

The Lord's Supper
1 Corinthians 11:17-34
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The only name given to it in the Scriptures is "The Lord's Supper" (See 1 Corinthians 11:20) or maybe also "The Lord's Table." (See 1 Corinthians 10:21) We appropriately refer to it in other ways such as:

- **Communion**, taken from the Latin translation of the Greek word for fellowship (1 Corinthians 10:16 NIV "Participation" = Greek koinonia).
- **The Eucharist** from the Latin and Greek for grateful or gratitude.
- **The Mass**. The origin of the word is uncertain but might be from the Latin for "sent." ("Ite, missa est" – "Go, you have been sent.")
- **"The sacrament"** from the Latin word translating the Greek word "mystery."
- **"An ordinance,"** which is from the Latin for something ordered by divine decree as when the Lord ordained or ordered it at the Last Supper with His disciples.

While all of these words can correctly apply to the Lord's Supper, unfortunately the words "Eucharist," "Mass," and "Sacrament" have been, in some groups, freighted with meaning beyond or even contradictory of the Scriptures. It is probably best to refer to this ritual by the name given to it in the Bible – "the Lord's Supper." But I would add that calling it "Communion" or the Eucharist is not inappropriate if those words are rightly understood.

In almost all Christian churches, the Lord's Supper is observed regularly if not frequently. Why? What does it mean? What does it accomplish? Is it important? Even those who have often participated in the Lord's Supper sometimes wonder what it is they are supposed to be doing during it.

- Should I be praying, confessing sin, or singing?
- Must I be silent or can I talk to those around me?
- What is supposed to be happening during the Lord's Supper?

While Matthew, Mark and Luke all record our Lord's institution of this ritual, to my knowledge, the only direct instruction to the church on the Lord's Supper is given by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Please observe, as we look at this text, that Paul was writing to correct a church for their inappropriate behavior before and during the Lord's Supper. It is his correction and instruction that help us understand what the Lord's Supper is all about and what we are to do as we participate.

Look at 1 Corinthians 11:17-34:

"In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

"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.

"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. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

"So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you

meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.”

A quick review of the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians would remind you that one of Paul’s primary concerns with the church in Corinth was their factionalism – their tendency to divide into camps, cliques – fighting with each other or just ignoring each other. As we have seen, he still has this problem in mind when he writes this part of the letter.

It was common for the Christian church in its early years to regularly eat a meal together. Jude called them “love feasts.” (Jude 1:12) At the end of their meal they would participate in the Lord’s Supper. In verses 17-22 Paul points out that, by their actions, they are contradicting everything the meal and the Lord’s Supper were supposed to represent: *“...your meetings do more harm than good... there are divisions among you...When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk...Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!”* (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)

Those who had much were disregarding those who had little. With open disregard for the poor among them the wealthier were (pun intended) eating it up. This contradicted the very oneness that was supposed to characterize the church. I also want you to see that when Paul completes this section of the letter, he ends it on this same theme: *“So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other.”* (1 Corinthians 11:33-34) Tucked right into that context Paul calls attention particularly to the Lord’s Supper, giving both instruction and warning.

First look at the instruction. Look at verses 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.”* (1

Corinthians 11) From this I wish to lay out for you several principles regarding the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is commanded of all Christians.

1 Corinthians 11:23,26 says, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you... For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (Cf. Matthew 26 and Mark 14) For those who would contend or at least act like Communion is optional for the believer, I would remind you that here Paul makes it quite clear that what Jesus instituted, at the Last Supper with His disciples, was meant for His church to observe until He comes again. The Lord's Supper is properly called an "ordinance" because Jesus ordained it for His church; He ordered it to be practiced. Let those who treat communion with a "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude understand that that is in direct disobedience of our Lord.

The Lord's Supper is for all believers but believers only.

1 Corinthians 11:23 *"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread..."* With those words, Paul clearly joins his instruction on the Lord's Supper here with the ritual Jesus established with His disciples at the Last Supper. Judas aside, Communion was for His followers and not others.

Not only Jesus' example but also Jesus words at the Last Supper make it equally clear that this ritual is for believers only, for Jesus speaks of the "new covenant" which is ours only by grace through faith. Those who are not believers are not part of that covenant and the Supper makes no sense for them. Participating while not believing is a contradiction.

On the other hand, all true Christians are welcome at this table whether they are members of one particular church or not. To restrict believers from participating would violate the very essence of the ritual – the unity of the people of God in the common bond of Christ.

