MINUTES)

We all have traditions formed by our culture and society. One of the values that my family of origin instilled within me is the family meal. I grew up in a home where we always ate supper together. When my husband and I established our own home, we continued that tradition, at least until our children got part-time jobs that involved working during the supper hour.

1. What memories do you have of family meals, particularly on special occasions?
2. What mealtime customs might your family members object to changing because they are synonymous with your family identity?
3. What is it about sharing a meal that is so meaningful and even filled with deep spiritual power?
4. You might want to share a meal together as a group.

THE PASSOVER MEAL (10 MINUTES)

In Numbers 10:10 we learn that the Israelite feasts and sacrifices were to be memorials for the community. The oldest of these festivals is described in Exodus 12, where we find that the Passover meal was instituted to help the people of Israel commemorate (v. 14) the exodus--that great event by which God delivered Israel from slavery under the Egyptians. The Passover is still celebrated today by Jews all over the world.

Read Exodus 12.

1. Note some of the details of this celebration. What requirements did the Israelites have to meet in order to participate in the Passover (choose a lamb without defect, and prepare the meal carefully following instructions)? Who is this event for? Who is included in this community?
2. Why might God have chosen to use a meal to commemorate the most significant “saving” event in the Old Testament?

3. Note verses 26-27. Why would the Lord include this conversation between a young child and an adult in the Passover celebration?

Each time the Passover words are recited, each time the family stands with their cloaks in their belts, with their staffs in their hands, and the unleavened bread touches their lips, they hear, they feel, and they taste the grace of God. The whole community of Israel participates in this meal that signifies their identity as a people belonging to God.

4. According to Deuteronomy 7:7-11, what were the Israelites encouraged to do with the knowledge that they were God's people?
5. The Passover commemorates the exodus from Egypt. The people of Israel also experienced a miraculous entry into the promised land. Both included a parting of the waters, prefiguring death and resurrection, leaving the old behind, entering the new (the waters relate to baptismal imagery). Read Joshua 4:1-14. Once again we find reference to a child/adult conversation. What conclusions might we draw from these references to such conversations?

The Passover meal was intended for the entire family to celebrate God's great grace in providing redemption. It was very important to God that the children experience this meal and have tangible reminders to help them remember (though we must acknowledge that there is a minority view among Old Testament scholars that children did not directly participate in the Passover celebration).

THE LORD'S SUPPER (20 MINUTES)

At the Lord's Supper, God offers the bread and cup to the covenant family to refresh our faith and to assure us that we share in Christ's death and resurrection. "This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits" (Belgic Confession, Art. 35). It was instituted by Jesus at the time of the Passover celebration (see Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:1-30). Look in your Bibles together at Luke's account in chapter 22.

Jesus tells his disciples that he has eagerly anticipated celebrating communion with them (v. 15). Many biblical scholars believe that Jesus' secretive way of describing the location of the supper to Peter and John (vv. 10-12) was to prevent Judas from knowing the location in advance (see vv. 1-6), because a quiet upper room out of the public eye would have provided a perfect location to have Jesus arrested.

1. Why might Jesus have been so eager to celebrate the Passover with his disciples? (This is especially striking when one notes that the meal included arguments over who was the greatest, Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial, and Jesus' awareness of Judas's impending betrayal.)
2. Why might Jesus have chosen to commemorate his death at the Passover meal?

The apostle Paul also connects the Old Testament feasts to the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-18).

1. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 how is Jesus described (see also 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 7:14-17; John 1:29, 36)?
2. What is the connection between the Passover and the redemptive work of Christ?

In the Lord's Supper, the past, present, and future dimensions of Christ's death are wondrously intertwined. Note Paul's account of this in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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." 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." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

To do this “in remembrance” does not simply involve recalling a past event. Rather, the past event contains both present power and future promise.

