



The Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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Normally when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I just continue whatever series I am working on and relate the subject of the day to the Lord's Supper. But this time I felt that it would be a good thing to focus directly on the Lord's Supper in the sermon which also means focusing on the death of Christ. One of the great purposes of the Lord's Supper, of course, is to keep the death of Christ central by having us remember it on a regular basis, but it is more than a memorial and it will be useful to review some of the main aspects of this sacrament.

It is worthwhile to ask why the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper. The full answer to that question is seen in the various aspects of its meaning, but I think it will be useful to consider that question in a very general way. If we ponder the question of why the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper, the most general answer to that question is that he intended it to help us in our Christian lives. We don't have to do any in-depth interpretation of any of the Lord Supper texts, to arrive at that conclusion. We just need to step back and think of the Lord instituting this practice and consider that his purpose was obviously to help us in some way – to bless his people – to help them to live the life of believing on him and following him.

Clearly the Lord felt that celebrating the Lord's Supper on a regular basis would be profitable for his people as they seek to live their lives of faith and obedience. He is our creator. He understands us better than we understand ourselves. And on the basis of that exhaustive understanding of our needs, he celebrated the first Lord's Supper with his disciples and told them to continue celebrating it on a regular basis until he returned. This practice is something that we need. This symbolic meal is something that is important for our spiritual growth and

wellbeing. And the implication of this is that we must consider the Lord's Supper as important for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. It is very easy for us to undervalue the Lord's Supper. As Reformed people we rightly give considerable emphasis to the Word of God, blessed by the Spirit, for both initiating our salvation and for nurturing us in our spiritual lives. That is a good and necessary and biblical emphasis.

But it is easy, I think, to minimize the importance of the Lord's Supper. That is why it is useful to remind ourselves of this very basic truth that Jesus, who knows our needs better than we know our own needs, gave us this Supper as something that is important for our spiritual wellbeing.

The implication of that is that it is important for us to give the effort to receive the blessing from it that the Lord intends. It means that it is important for us to understand how the Lord intends to bless us through celebrating the Lord's Supper and to take the time to think about it, not only for the few minutes that we are actually celebrating the Lord's Supper, but also in the times between the celebrations of the Lord Supper so that we actually apply it to our lives.

One of the ways to do that is to take a passage like the passage that we just read and carefully think it through applying it to your own lives and asking the question, how does the Lord intend for me to benefit from the celebration of the Lord's Supper? Another way is dwell on the relevant sections of our confessions which have the advantage of being short and pithy and well-thought-out summaries of biblical truth that are actually very edifying to read and ponder. In particular, the Westminster Larger Catechism, which you can access online if you do not have a paper copy, has some very valuable and practical questions and answers on the Lord's Supper. For instance, there is a Q/A on how to prepare yourself before coming to the Lord's Supper. There is another on what to be thinking about during the Lord's Supper and yet another on how to profit from it afterward. These are wonderful devotional aids that God has given to us to help us take seriously in a practical way this sacrament which our Lord has given to us for our spiritual good and wellbeing.

Well that is an observation which comes from the simple fact that Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper to help us in some way in the Christian

life. We will now consider some of what we learn about the Lord's Supper in this passage of Scripture – 1 Corinthians 11, especially verses 23-26. In verse 23, Paul describes what Jesus did with the bread and what he said in connection with the bread. "[H]e ... 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.'

Jesus did this "on the night when he was betrayed." So just before he went to the cross. There he is with his disciples in the upper-room. They are eating the Passover meal together. And Jesus takes a loaf of bread and breaks it and he says, "This is my body, which is for you." And then he gives a piece to each of his disciples.

Clearly he means that the broken bread represented his body. Jesus was about to go to the cross. Pretty soon he was going to be arrested, tried and crucified. And there he is with his disciples. He is not fleeing. He is not trying to get away. He knows, even if they do not yet understand, that he is giving his life for them. He had already taught in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." So there in the upper room with his disciples, he uses broken bread as a symbol for his body which is about to be broken and he says to his disciples, "This is my body, which is for you."

And he hands them a piece of the bread and they take it and they eat it. The symbolism is clear. Jesus is saying, "What I am about to do, I am doing for you." And even more pointed and personal, he hands them each a piece of the bread, which he had just said represented his broken body, and by that he is saying, "I give my broken body to you." And we understand him to mean – "What I am about to accomplish by giving my body to the cross, I give to you."

