

The Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Introduction: The Lord's Supper, or what some call communion, is so important to the Christian faith it is addressed 5 times in the Bible. It appears in Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 10:16-22; and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Along with Baptism, it constitutes the two ordinances of the church. We recognize some view "foot washing" as an ordinance (John 13:1-20) and that the Roman Catholic Church recognizes 7 (Baptism, Eucharist [the Lord's Supper], Confirmation, Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction). Evangelicals and Baptists limit the number of ordinances to only two, because only Baptism and the Lord's Supper meet five important guidelines:

- 1) It was prescribed by the Lord.
- 2) It was proclaimed in the saints.
- 3) It was practiced by the churches.
- 4) It was participated in only by the saved.
- 5) It pictures the atoning sacrifice and bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Now, one other issue must be addressed before examining this text. How are we to understand the nature of the Lord's Supper? What is the relationship of Christ to

this ordinance? Basically, four views have been held in the history of the Church. I follow closely Mark Dever's excellent study in *Theology for the Church*, pages 647-49.

- 1) Transubstantiation – Communion is an “unbloody sacrifice” of Christ that is continual and ongoing. The elements change in substance but not appearance. Effectual grace is communicated to the participant. This is the Roman Catholic position.
- 2) Consubstantiation – The elements are not changed (transubstantiated) but Christ is “in, with and under” the substance of the bread and wine. The sacrament, therefore, is the true body and blood of Christ. This is the Lutheran position.
- 3) Spiritual presence – Christ is present in the Lord's Supper spiritually but not physically. By faith we enjoy a unique and special presence of our Lord when we come together as the body of Christ. This is the view of John Calvin (1509-64) and one I believe is compatible with the 4th position held by most Baptists.
- 4) Memorial – In a sense all hold this view, though as Dever notes, “the other three positions go beyond the supper as memorial, but no one denies this is an aspect of the Lord's Supper” (p. 648). The memorial view sees communion as symbolic of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. Now, as I noted, I believe views 3 & 4 are so close in understanding they can actually be held

together. Again, I quote Mark Dever, “Baptists have historically used language so rich about Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper for those who come by faith that little difference is perceptible between their position and the Reformed idea of Christ’s spiritual presence” (page 648).

The Lord’s Supper is a holy and sacred practice where believers come together as a body to remember, meditate upon, and celebrate the atoning death of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. It is not something to be trifled with or handled in a flippant manner. To do so is to invite the severe reprimand of the apostle and the judgement of our God. First Corinthians 11:17-34 makes this crystal clear.

I. We must deal with problems when we come to the Lord’s Table 11:17-22

When a church deserves to be praised, we should praise it. And, when a church needs to be rebuked and corrected, we should do that too. Speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) requires that we do both.

1) We must deal with divisiveness 11:17-19

Paul began with a word of commendation in 11:2. Now he begins his discussion of the church’s behavior at the Lord’s Supper with a word of criticism (v. 17). “Now in giving this instruction I do not praise you.” Why? “Since you come together not for the better but for the worse.” The church’s gathering for worship and observing of communion was neither glorifying to

God or edifying for the body. In particular (*CSB*, “For to begin with;” *ESV*, “For in the first place”), “I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it” (v. 18). Schreiner notes as we move through the passage, we discover the divisions were “sociological instead of theological” (*I Cor.* TNTC, 241). They were between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Further, the divisions, though wrong, are still used by God for redemptive purposes. While Paul regrets the divisions that have arisen at the gathering of the Lord’s Supper, he recognizes that these “factions” are “necessary...that those who are approved may be recognized among you” (v. 19). Schreiner again is helpful when he says, “The factions that break out have, it seems, a refining and purifying effect on the church in that they clarify who truly belongs to God and also uncover those who do not truly belong to God” (*Ibid*). How we love and defer to one another speaks volumes of our walk with God.