1. What are the tangible reminders that God has provided through the Lord’s Supper? What are we remembering?
2. As we remember Christ’s work in the past, we are proclaiming in the present. In what ways does receiving the elements serve as proclamation? How does--or does not--our manner of celebrating the sacrament enhance this proclamation? In what ways do our entire lives become proclamations and celebrations of Christ’s great gift?
3. The sacrament does not simply look back to Jesus’ death. What are we looking forward to (see Luke 22:16; Rev. 19:6-9)?

CLOSING PRAYER (10 MINUTES)

1. Take time to share items of praise and concern.
2. Include a time of praise and thanksgiving for mealtime traditions, families, God’s redemptive grace, the church community.
3. Ask for heartfelt joy and gratitude when celebrating the Lord’s Supper.
4. Ask for sensitivity to all members of God’s family when next celebrating the Lord’s Supper.

3 CELEBRATING THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE CRC

CORE POINT

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 has played a central role in Christian Reformed Lord's Supper practice for many generations. Paul's words here have also been used to explain why public profession of faith is required prior to participation. This lesson will begin to examine the role this passage has played in CRC practice.

REVIEWING OUR OWN LORD'S SUPPER EXPERIENCES (10 MINUTES)

During my student days, I took a course in "reading the New Testament in Greek." Our professor was a Jesuit priest, and we students came from eight different Christian denominations. During one class we were reading one of the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, and the professor asked each of us to identify which Scripture passage played the dominant role in each of our denomination's communion liturgies. I was the only Christian Reformed member of the class, and I was also the only one who identified 1 Corinthians 11 as my denomination's dominant communion passage. That experience began my journey of seeking to understand what Paul's primary purpose was in this passage.

(**Note:** If you have access to the *Psalter Hymnal* (1987 edition, gray cover), it may be helpful to note the preparatory exhortation for communion on pp. 976-79 and the form for celebration on pp. 983-84. An excerpt is quoted below.)

The only passage in Scripture that prescribes guidelines for the practice of holy communion is found in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. For generations the Christian Reformed Church has quoted from this passage in its communion forms to teach that mature self-examination is a prerequisite for participation:

Beloved in Jesus Christ, since we hope next Lord's Day to celebrate the blessed sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are called to prepare our hearts by rightly examining ourselves. For the apostle Paul has written: "Therefore, 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:27-28).

This application of the passage concludes that self-examination refers to one's personal walk with God and is focused on the condition of one's inner heart. The Christian Reformed preparatory exhortations challenge participants to examine their hearts, lives, inmost thoughts, faith, hope, love, sin, and guilt.

1. If you are Christian Reformed, in what ways have these verses from 1 Corinthians shaped your participation in communion? If you belong to another Reformed denomination, how has your church dealt with this passage? Have you practiced preparatory devotional exercises prior to communion, or are you aware of others who do so? What practices are helpful for such preparation?
2. In what ways do you think these verses affect the entire congregational experience of communion? What are the benefits and blessings that flow through these verses? Might there be hindrances to participation that come from these verses?

In the past, Christian Reformed church councils regularly practiced mutual censure (*censura morem*), an exercise in which each office bearer is asked if he or she can wholeheartedly come to the communion table in full fellowship with all other participants. When someone answers no (usually because of some interpersonal conflict), the body has to work through the issue at hand, and may postpone communion until the issue is resolved.

1. Have you ever experienced the postponement of communion for such a reason? What happened between the postponement and the next practice of communion?
2. Why is it, or why is it not, appropriate for congregations to postpone communion while working through matters of conflict?

IMAGINING THE SITUATION PAUL IS ADDRESSING (5 MINUTES)

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 out loud together. From Paul's account, we can safely conclude that the communion service he is describing is different in two ways from most of those we experience: (1) it includes an entire meal, (2) the event begins before everyone has arrived. During this time, the Roman Empire did not practice a common day of rest, so Christian worship occurred in the evening (or early in the morning). Wealthier members usually were able to arrive sooner for evening worship than those who were poorer or slaves, so starting times may have been somewhat fluid.

Based on Paul's words here, imagine together what the worship space (probably a wealthier member's living room area) might have looked like by the time the latecomers arrived. Allow your imaginations to do justice to the anger and sarcastic sadness in Paul's words in verses 17-22, and share together the pictures that form in your imagination.