**The Lord's Supper is a ritual for the church as a whole
and thus it is not a private act.**

- Jesus instituted it with His disciples.
- In both Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians we see that it was observed when the church came together, not individually in private.
- And the very symbolism of the common cup and single loaf speaks to a major issue in communion – our oneness with each other in Christ – reenacted every time we take communion together.

Let me speak to that point of a common cup and a single loaf. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper He took **bread** and He broke it and the disciples all took from the same loaf. Contrary to the King James Version (See 1 Corinthians 11:24) the breaking was not primarily a reference to His body being broken but to the sharing from the same loaf. (Cf. John 19:36) Jesus also took the **cup** and they all drank of it. In a brief reference to the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul makes explicit what is already implicit in Jesus' actions. Paul writes, *"Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."* Certainly in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul's major point has to do with their oneness instead of the way they were disregarding each other.

From the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus and in the church, through the centuries, Communion stresses two points at the same time – Our unity...in Christ. The Lord's Supper reflects our oneness and our oneness in Christ and His cross work to make us one in Him. For that reason we discourage private communion and even communion observed only by a part of the church, such as a small group. Such private or small group communion seems to us to be a contradiction of the very intention of communion.

Not having a single loaf large enough to feed a thousand people and also concerned with hygiene, we break the bread before Communion and we pour the drink into separate cups. So in order to make the symbolism more explicit, I wish to initiate the ritual later by actually breaking a single loaf and by pouring the drink into a single cup. The Lord's Supper is not a private act but a ritual for the whole church.

**Just as Jesus was the host at the first Lord's Supper,
so He is the host at each Lord's Supper –
He is present in the bread and cup.**

1 Corinthians 11:23-24 says, *“The Lord Jesus...took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body...’”* In all the Gospel accounts Jesus said it this strongly: Referring to the bread and then the cup he said, *“This **is** my body”* and *“This **is** my blood.”* Couldn’t Jesus have said, “This represents my body” if that was all He meant?

As I will attempt to explain better in a minute, Jesus is somehow present in the bread and drink. No, He cannot mean that he is physically present in them for He is now physically in heaven. It must mean that He is spiritually present! But as we know in much else about our God and our relationship with Him, just because it is spiritual rather than physical doesn’t mean it is any less real. As we participate in the Lord’s Supper, we benefit by remembering that Jesus is actually here. He has chosen to take up residence in the bread and cup and be the host of this Lord’s Supper even as He was at the first.

If you think I go too far in saying that Jesus is present in the bread and cup, remember John the Baptist’s experience at the baptism of Jesus. We read in the Gospel of John 1:32-33, *“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven **as a dove** and remain on him (Jesus). I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see **the Spirit** come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’”* God the Holy Spirit was present in the dove.

It ought not to be strange to us that God should present Himself to us in the physical.

- He did so in the pillar of fire that led the Israelites.
- He did so in the Shekinah glory in the Tabernacle.
- He did so in the humanity of the Lord Jesus.

John Calvin writes “God chose to represent the Holy Spirit to John in this way. Likewise God has chosen to present his Son to us in the way of the bread and cup.”¹ We know that Jesus said that in the Lord’s Supper, He is present. He has chosen to be here.

I think Charles Spurgeon captured this well in the words of a hymn:
“What food luxurious loads the board,
when at his table sits the Lord!

The wine how rich, the bread how sweet,
when Jesus deigns the guests to meet!

If now with eyes defiled and dim,
we see the signs, but see not him;
O may his love the scales displace,
and bid us see him face to face!

O glorious Bridegroom of our hearts,
your present smile a heav'n imparts!
O lift the veil, if veil there be,
let every saint your glory see. (C.H. Spurgeon)

Jesus is the host at each Lord's Supper – He is present in the bread and cup.

The Lord's Supper symbolizes the past, completed, self-sacrifice of Jesus for us and is not a perpetual or repeated sacrifice.

1 Corinthians 11:24,25 says, *"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.... This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

800 years before Jesus, Jeremiah wrote, *"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the **covenant** I made with their forefathers... "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* (31:31-34 – Emphasis Added)
A "covenant" or "testament" is a binding agreement between God and mankind. Jesus said He came to inaugurate the "new" covenant that Jeremiah prophesied.

