

FAITHFUL PARTAKERS
1 Corinthians 11:23-34
August 7, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist, Birmingham

How do you celebrate the Lord's Supper? This question was pressed into my mind and heart on a mission trip to Kiev, Ukraine eight (8) years ago. Our group was asked to lead the worship service on the first Sunday of the month, which, as a holdover from Russian Orthodoxy, happened to be Communion Sunday. But this was no ordinary communion service for me. I felt more than a bit ashamed at being the guest of honor when I noticed the passion that these Ukrainian believers had for the Lord's Table. The pastor led with a few brief words and then asked if there were any others that might like to speak. For the next 45-minutes this group of about 200 openly confessed sin, prayed for unbelieving family members and friends, prayed for protection from the evil one and unity in the body, and lifted up the name of the Lord in praise and thanksgiving. It was, quite frankly, unlike anything I have ever seen in the United States.

I recognize that this passion might simply have been a misplaced zeal on the part of some. There were probably those that continued to hold the Russian Orthodox belief of the real bodily presence of Christ in the elements. Others were perhaps emotionally caught up in the moment. Others might have simply been trying to impress their American visitors. But for whatever reason, I came under deep conviction that morning as to how I had approached the Lord's Supper in the past. I had heard more than one sermon on examining yourself to make sure you are worthy of approaching the Table and certainly had, to the best of my ability, done that at least at some Communion times in the past. But what I saw in those people, and what brought me under such deep conviction, was doctrine and practice simultaneously displayed. My burden for the Lord's Table was born out of an overwhelming picture that I saw, perhaps for the first time, of the theology of the Lord's Supper.

I fear today that many do not understand the true sacramental aspect of the Lord's Supper. I have the burden of proof on my side. Why is it that the Lord's Supper, in many churches, has become the least attended service on the calendar, almost optional? Why is it that Communion has become almost an afterthought in some worship services, tacked on at the end of the service without any explanation whatsoever? Simply put – how is it that people today have become so flippant with the Lord's Supper? The same way these at Corinth did – they fail to understand the necessity of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. However, as we see in our text this morning, *the Lord's Supper, as instituted by Christ Himself, is a means of grace to remember and proclaim the gospel of Christ until His return.* Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that the Lord's Table is nothing to be trifled with. So I ask you, as we work our way through our text this morning in anticipation of partaking together at the Lord's Table in a few moments, *how do you celebrate the Lord's Supper?*

There are two things for us to see in this text this morning: (1) a reminder of the purpose of the Lord's Supper and (2) the preparation for partaking of the Lord's Supper.

I. Reminder of the Purpose of the Lord's Supper (11:23-26)

In this section Paul reiterates to the Corinthian believers that the sole purpose of Christ's instituting the Lord's Supper was *to celebrate His death.* We see in the verses preceding our text (11:17-22) that the Corinthian's were indeed celebrating, but it was anything but a celebration of Christ's death. Christ's death on the Cross as their substitute, **"which is for you,"** should have

dominated their meeting together at the Lord's Table. But they had in fact made a mockery of the Supper by using it for their own physical appetite and worldly desires. When they came together for this time of celebration they were gluttons and drunkards – eating all they could eat and drinking all they could drink without any consideration of the death of Christ or the body of believers, often excluding some “lesser-knowns” from the celebration. Rather than an occasion to focus on the Cross and selflessness, this time had become a time to focus on self and selfishness. So Paul issues this reminder of the purpose of the Lord's Supper.

1. Remember (11:23-25)

The first purpose Paul gives for the Supper is for the believer to *remember Him*. All of us tend to forget. It is a consequence of the Fall. Man was created in the image of God – perfect in righteousness, holiness and knowledge. After the Fall, this perfect righteousness, holiness and knowledge was severely marred. In theological terms we call this total or utter depravity. Every part of man's being is affected by sin. Though the image of God remains, it is tainted by sin. One of the effects of this taintedness is that we often forget. This is the general effect of sin on all mankind – believer and unbeliever alike.

However, given the nature of the Lord's Supper, we know that it was instituted for a particular purpose – to remember the Lord's death. This is important to understand because *you cannot forget or remember what you have never known*. In order to “**do this in remembrance of Him**” suggests the fact that these Corinthians had trusted in Christ's atoning death on their behalf. As one writer put it, “**remember**” means “to call back again into memory a vivid experience.” In other words, the Lord's Supper is for believers to remember His body given for them (a reference to His substitutionary atonement) and His blood shed on their behalf (a reference to His blood which ratified a new covenant and without which there is no remission of sins). While that is a mouthful, simply stated, the Supper is a reminder that we are partakers *in Christ* and at the table we receive anew the benefits of His death. Wayne Grudem points out that in our participation we are saying, “I am taking the benefits of Christ's death to myself” (*Systematic Theology*, 990). It is a great reminder that we are to live each day in the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. This is what it means to “remember Him.”

Before we look at the second purpose of the Lord's Supper given in this text, I would like to give a bit of a historical sketch as it relates to the phrase, “**This is My body.**” This little phrase has caused much consternation throughout the history of the church.