THE CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS (15 MINUTES)

These verses in chapter 11 continue themes that we find throughout 1 Corinthians. Paul is addressing a very divided congregation throughout this epistle, and many of the congregation's divisions are rooted in arrogance and pride. Briefly survey some of the other issues that Paul touches on:

1. The Corinthians were divided between followers of Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ (1 Cor. 1:10-17; 3:1-23).
2. Instead of practicing church discipline, the Corinthians were proud of an immoral member (chap. 5).
3. Some members took other members to court (6:1-11).
4. The Corinthians exercised their freedom in Christ by eating food sacrificed to idols without considering whether this might cause others to stumble (chap. 8-10).
5. They considered those who spoke in tongues to be spiritually superior to those who showed evidence of other gifts of the Spirit (chap. 12-14).

Every Christian congregation struggles at times with divisions in which some members appear to be more fully part of the "in-group" than others. At times, every Christian congregation has subtle ways of saying that some members are more "spiritual" or "worthy" than others.

6. What are some of the ways you have seen this dynamic at work in your congregation or in congregations you have been a part of?

PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH AND THE LORD'S SUPPER (20 MINUTES)

For many years the Christian Reformed denomination identified the act of public profession of faith as the entry point to participation at the Lord's table. Scripture does not specifically teach that the Christian life requires a public profession of faith as a one-time milestone event in one's walk with God, but 1 Corinthians 11 is commonly referred to in justifying this requirement. The reasoning here is understandable: one comes to the table worthily through discerning self-examination, which is the act of a committed Christian.

Historically, the CRC has made a significant distinction between baptism and the Lord's Supper. Infants of believing parents are baptized; the infant does nothing to merit receiving the sacrament. But communion is different: participants are asked to publicly commit to the Lord Jesus Christ before receiving the sacrament.

Does Scripture in general and 1 Corinthians 11 in particular support this distinction between the two sacraments?

Consider these two issues:

1. Why are the active verbs in the baptismal command treated differently than the active verbs in the Lord's Supper instruction?

On Pentecost Sunday, the apostle Peter provides this teaching concerning baptism: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39). We Reformed types, noting Peter's invitation to children and the relationship between baptism and circumcision, conclude that we are called to baptize infants. Our Baptist friends note Peter's first command, "Repent," and say, "Only those who are capable of repentance may be baptized." They would also say, "Just as Paul teaches that we must be able to practice self-examination in order to receive communion, so Peter teaches that we must be able to repent in order to be baptized."

We, in turn, respond by saying, "But Peter's command is intended to include those who are not old enough to repent. Infants are to be baptized, and when they are old enough to repent, they are called to do so." We even have a phrase to describe this response: "age- and ability-appropriate obedience." The commands in Scripture apply to all of God's people, but some are incapable of practicing obedience.

Do our Baptist friends point out an inconsistency in our practice of the sacraments? Can we with integrity claim "age- and ability-appropriate obedience" for baptism but not for communion? Are there strong, biblical reasons to treat the active verbs associated with one sacrament differently than those connected with the other?

It's helpful to expand the scope of this question beyond the sacraments. On what basis would we treat the instructions for participation at the Lord's table any differently from the Ten Commandments or other scriptural injunctions? Don't we apply all of God's life-giving commands to every member of the Christian community in ways that are appropriate to their age and ability?

2. But the phrase "be baptized" is in the passive voice while the phrase "take communion" is in the active voice. Doesn't that suggest that receiving baptism is a passive act suitable for infants while taking communion is an active act that requires a human response of some kind?

Perhaps that is the case. But how simple is it to distinguish between "active" and "passive" in our walk with God? Are infants truly passive? How does this distinction work in verses such as "You brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast" (Ps. 22:9) and "From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you" (Ps. 71:6)?