Hebrews 12:24 declares that *"Jesus (is) the mediator of a new covenant..."* And in the Gospels, repeated here in 1 Corinthians, Jesus said that His body and blood (His willing death for us) are the means to bring about that new relationship with God. Or as Paul said it in Ephesians 2:13, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away (from God) have been brought near through the blood of

Christ.” Christ’s death, His dead body and shed blood, demonstrated that He took the wrath of God that we deserved because of our sin and made it possible for us to have peace with God.

But please note, nowhere in the New Testament is the Lord's Supper called a sacrifice. Instead, the Lord’s Supper points back to the ultimate and completed sacrifice already made by Jesus by means of His body and blood. Hebrews 9:24-26 says, *“For Christ did not ...enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the (Jewish) high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own... But now (Christ) has appeared once for all... to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”* And, Hebrews 10:10-12 says, *“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.... When (Christ) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”*

So, Jesus said, when you participate in the Lord’s Supper, “Do this...in remembrance of me.” Certainly this includes the mental exercise of recalling the facts of Christ’s death on our behalf. But it is more than that; it is also a choice. A choice to again embrace Jesus and what He has done for us. It is to affirm that **who** He is and **what** He did has **a bearing on my life today** and forever.² When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are acting out the gospel message again. Augustine refers to the Lord’s Supper as “The visible word of God.”

By Jesus death for us we can be pardoned for our sins and become the children of Almighty God and brothers and sisters of one another. Romans 5:1-2 says, *“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”* I think John Calvin summarizes this well when he writes:

“Here, then, is the...consolation which we derive from the Supper. It directs and leads us to the cross of Jesus Christ and to his resurrection, to certify to us that whatever (sin) there may be in us, the Lord nevertheless recognizes and accepts us as righteous— whatever (residuals) of death may be in us, he nevertheless gives us life— whatever misery may be in us, he nevertheless fills us with all felicity (joy). Or to explain the matter more simply—as in ourselves we are devoid of all good, and have not one particle of what might

help to procure (gain) salvation, the Supper is an attestation (affirmation) that, having been made partakers of the death...of Jesus Christ, we have every thing that is useful and salutary (healthful) to us... Let us recollect, then, that the Supper is given to us as a mirror in which we may contemplate Jesus Christ crucified in order to deliver us from condemnation, and raised again in order to procure (obtain) for us righteousness and eternal life. It is indeed true that this same grace is offered us by the (written) gospel, yet in the Supper we have more (tangible) certainty, and fuller enjoyment of it.”³ The Lord’s Supper symbolizes the past, completed, self-sacrifice of Jesus for us

Before coming to the last and most important point about the Lord’s Supper I want to deal briefly with what I think is a misunderstanding about Paul’s warning in this passage. Communion calls for self-examination of attitude and conduct. Particularly it calls us to consider how we are treating each other. Look at 1 Corinthians 11:27-29: *“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. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.”*

Here is a section of the teaching that I think has caused no end of unnecessary mental suffering among God-fearing people. The typical understanding of this passage, as I have mentioned in other sermons, is that the believer is to inspect his life to see if there is any unconfessed sin. Then feeling sufficiently sorry for it and confessing it, the believer is somehow made worthy again to take communion. And further, if we take communion without confessing our sins we eat and drink judgment on ourselves. If you think about it, it sounds very much like what we criticize in some Catholics who go to confession before they take communion. In this popular understanding of this passage have we created a form of “evangelical” confession and penance before Communion?

Closer inspection of three words might relieve us of that misunderstanding. First is the word, “unworthy.” Paul is not addressing your character, as if because of sin you are unworthy to take communion. The Gospel message is that no one is worthy and

we are made worthy not by confession but by Jesus' righteousness being given to us. Paul is not describing your character; instead he is describing certain actions that he has already been pointing out.

The second word is "examine." Again, I remind you this is not some sort of morbid introspection attempting to ferret out any vestige of formerly unknown unconfessed sin. Paul is saying I want you to test yourself to see how genuine your motives and actions are particularly toward each other.

