

Communion: Discerning the Lord's Body 4-21-13

All of us have had to miss gathering together with our local congregation due to travel, health or other activities. Perhaps we have asked ourselves or been asked the question if it is permissible to take communion away from our church. Imagine the scenario of two hunters who are both members of the church, but will be gone on Sunday hunting. Can they satisfy the "Laws of Communion" that we spoke of this morning by partaking of communion together?

Surprisingly, the answer to this question really is found in the authority we have to establish a congregation (local church). The Bible indicates by both direct statements (I Corinthians 11:23-34, I Corinthians 16:1-2) and by necessary inferences (Acts 20:7, Acts 2:39) that only a local church may partake of communion. So what we are really asking is: are two Christians together a local church?

Often people turn to Matthew 18:20 as the support that two Christians form a church ("For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.") and can therefore partake of communion together. However, the context of that passage is specific to the Apostles, who had just been given the "keys to the kingdom" in 18:19 ("Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven."). This passage has NO authority to establish a congregation within its meaning; it is a directive unique to apostolic authority.

Instead, we ought to look to passages such as Ephesians 4:8-12: (*"He) gave gifts to men.....and He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ"*) as the authorizing passages for establishing a church. There we see Jesus first giving unique offices to establish a church: apostles and prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. So as not to confuse us, let us understand that the work of apostles and prophets for congregations is complete in the form of the New Testament, which was written by apostles and prophets (II Peter 1:19-21). We understand the works of preachers, elders and teachers. The second point in this passage speaks to purpose and intent: the local church is meant to establish a work of Christians in helping people get to heaven.

Two or three men cannot establish a local church without the intent and purpose of perpetuating it. Therefore, they are not establishing a congregation when they are in the woods, at the lake, on the road, etc.

Let us revisit our original theme: communion is a gift only given to the local church. The very word communion is most typically used to describe a common union of people. It is not what creates a congregation, but takes place in a congregation.

More specifically, in I Corinthians 11:23-25 Paul said that we must (individually) examine ourselves to take communion, since *"he who eats and drinks in an unworthy*

manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body". What does Paul mean by "discerning the Lord's body"?

The context of the passage (effectively, from chapter 11 through chapter 15) deals with the conduct of the church, particularly when they gather together as an assembly. Paul repeatedly describes the Lord's body as the congregation "*For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*" 1 Corinthians 10:17; "*...for the sake of His body, which is the church*" Colossians 1:24b.

Paul makes it clear that the main theme of 1 Corinthians 11 and the problems in communion were due to their lack of regard for one another and the church as a whole . (*For first of all, when you come together as a church.....What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?* 1 Corinthians 11:18a,22)

So how is it that we "discern" the church, the local body of Christ? First, it is about simply being together when we take it (*Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.* 1 Corinthians 11:33). Second, it is about being without divisions (*For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it* 1 Corinthians 11:18)

It matters with whom we partake communion. Since we are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes, it is inferred that we are also proclaiming in our common union that we are the ones going to heaven. Could we do this if we went to a congregation that taught and practiced false doctrines?

We now see why there are dangers in communion . One of them is taking it without understanding the purpose and intent; it is a memorial, not a sacrament. A sacrament is something holy by itself; communion is holy because of those who are present when we partake of it. Another danger is taking it apart from the church. This amounts to not "discerning the Lord's body". Finally, is there anything more adverse to the "common union" than taking it for myself rather than the church? When we think we can partake of communion alone, it ceases to be either common or union, but exclusive, and contrary to the purpose and intent of communion.