From what happens in the hours that follow, it is clear that the disciples did not understand the significance of what Jesus was doing. But that was OK because it was Jesus' intention that they remember this moment and as the Holy Spirit would lead them to understand the significance of Jesus' death, they would understand the significance of the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. Jesus would die in their place. Jesus would give his life as a ransom for their sins. Jesus was going to give his life as the propitiation for their sins which means that he would give his

life as the sacrifice which would appease the wrath of God for their sins. By his death on the cross, Jesus would pay the penalty for their sins. By his death on the cross Jesus would deliver them from sin itself. And the broken bread is a symbol of all of that.

And he hands that symbol to them. And he is saying by that, “All that this broken bread represents I give to you.” And he says, “Do this in remembrance of me.” He is saying, “I want you repeat these actions and these words again and again and again. For as long as you are on this earth, I want you to repeat these actions and these words on a regular basis. And I want my people to repeat these actions and these words regularly as long as the world continues – until I return.”

Now there is enough meaning here to give the theologians depths to ponder, but we don’t need to go to those depths to understand what is going on here. All we need to do is think about the question of why Jesus would want his people to repeat these actions and his words again and again and again. Why did he want them to regularly remember this night and what he did and what he said? That is not a great mystery.

It is significant that Jesus did not just tell them what he was about to do and why. He had done that to some extent. And they would later come to understand much more clearly the significance of Jesus’ death when the Holy Spirit was poured out and enabled them to interpret Jesus’ death in the light of the Old Testament Scriptures. But here Jesus is not just speaking. He is using symbols. He is using symbolic actions. He is using words that he intended to be repeated over and over again. There are not a lot of words here. Just a few highly significant words to be repeated over and over again. “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

This is what Jesus wanted his people to see and hear repeatedly throughout their lives – this action of him handing out the symbols of his broken body and poured out blood along with these short pithy sayings. Just a handful of words repeated throughout the lifetime of each of his people and throughout the ages until his return.

The symbolism is very clear. The meaning of the words is unmistakable. The actions and the words go together, and they remind us again and

again and again of Jesus giving to his people all that is represented by the symbols of his broken body and shed blood. He wants this picture to be etched into our minds and upon our hearts. Jesus giving himself for us and to us. A very simple action. Very simple words. Intended to remind us and to impress upon our hearts again and again and again. “This is my body, which is for you. This is my body which is for you. This is my body which is for you.” Jesus intended for these actions and words to be burned into our hearts. And for us never to forget them. “Do this in remembrance of me.”

This is important for our spiritual wellbeing and for our spiritual growth. It is important for us that the truth conveyed by these words and actions be top of mind as we live our lives as followers of Jesus. It is important, as we experience the ups and downs and the challenges of following Jesus, that we are repeatedly reminded that Jesus gives himself to us as the one who died for us – as the one who was crucified for us. This truth must not be allowed to recede to the edges of our minds. We need always to remember this absolutely basic truth of the Christian life. Jesus gives himself for us and he gives himself to us as the one who took the penalty for our sin and paid it in full.

You see if we forget – if we allow this truth about Jesus to drift away to the periphery of our consciousness, our awareness of how freely Jesus gives himself to us may weaken and to the extent that that weakens to that extent we stand alone before God in our sins. Our sins rise up against us. The devil accuses us. And we begin to think in terms of having to make ourselves acceptable to God by our own works. And that is very harmful to our spiritual wellbeing. Our spiritual growth is rooted in the grace of God in Christ. Our relationship with God is healthy when we are trusting in Jesus and in his love for us. It is vital for our spiritual wellbeing that we are confident of the truth that Jesus is conveying and emphasizing in the words and actions of the Lord’s Supper. Our love for Jesus is rooted in confidence of his love for us and of his free offer of himself to us with all that is in him.

The Lord’s Supper is about Jesus reassuring us of his love and his grace by the repetition of these simple words and actions. “This is my body, which is for you.” Do not forget this! This is at the center. This is at the

core of our spiritual wellbeing. This is what Jesus wants us to be reminded of again and again and again. This is what we are prone to forget. This is what the devil wants us to forget. The natural drift of our hearts is to forget this truth and to begin to think in terms of earning God's favor.

This is why the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." This is why he wrote in Galatians 6:14, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...." This is why Jude writes in verse 20-21 of his epistle, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." At the very heart of a healthy relationship with Jesus is a confidence in what Jesus acts out and says in the Lord's Supper. "This is my body, which is for you." Do not forget this! Remember me as the one who gives his body for you and to you. Picture me with my hand outstretched to give you myself and all the aspects of salvation that are in me – the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, acceptance by God as righteous, release from the bondage of sin.

What Jesus says and does next makes the same point, but it adds some details by bringing in the idea of the new covenant. Verse 25, "In the same way also he took the cup, after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" "This cup with its contents is a symbol of my blood and my blood establishes the new covenant."

