

Evangelism and the Lord's Supper

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It was brought to my attention several weeks ago that the reason some churches were observing the Lord's Supper less frequently was because the ritual was perceived to be less friendly (less understandable?) to unbelievers. I suspect the rationale was that if we desire to be more open to newcomers who might be less familiar with the Lord's Supper, we might consider reducing the times per month that we observe it. Unfortunately, with that thinking we pit "evangelism" against the Lord's Supper.

What is odd about such thinking is that it is the very opposite of what Scripture says of the Lord's Supper. Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26 "*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you **proclaim** the Lord's death until he comes.*" That word "proclaim" is used throughout the NT to refer to the proclamation of the Gospel message. It therefore seems that one of the benefits of observing the Lord's Supper is that it is a powerful visual demonstration of the very Gospel that unbelievers need to hear and receive. The International Critical Commentary refers to the Lord's Supper as "an acted sermon, an acted proclamation of the death which it commemorates." (1 Corinthians, p 249)

Contrary to thinking that the Lord's Supper is counterproductive to evangelism, the Bible indicates that the Lord's Supper is a means of evangelism. It is reasonable to still discuss the frequency of the Lord's Supper but not on the grounds that it inhibits evangelism. **Regardless of the text of Scripture that is being preached on any given Sunday and regardless of the theme of the worship music we sing (often such texts and themes are directed, as is most of Scripture, toward believers), the Lord's Supper gives us occasion to reiterate visually, tactilely, and certainly verbally the basic message of the cross. That I submit is evangelism at its most potent.**

1.

Now just as 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 it is a "means of grace" we declare that by it 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 minister's God's grace to us nurturing our faith. The reading of the Word of God with faith becomes a means of grace.

Likewise, but even more particularly, as we participate in the Lord's Supper, humbly seeking the Lord Jesus in faith, He comes to us in the bread and cup. 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." (Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, p. 28-29)

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.

2.

I want to deal briefly with what I think is a misunderstanding about Paul’s warning in that same text: 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 especially those with sensitive consciences. The typical understanding of this passage 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 and do penance before they take communion. In this popular evangelical misunderstanding 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 on their own and we are made worthy not by our “work” of confession but by Jesus’ righteousness being given to us.** Instead Paul is describing certain actions that he has already been pointing out; the entire context is about how they were treating each other, namely how the “haves” were treating the “have nots.”

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

That becomes clearer when we look at **the third word, “body”** in verse 29. You will recall 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, as indicated by their participation in the Lord’s Supper, while at the same time sinning against their brothers and sisters in the Lord of which they have been made part.

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 needier 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).’” (The NIV Application Commentary)

In 1 Corinthians 11 the Lord’s Supper explicitly calls for us to examine our attitudes and conduct toward other Christians, especially the poor. The usual call for introspection, confession and feeling sorry for our sins can lead too easily to a sense that we somehow make ourselves “worthy” to receive the Lord’s Supper.

If we believe it is necessary to refer to 1 Corinthians 11:27-28 in our Lord’s Supper ritual (“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.”), I think it is imperative that we do so **only** in the context of Paul’s argument wherein the exact observance of the Lord’s Supper is not the issue but how they were treating each other is. (See also Gordon Fee in [The New International Commentary on the New Testament](#) p561ff) I suggest that we focus instead, as noted above in 3, on the grace of God given to us in and through Jesus Christ.

Speaking to your pastoral concern for the “saved” and “unsaved,” I urge you to reconsider the frequency of observance and institution of the Lord’s Supper.