SUMMARY (10 MINUTES)

In the light of these first three lessons, with their emphases on

- unity and hospitality in the church,
- the Passover celebration, which most likely included the entire family,
- Jesus' transformation of the Passover at the Last Supper,
- the divisions in Corinth and in our own churches,

consider the following questions:

1. In what ways is the act of public profession of faith a legitimate and appropriate entry point to the Lord's table?
2. In what ways might profession of faith function as a community-dividing act that subtly sends the message that (1) the covenant body is not really one but two: baptized members and professing members, and (2) one must pass a certain test (professing one's faith) in order to benefit from the means of grace we call communion?

Note: There is obviously not an easy resolution to these questions. Take care that this does not become a polarizing issue. These are complex questions which, in some ways, are designed to raise more questions and reflection than to direct us to one clear answer.

CLOSING PRAYER (10 MINUTES)

1. Take time to share items of praise and concern.
2. Include a time of praise and thanksgiving for uplifting worship, joyful communion practice, and the blessings of heartfelt self-examination.
3. Ask the Lord for humility, patience, and insight in sorting out the complex questions related to understanding the implications of 1 Corinthians 11 for the church today.

4 JOYFULLY OBEYING PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS

Part 1: The Call to Self-Examination

CORE POINT

The call to self-examination involves two dimensions: receiving the mystery of Christ's sacrifice for us and discerning the unity of the body, the church.

INTRODUCTION

Note: This lesson contains a fair amount of teaching material. If participants do not read the lessons prior to meeting together, it may be helpful to read the teaching material out loud.

In the previous lesson we looked at this communion passage in the light of the epistle of 1 Corinthians and the practice of the Christian Reformed Church. We noted how Paul rebukes the church in Corinth for its dysfunctional practices, reminds them of the purpose and heart of the Lord's Supper, and gives specific instructions for remedying the dysfunction.

In the final two lessons we will examine Paul's specific instructions and ask how we might be called to apply them to our participation in the Lord's Supper today.

The previous lesson also asked some major questions concerning the nature of communion and traditional observances. Did anyone reflect further on these issues since that discussion? Are there new insights or questions that might be helpful to discuss before beginning lesson 4 together?

Reread 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 together.

The passage ends with two specific commands: to examine ourselves and to wait for one another. In lesson 4 we will focus on examination, and in lesson 5 we will explore "waiting for one another." Reformed Christians have not always seen this as a text that points to joyful obedience (in direct opposition to Reformed theology's high view of the law as a guide for grateful living!). Rather, these commands have at times been a source of anxiety and legalism. We need to recover the sense that these commands are life-giving. We will explore together how obeying them brings joy, integrity, and justice.

THE KEY PHRASE AND THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF THE CROSS (15 MINUTES)

All the instruction in this passage revolves around *recognizing the body of the Lord*. In what way are we called to examine ourselves? What is the purpose of our self-examination? We are to discern if we properly recognize the body of the Lord.

What does this mean? The passage suggests that there are two dimensions to this recognition. First, in verse 27 Paul writes, "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." So "discerning the body" in verse 29 is a shorthand way of referring back to the fullness of Christ's gift of sacrificing his life for us as Paul describes it in verse 27.

We are called to examine the spirit in which we receive the grace of God given to us freely through his Son, Jesus Christ.

1. From the first century on, the Christian faith has composed rich worship songs that celebrate the sacrifice of Christ for us and call us to ponder the mystery and adore the sacrificial Lamb. Read some of these New Testament "hymns" together and quietly rest within their wonder: Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; Revelation 5:9-11; 7:9-12.

2. Many believers have favorite hymns that also help them to rest in the wonder and mystery of Christ's gift of himself for us. What is one of your favorite hymns, and how does it help you connect with God?

THE OUTSTRETCHED ARMS (15 MINUTES)

Another dimension to the atoning work of Christ is that of his outstretched arms on the cross embracing the world. This dimension of the passage has not been stressed as much as the first, and understanding it requires some careful work with the text.