Our relationship with God is a covenant relationship which means that it is an official formal relationship like marriage. It is a relationship which is a serious permanent relationship which is supported by promises and oaths. When a couple is married they make promises to one another and they swear an oath before God. The purpose of all that is to strengthen the relationship. To give confidence in the relationship. It has to do with security in the relationship.

Our relationship with God is covenantal so that we can count on God and so he can count on us. God does not need to swear an oath so that we can count on him, but he does so anyway to help us to be confident

of his promises, of his commitment to us. But though the intention of the covenant is to bind us to faithfulness and obedience, because of our sin, we constantly break our promises and our covenant commitments. That is why blood is a part of the biblical covenants. The blood points to the fact that the penalty for covenant breaking is death, but it also points to the provision that God makes for our forgiveness. In the Old Testament the blood that pointed to forgiveness was the blood of the animal sacrifices. In the New Testament the blood is the blood of Christ.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” He is giving us the new covenant. In the cup he gives us what the cup and the wine in the cup represents – the new covenant.

And the new covenant is a bundle of promises – promises reinforced with an oath – for that is integral to covenant. The new covenant is new because it is better than the old covenant. The old covenant was good, but it was not good enough. It was not good enough because Israel was not able to keep it. There was something lacking in it. Its purpose was partly to demonstrate that more was necessary for man to live in harmony with God than wonderful deliverances, miracles, instructions and laws. The Old Testament provision for God was a wonderful provision, but it was not enough. In the end, the history of Israel is a disaster in spite of all that God had done for them and given them. And all of that was designed to show that something more was necessary that only Christ could give. The new covenant describes that something more.

Listen carefully to how God introduces the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, “Behold, the days are coming [God is pointing here to the days of Jesus], declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no

longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more."

This is what Jesus is referring to in the Lord's Supper when he says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." This is what he is handing to us in the cup. He is handing to us the writing of his law on our hearts. He is giving to us the internal renewal of the Holy Spirit to enable us to keep his law. He is granting to us the knowledge of God which belongs to salvation – the knowledge of God which is eternal life. And he is giving to us the forgiveness of our sins. And he is giving all that to us in covenant form which means as a promise reinforced with an oath.

And Jesus wants us to picture him with his hand outstretched to us with the cup and say, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." By taking the cup you take what it represents – the new covenant promises of the law written on your hearts and the saving knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins. Jesus wants us to be reminded of this picture over and over again. He wants us to see him in our minds handing us the cup and saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

Now God's covenant promises require a response for us to participate in them. The response is seen in the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. We receive the bread and we receive the cup. The covenant is a relationship in which both parties make promises and commitments. The covenant requires faith. And the covenant requires obedience. And the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to strengthen our faith and to strengthen our obedience. Jesus hands us the bread and the cup. And we must receive it. All of the symbolism of what Jesus says and does requires the symbolism of what we do in taking the bread and taking the cup. In order for us to receive what is offered we must believe, and we must commit ourselves to obedience. This belongs to the nature of covenants. The strength to believe and obey come from the Lord, but we must believe and obey in that strength.

So the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal and that means there are commitments on both sides. Jesus offers himself to us. Jesus offers the new covenant to us. He does it by the words and he does it in the

symbolic actions. And we receive the bread and the wine and if we truly participate, we receive them by faith and in our receiving them is also a commitment to live the life of salvation.

The purpose of all of this is for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. The purpose of the symbols and the symbolic actions and short memorable words and the repetition is to hear and see again and again, Jesus handing to us the symbols of his sacrifice and all that it means so that we are always mindful of how really and truly Jesus offers himself to us and we are to receive these symbols by faith and by so doing recommit ourselves to living the life that salvation is. And by the tangible nature of the symbols and actions and by the simplicity and by the repetition, the Lord's purpose is that our confidence in his love and the reality of his offer of himself to us will be sustained and will be support and will grow, but also that the repeated act of recommitting ourselves to live the life of obedience and thanksgiving that is such a huge part of what salvation means, we will also be strengthened in living that life.

As I said earlier, there is much more. We can grow in our understanding of the deeper aspects of the Lord's Supper. But ultimately the Lord's Supper is meant to be simple and to reinforce in our minds and in our hearts the absolute basics of the gospel. The gospel acted out. Addressed to our eyes as well as our ears. Making abstract ideas concrete. Leaving us with a simple message and a simple picture in our minds. Jesus handing us the bread and saying, "This is my body which is for you." Jesus handing us the cup and saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." And us, as we receive the bread and the cup by faith receive also what they signify. The point it all is so that we can be assured of the reality to which all of it points.