That becomes clearer when we look at the third word, "body" in verse 29. You might recall when we began this message, I pointed out that the problem Paul was addressing in Corinth was their lack of love for each other. That disregard for each other spilled over even into their participation in the Lord's Supper. Paul describes their guilt as not "recognizing the body of the Lord." It is not that they looked at the bread and said, "I don't know what that is." It is that they were claiming to belong to Christ and his church while at the same time sinning against their brothers and sisters in the Lord.⁴

Dr. Blomberg writes of this, "The (Lord's Supper) should be a time of self-examination, not so much for past sins, though (true) repentance from them is always appropriate. Rather, Christians should consider their present attitudes toward those more needy than themselves. This would lead to a radically different group of people who ought to refrain from the Lord's Supper than usually appears. All repentant sinners are welcome, no matter how far away from God they may have recently felt. (But) all professing believers who are unprepared to give generously of their wealth to help the poor in their midst, or who treat people of lower classes as second-class citizens, or who simply remain unreconciled with fellow (believers), should refrain. Jesus' words concerning a somewhat analogous situation remain remarkably relevant here too: "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)."⁵ In 1 Corinthians 11 the Lord's Supper explicitly calls for us to examine our attitudes and conduct toward other Christians, especially the poor.

Now most importantly, The Lord's Supper is a means of grace.
There is mystery in this but not magic.

I must start with what that does not mean. Sacramentalism is a view that, when blessed, the bread and the cup bring God's saving grace to the recipient even if the recipient doesn't believe. In other words the bread and cup become inherently and automatically effective. This we reject as totally unbiblical and damning to souls.

So if we reject such a magical view, what do we accept? When we say something is a "means of grace" we declare that by that "something" God grants His grace to us whereby we are spiritually benefited. When, for example, seeking to hear from God, we humbly read God's Word, the Holy Spirit supernaturally ministers God's grace to us nurturing our faith. The reading of the Word of God with faith becomes a means of grace.

Likewise, as we participate in the Lord's Supper, humbly seeking the Lord Jesus in faith, He comes to us in the bread and cup. No, as I said earlier, He is not physically present, but He is really and truly spiritually present. Pastor and theologian, Robert Letham, wrote, "Thus in the (Lord's Supper) the Holy Spirit unites the faithful (people) to the person of Christ as they eat and drink the signs, the physical elements of bread and wine. There is an inseparable (joining) of sign and reality. As truly as we eat the bread and drink the wine, so we feed on Christ by faith...The role of those who take the bread and cup is, therefore, to believe and receive."⁶

When we eat the bread and drink the wine, Jesus says it is like eating His flesh and drinking His blood. In other words, by faith we are taking Him in, trusting Him, reaffirming our faith, declaring anew our belief and trust in Him. And in that He ministers His grace to us to believe. There is a mysterious synergy in this that we cannot fully explain.

- He offers us Himself in the bread and cup.
- We obey and eat and drink, believing Him.
- He ministers His grace to us to trust Him more fully.

In a well-known passage in John 6, after miraculously feeding bread to thousands of people, Jesus refers to Himself as the bread of life.

Then Jesus says plainly, *“For my Father's will is that everyone who **looks to the Son and believes** in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”* (John 6:40 – Emphasis Added) The point is that He, in His very person, is the life they need. But to press the point that it is Jesus, Himself, that they need, He uses metaphors for what He has already said, when He says again, *“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”* (John 6:54) Certainly you see the parallel between verses 54 and 40. When we trust in Jesus He does not physically come into us but He does truly come into us spiritually.

Likewise, when we come to Jesus' words, in the Lord's Supper, about the bread being His body and the drink being His blood, we see that He is not saying that He is physically present in the bread and drink or that He physically enters us in the bread and drink. He is saying that He is spiritually present and He comes to us. The ingesting of the bread and drink corresponds to the spiritual indwelling of Christ in us. He is part of our very spiritual beings, as food becomes part of our physical beings. This is a mystery to be sure but no less declared by God's word.

Until the day we see Him face to face, there could be no sweeter, more intimate, fellowship with Jesus than what He offers us in the bread and cup. He comes to us – He comes into us to commune with us, reassure us, and strengthen us.

Remember:

- The Lord's Supper is a public ritual for all believers gathered together.
- Our Lord Himself hosts the Lord's Supper; He is present.
- The Lord's Supper is a sign to us of the completed cross work of Jesus on our behalf and of our new relationship with Him and each other.
- The Lord's Supper is a means of grace to those who come humbly seeking Him; Jesus comes to you in the bread and the cup.

End Notes

¹ Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Supper of our Lord."

² Cf. William Willimon, *Sunday Dinner*

³ John Calvin in "Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord" Points 9, 10)

⁴ Thistleton, p. 890

⁵ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, p. 234-5

⁶ Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, p. 28-29