First, the oldest Greek manuscripts that we have available do not include the words "of Christ" or "of the Lord" in 1 Corinthians 11:29. Therefore, it is likely that a scribe added the phrase at one point, and thereafter all who copied the epistle continued to include that addition. In the most ancient manuscripts, verse 29 would read, "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (For this reason, some contemporary translations include the phrase "of the Lord," while others do not.)

Several other examples in the later manuscripts of Scripture reveal that a scribe added a word or short phrase; the situation usually occurred where the original text was likely deemed not clear enough. In this case we are not surprised. "Discerning the body" *seems* to be a fairly vague instruction.

But actually it is not vague at all. When we study the surrounding chapters, we find clear pointers that help us to know what Paul means by it.

The ancient church did not have subheadings, chapters, verses, or any other means of sectioning off books of Scripture. It simply had a collection of scrolls, and each scroll contained one book of the Bible. And when Scripture was read, it was often read in large sections. Early Christians would often have heard all of 1 Corinthians read to them at one time.

When the readers came to what we now call chapter 11, verse 29, and read "the body," listeners would remember that a few moments earlier they had heard these words: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor. 10:16-17). And these words would still be echoing in their hearts along with 1 Corinthians 11:29 as the reader continued into chapter 12.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-14 out loud together.

Could it be that Paul is deliberately ambiguous in 1 Corinthians 11:29 so that we envision the widest sense of the power of Christ's work: pondering the depths and riches of his broken body and poured out blood for us, and remembering the wideness of his corporate body, the people of God? We cannot have one without the other! Christ is the head, and we are the members.

When I was a young child, our family did not own a TV, so whenever I could, I watched TV at a neighbor's home. I remember vividly a show that featured cardboard heads mounted on shelves detached from any bodies. I remember it so well because that visual image recurred in my nightmares for months afterward! And now it is as if Paul is saying to the believers in Corinth, "Before you come to communion, recognize the head and recognize the body, and how they are organically and deeply joined together."

Lesson 3 clarified for us how important this second dimension of self-examination is. There we noted some of the divisions in the church of Corinth, and how the abuses in celebrating the Lord's Supper flowed from the division between rich and poor. "Recognizing the body" includes discerning how well the community practices unity and hospitality.

1. The depths and wonder of what God has done for us are so rich that we easily focus on one dimension of self-examination and forget about another. When you heed the call to examine yourself and recognize the body, do you concentrate on the vertical, the horizontal, or both dimensions of Christ's work on the cross? What leads you to concentrate in this way?
2. In our communities today various groups of people might feel excluded or feel as if they were "lesser" members. Some possibilities include adults who are single, those who are divorced or separated, those who are mentally ill, those who grieve, those whose children do not attend Christian schools, those who are not white (or, in the case of the CRC, not of Dutch background), those without a certain level of education or income, young adults, teens, and so on. If Paul had addressed this epistle to your church community, which groups might he identify as those who needed the welcoming hand of hospitality?

BUT WHAT ABOUT JUDGMENT? (15 MINUTES)

Reread 1 Corinthians 11:29-32. What sort of judgment is Paul referring to here? Verse 32 tells us that this is a "disciplining" judgment—that is, we experience consequences from our sinful actions, and these consequences function as a purifying fire that calls us to repent and change our ways. In 2 Corinthians 7:2-16, Paul tells the Corinthians that Titus has described for him how the church has repented in response to his earlier letter, and Paul adds, "My joy was greater than ever" (2 Cor. 7:7).

Paul's words in Galatians 6:7-10 help us to understand the nature of such judgment. Read that passage together. Actions bear fruit, and the character of this fruit reveals whether it comes from the Spirit or the sinful nature.

1. Paul contrasts in detail the consequences of these two paths in Galatians 5:16-26. Review this passage together, and note how prevalent the acts of the sinful nature (vv. 19-21) were in the Corinthian church. Recall your present and past experiences of congregational life. In what ways have you seen the consequences of sinful actions either call a community to repentance or—because they were ignored—inflict painful judgment within a community?
2. The call to examine ourselves is a joyful call, because such examination reminds us of the fruit of the Spirit that we experience within ourselves and others, and it reminds us of the healing mercies of the Lord in response to our repentance as it is needed. What specific practices help you personally, and your church community corporately, to carry out this call to joyful examination? What practices might you begin to carry out in response to Paul's exhortation here?
3. What could age-appropriate and ability-appropriate obedience to the biblical commands look like?