2) We must deal with selfishness

11:20-22

The Corinthians were operating in self-deception when they came together to observe this sacred communal meal. In actuality, “When you come together, then, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper” (v. 20). What is the evidence that the apostle sets forth? Simply this. “For at the meal (*ESV*, “in eating”), each one eats his own supper” (*ESV*, “each one goes ahead with his own meal”). The

result? “So one person is hungry while another gets drunk! (v. 20). It is difficult to read and believe these words. Apparently, the Corinthians were guilty of segregating the church (rich and poor) and of gluttony! Perhaps being influenced by the pagan festivals they once indulged in, the wealthy gorged on food and drink and got drunk in the process. All the while, the poor (many of whom were probably slaves) went hungry with little or nothing to eat and drink. Wiersbe is almost certainly correct, “It is likely that the weekly agape feast was the only decent meal some of the poorer members regularly had; and to be treated so scornfully by the richer members not only hurt their stomachs, but also their pride” (*Be Wise*, 128). Paul is outraged by such selfish and sinful behavior and delivers a stern rebuke in verse 22: “Don’t you have homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I praise you? I do not praise you in this matter!” *The Message* concludes verse 22 with, “I never would have believed you would stoop to this. And I’m not going to stand by and say nothing!” A sacred meal that should have been building up the church was actually tearing it down. Such selfish and narcissistic behavior insulted God and embarrassed their brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no place for praise when we act like this.

II. We must honor the meals' purpose when we come to the Lord's Table

11:23-26

Paul moves to provide clear and careful instructions on the purposes and significance of communion. It is nothing like a pagan feast or wild party. It is a solemn act of worship that has its historical roots in the last supper our Lord had with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. Theologically it calls us to look back, forward, inward and outward.

1) It is a commemoration of the Lord's death

11:23-25

In words that follow closest the account in Luke 22:14-20, Paul informs the Corinthians he is simply passing on what he “received from the Lord” (v. 23). Paul was passing on the tradition that originated with Jesus and was then relayed to others by the apostles, including himself. The words are simple and yet powerful. “On the night (before he was crucified) when he was betrayed (by Judas), the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me”” (v. 23-24). The taking of the bread and its breaking commemorates and pictures the sacrifice of Jesus as his body was beaten and broken for us. Paul continues in verse 25, “In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do

this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”” The “new covenant” recalls the language of Ex. 24:8 and especially Jere. 31:31-34. Jesus’ blood points to his brutal death and the atoning blood sacrifice poured out on the cross. Leviticus 17:11 reminds us that life is in the blood, and Heb. 9:22 affirms, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” The hymn writer wonderfully reminds us, “Would you be free from the burden of sin? There’s power in the blood.” Indeed, there is power in the blood of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. We remember this truth every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

2) It is a proclamation that anticipates the Lord’s return 11:26

The Lord’s Supper calls us to look to the past as we remember our Savior’s sacrifice for our sins on the cross. But now Paul tells us we should also look to the future. Why? Verse 26 provides the answer. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” The Lord’s Supper should certainly be a time of careful meditation and reflection. But it should also be a time of joyful anticipation and celebration! Yes, he died, but he rose from the dead and he is coming again. Sorrow and joy are partners in this meal. I think John Piper says it well, “should the Lord’s Supper be solemn or cheerful? I’m saying it should not be either-or and should not be sequentially. There is a solemnity with explosive joy, and

there is sweet cheerfulness whose eyes are brimming with tears” (“The Lord’s Supper,” Desiring God). In the Lord’s Supper we testify to a Savior who died but is alive, one who came and is coming again!

III. We must make preparation when we come to the Lord’s Table 11:27-34

The Bible does not tell us how often believers should gather to celebrate and observe communion. We would say, however, it should be regular and often enough to prompt the careful introspection of our soul that each one of us needs for spiritual health and nourishment. This is especially the case for those going through trials, difficulty, and suffering. The precious testimonies from the persecuted church of their observance of communion are many. Paul has told us to look backwards and forward. Now teaches us to look inward and outward.

1) There must be personal examination of ourselves 11:27-32

Verse 27 begins the conclusion of Paul’s discussion joined to a stern warning. “So, then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord.” The divisiveness and selfish behavior of the Corinthians makes them unworthy to come to the Lord’s Table. John Calvin writes, “To eat unworthily, then, is to pervert the pure and right use of it by our abuse of it”