The Roman Catholic teaching is that the bread and the wine *actually* become the body and blood of Christ. This happens at the moment the priest elevates the bread and pronounces, “This is my body.” Grace is imparted to those present as the sacrifice of Christ is repeated each and every time the Mass is celebrated. Christ is sacrificed over and over again and the grace imparted is necessary for salvation. So according to the Roman Catholic view, the elements *actually* become the body and blood of Christ sacrificed each time communion is taken.

Martin Luther rejected the Roman Catholic view but still insisted that “**This is My body**” should be taken literally. His teaching was that the bread did not *actually* become the body of Christ, but the physical body of Christ is present “in, with, and under” the bread, much like water is present in a sponge. The bread of communion contained *contained* the body of Christ.

Ulrich Zwingli was troubled by Luther's teaching because he struggled to see how the body of Christ, specifically His human nature, could be everywhere present. Zwingli's formulation was that the elements, the bread and the wine, are “merely symbolic” of the body and blood of

Christ. He denied that the body of Christ, now glorified in heaven, could be in any way present locally in the elements.

John Calvin, however, trying to act as mediator in the dispute that arose between Luther and Zwingli, disagreed with both men, though he tended at times to sound Zwinglian in his treatment of the Supper. While he agreed with Zwingli's symbolic language, he thought Zwingli went too far in his statement that the elements are *merely* symbolic. Notice the following from Calvin's *Institutes*:

By the showing of the symbol the thing itself is also to be shown. For unless a man means to call God a deceiver, he would never dare assert that an empty symbol is set forth by him. . . . And the godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified *is surely present there*. For why would the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, except to assure you of a true participation in it? [4.17.19, italics mine]

Most Protestants today, contrary to what many Southern Baptists believe to be the case, would hold to Calvin's view of the Supper. While we agree with Zwingli that the elements symbolize the body and blood of Christ, we, like Calvin, would disagree that these symbols are mere empty symbols. Christ is *spiritually present* in a special way when we partake of the Lord's Supper – just as His Spirit is present when the Word is proclaimed. And contrary to the Catholic view, the sacrament in and of itself does not impart grace, but, like the Word, presents Christ to us. The Lord Himself established this means of grace for us to remember Him in worship at the Lord's Table.

How do you celebrate the Lord's Supper? Perhaps these words from John MacArthur will help us to understand the importance of approaching the Lord's Table with joy and thanksgiving.

For you are two of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. Jesus gave His body, His entire incarnate life, for us who believe in Him. "I became man for you; I gave the gospel to you; I suffered for you; and I died for you." Our gracious, loving, magnanimous, merciful God became incarnate not for Himself but for us. [*1 Corinthians, 272*]

That is the essence of the Lord's Supper. And it is only as we understand this, though not perfectly or fully, that we can faithfully remember Him and proclaim Him as He desires. What a tremendous privilege it is to come to this Table!

2. Proclaim (11:26)

Paul wrote, "**For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.**" Each and every time the Lord's Supper is observed, there is a proclamation of Christ that takes place. It is, first of all, a proclamation of His life.

(1) Life – *incarnation; perfect obedience*

(2) Death – *innocent; Cross; burial*

(3) Until He comes – *resurrection; ascension; session; return* – Expresses our hope!

In other words, when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the gospel. *The Lord's Supper is an opportunity that the Lord Himself provided for us to express the hope that is within us.*

“The anticipatory character of the Lord's Supper is a feature absent from many contemporary observances of the event. In this Supper Christians remember and praise the Lord for His sacrifice, but they also anticipate His return. The memory of this dual purpose of the Supper can heighten the expectation of lethargic and earthbound Christians for the appearance of the Lord of Glory.” [*1 Corinthians*, 121]

How do you celebrate the Lord's Supper?

II. Preparation for Partaking in the Lord's Supper (11:27-34)

In verse 27, Paul moves from reminder to warning, “**Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.**” “**Unworthy manner**” refers to the way the wealthy Corinthians had approached the Lord's Table in 11:17-22. They were greedy, insensitive, and selfish in their approach, causing division in the body by excluding those that were “not like them.” It seems as if you had to have an invitation to attend this gala event in Corinth – and only those who passed muster with the top brass would be invited. Paul warns them that this is an abomination to God. The ESV picks up on this thought in translating this, “**guilty of profaning the body and the blood of the Lord.**” Their actions were no different than those who crucified Christ and they would share in the guilt of those who killed Him. Curtis Vaughan put it bluntly, “The greedy, selfish participant in the Lord's Supper *prostitutes* the very purpose of Christ's death for all mankind. In that sense he profanes and desecrates His death” [*1 Corinthians*, 122].

1. Examine yourself (11:27-32)

a. Relationship with Christ (v. 28) – relationship to the Head

b. Relationship with others in the body (v. 29) – 10:17

c. Recognize God's discipline (vv. 29-30)

krima – chastisement or discipline of the saved; judgment (v. 29)

Paul was convinced that the Corinthians disregard of the Lord's Table had caused a spiritual illness with physical results. (v. 30)

katakrima – condemned along with the world

2. Wait for one another (11:33-34)

— Bread broken and distributed; corporate aspect; rubs against the actions of the Corinthians

“It is implied that a proper distribution of food should first be made and then that all should eat together.” [C.K. Barrett]

— true “communion” with Christ takes place within the body.