CLOSING PRAYER (10 MINUTES)

1. Take time to share items of praise and concern.
2. Include a time of praise and thanksgiving for joyful practices of examination in discerning the body.
3. Ask the Lord for courage, patience, and perseverance in strengthening these practices, both personally and corporately.

5 JOYFULLY OBEYING PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS

Part 2: Waiting for One Another

CORE POINT

God's grace to us demands that we be a gracious and welcoming people.

LET'S FOCUS ON WAITING (10 MINUTES)

You will recall that at the outset of this study we shared stories of welcome as well as stories of inhospitality. We went on to look at the Old Testament teaching of the Passover and its links to the Lord's Supper. We've studied Jesus' own words in the gospels about the Lord's Supper, and we have focused on Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 11 and discussed the imperatives about "discerning the body" and self-examination (vv. 27-29).

Let's turn now to the imperative found in verse 33: "wait for one another" (NRSV, NIV 1984).

- Most of us have experienced waiting for a red traffic light to turn green or sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Describe a recent time when you found yourself in a similar situation. What did you do while you were waiting? How did you feel? How did you react?

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY? (15 MINUTES)

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 as a group. The imperative about "discerning the body" recognizes the value of each member of the body, including the poor. The imperative of self-examination cautions us against destroying unity and challenges us to rectify the abuses named in verses 21-22.

Reread 1 Corinthians 11:33. The Greek term *ekdechomai* means "to accept" or "to wait." Its root word, *déchomai*, means "to receive" in the sense of "to welcome" or "to extend hospitality" (see Luke 9:53; 2 Cor. 7:15; Gal. 4:14).

1. What principle for participation at the Lord's Supper is found in the phrase "wait for one another"?
2. How would you explain the impatience and lack of waiting in the Corinthian church?
3. Share some personal stories of hospitality that members in the group may have experienced.
4. Both Galatians 5:22 and Colossians 3:12 indicate that patience is central to the Spirit-led life. Why is patience so central to communal, Spirit-led living? How can we "wait for one another" joyfully?

CHALLENGES FOR THE COMMUNITY (20 MINUTES)

As we close this study of 1 Corinthians 11, let's reflect on what it means to belong to God's family. We have seen the divisions in the Corinthian community, and we have heard Paul's admonition to practice the Lord's Supper in such a way that it symbolizes the unity of God's people (cf. 1 Cor. 10:16-17). The selfish behavior of the rich preventing the less fortunate from partaking was contrary to the meaning of the Lord's Supper, a family meal of thanksgiving.

1. What words are synonymous with "belonging"? What does "not belonging" feel like? What role does the Lord's Supper play in helping us "belong"?
2. Extending our arms to receive and welcome others can be risky business. Take a moment to stretch out both of your arms. What a vulnerable position! Read Philippians 2:1-11 and visualize Jesus as he hung on the cross. He made himself vulnerable for us! The crucifixion is the epitome

of Jesus' humility and his surrender to the Father's will. How have you personally experienced God's grace and forgiveness? What are some of the fruits or consequences of grace and humility? Can we be gracious and welcoming to others and at the same time be full of pride?

3. How are we acting in ways that reflect union and communion with God and his people?. What steps can we take as individuals, as a small group, and as a congregation to be more gracious and welcoming?

CLOSING PRAYER (10 MINUTES)

1. Take time to share items of praise and concern.
2. Include in your closing prayer a time of praise and thanksgiving for
 - God's grace.
 - being adopted into God's family.
 - the people in our lives.
3. Confess actions that reflect disunity—as individuals, as a group, as a congregation.
4. Ask for humility and unity, for hearts to be broken with the things that break the heart of God.