(1 Cor. 385). Such actions do not honor Christ. They are grievous sins against Christ and his atoning sacrifice. Paul, therefore, issues a strong word of command, “Let a person examine (pre. imp) himself; in this way let him eat the bread and drink from the cup (v. 28). Examine yourself. Look at your life and do inventory of your heart. If you are not right with God and others, then it would be better for you to not draw near to the table of communion (cf. Matt. 5:23-24). The consequences of coming in an unworthy manner are strikingly detailed in verses 29-30. “For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing (*ESV*, “discerning”) the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (v. 29). Exactly what Paul means by “the body” here is unclear. It is Christ? Is it the church? I really like Schreiner’s both/and solution to this question: “perhaps the best solution does not opt for an either-or. In partaking of the bread, believers participate ‘in the body of Christ’ (1 Cor. 10:16); and ‘Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body’ (1 Cor. 10:17). Paul has already forged a close connection between the broken body of Christ and the one body which is the church. The same connection and link is probably present here as well. Those who discriminate against other members of the congregation while eating and drinking of the elements do not discern the significance of Christ’s death, nor do they perceive the unity of the body. Indeed, Christ by

his death has made all believers one. Those who fail to perceive the significance of Christ's broken body and the unity of the church incur judgment." (p. 247). The precise nature of the judgment is now explained in verse 30. The words are shocking to say the least. "This is why many are sick (*ESV*, "weak") and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep (*ESV*, "died"). The *CSB* is more literal, but the *ESV* captures the literal meaning. God's judgment was quite severe for those who desecrated his table. Some were sick and some had died. It is important to note that the metaphor of sleep is often used in the Bible for the death of a believer and never an unbeliever. Such persons do not lose their salvation, but their earthly life is cut short. As Leon Morris says, "Spiritual ills may have physical results" (1 Cor. TNTC, 161). Indeed, some may even be fatal.

Paul explains in verses 31-32 it does not have to be this way if the church is acting like the church. "If we were properly judging ourselves (*ESV*, "judged ourselves truly"), we would not be judged" (v. 31). If we properly take care of things, then God does not have to step in. But, if we don't, he will. And, as we would expect, there will be redemptive value for the church: "but when we were judged by the Lord, we are disciplined, so that we may not be condemned with the world" (v. 32). These words are sobering as well as comforting. God will discipline us as his children (cf.

Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:5-13) but he will not condemn us with the world in final judgment. He loves us too much to let us continue acting as fools.

We cannot lose our spiritual life because we are secure in Christ (John 10:27-28). The same, however, cannot be said for physical life.

2) There must be humble consideration of others 11:33-34

Curtis Vaughn reminds us: “Paul’s stern warnings in this section are a reminder that participation in the Lord’s Supper is no trivial matter. It is a solemn privilege to be undertaken by those who come in earnestness and commitment. The Supper is a memorial to Christ, an anticipation of His return, and it becomes a source of much help and encouragement to the participant. It should be undertaken only by a believer serious about his fellowship with God and other brothers in Christ. It must be preceded by rigorous self-examination and not be performed superficially at each quarterly, monthly, or weekly observance” (*1 Cor.*, BSC, 123).

Paul drives these truths home in the final verses of chapter 11. Again, he is tender as he concludes, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, welcome (*ESV*, “wait”) one another” (v. 33). Be kind and gracious to one another. Defer to one another. Adopt the mind of Christ so beautifully expound in Phil. 2:3-4. Verse 34 parallels verse 22. If one is

really concerned about getting enough to eat, which is not the focus or point of communion, “he should eat at home, so that when you gather together you will not come under judgment” and receive God’s discipline. There were other matters Paul needed to discuss with the church, but those could wait another time, “whenever I come.” These may or may not be related to the Lord’s Supper. We cannot be sure. What we do know is he feels that he said enough for now. If they listen to his counsel laid out in verses 17-34, he will be satisfied.

Conclusion:

How Beautiful

by Twila Paris

How beautiful the hands that served
 The wine and the bread and the sons of the earth
 How beautiful the feet that walked
 The long dusty roads and the hill to the cross
 How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful
 Is the body of Christ

How beautiful the heart that bled
 That took all my sin and bore it instead
 How beautiful the tender eyes
 That choose to forgive and never despise

How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful
Is the body of Christ

And as he lay down his life
We offer this sacrifice
That we will live just as he died
Willing to pay the price
Willing to pay the price

How beautiful the radiant bride
Who waits for her groom with his light in her eyes
How beautiful when humble hearts give
The fruit of pure lives so that others may live
How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful
Is the body of Christ

How beautiful the feet that bring
The sound of good news and the love of the King
How beautiful the hands that serve
The wine and the bread and the sons of the Earth
How beautiful, how beautiful, how beautiful
Is the body of Christ.