

Week 45

The Lord's Supper

Key Verse

I Corinthians 11:26 "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."

+ Introduction

While we prefer to think of the New Testament church as trouble-free and a stellar model for how we are to act in the church today, we know from the book of Acts and many of the epistles that the early church encountered numerous problems that needed to be dealt with strongly and definitively. One of those problems is addressed by the Apostle Paul in the passage we will consider in this lesson. We can be grateful for the problems in the early church because, as they are exposed and addressed, we learn much of what we know about the first-century church. As one writer stated, concerning Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians 11, that "if there had not been abuses of the meal in Corinth, we might never have heard about it."¹

The Lord's Supper is one of two ordinances of the Christian church. The other, believer's baptism, was the topic of last week's lesson. By way of introduction, the following are brief excerpts from the "Beliefs" section of Second's website, and from the Baptist Faith and Message.

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the church. It was instituted when the Lord had the Passover meal before His crucifixion. We observe the Lord's Supper on a regular basis in remembrance of Jesus Christ's atonement for our sins. It is a proclamation of His death and an assurance of His Second Coming.²

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.³

Note the words "ordinance," "instituted," "remembrance," "proclamation," "symbolic," and "anticipate." Each is important to our understanding of the Lord's Supper and sheds light on what we commemorate when we gather as a congregation to observe it.

(Note to teachers: Interpretation differences around the Lord's Supper relate primarily to how Christ is present in the observance, who may participate in the Lord's Supper, and how often the Lord's Supper should be observed. These are not addressed in this lesson; the focus is more specifically on the primary text and commentary on how the Lord's Supper is observed at Second Baptist Church).

+ A Rebuke and a Reminder

Paul begins I Corinthians 11 on a positive note as he commends the church for remembering him and holding *"firmly to the traditions just as I delivered them to you"* (I Corinthians 11:2). But in subsequent verses, Paul addresses issues that were leading to disorder in the church. Apparently, there was confusion about freedoms and the use of spiritual gifts. Also, of importance to this lesson, there was disorder and division at the Lord's Supper. The problems appear to have resulted in discrimination against the poorer members of the church.

In his commentary on I & II Corinthians, F. F. Bruce ⁴ suggests that the Lord's Supper was being taken in the course of a communal meal. But how it was observed was regarded by Paul as an affront to Christian fellowship. In the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, further light is shed on the heart of the problem. Paul, as founder of the church, would have introduced the practice of a communal church meal, but the Corinthians – in Paul's absence – had distorted the purpose of the meal.

The church was meeting regularly to celebrate the Lord's Supper, but in such a way that Paul denied that the church meal could properly be called the Lord's Supper (11:20). ⁵

Most commentators feel that richer church members were coming early and eating and drinking before the poorer members arrived. By doing so, the poorer members were left with little to eat. The result was that what was meant to be a fellowship meal actually underscored the social divisions in the church. Paul was emphatic that cliques, selfishness, and drunkenness had no part in these communal meals.

+ Paul Shares the Instructions of Jesus

a. *This do*

We consider baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances because they were instituted, or "ordained," by Christ and are to be observed by those who profess faith in Him. Baptism is observed only once, preferably at the beginning of the Christian life and following your profession of faith, putting baptism "on the right side" of your salvation. The Lord's Supper is to be observed repeatedly as a sign of our fellowship with Christ and a reminder of what He did for us through His sacrificial death on the Cross.

The Lord's Supper has its origin in the final Passover meal that Jesus celebrated with His disciples. This Passover meal is recorded in all three Synoptic gospels (Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22). And in John's Gospel, we learn of events surrounding the Passover observance (washing of the disciples' feet, for example) in the Upper Room discourse of chapters 13-17. As Paul recounts

what Jesus did during the meal, he begins by stating that *"I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you..."* (11:23). Scholars disagree somewhat on what Paul means by this. Is he saying he received a special revelation from Jesus? Or was he communicating a matter of church tradition (the words "received" and "delivered" support this view), which he knew had the authority of Jesus behind it? In either case, he repeats and explains the gospel accounts.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-25 ...that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread;²⁴ 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.'²⁵ In the same way the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'

In these verses, Paul clearly places the origin of the Lord's Supper as during the last meal Christ shared with His disciples before He was betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified. In addition, Paul emphasizes several important teachings:

- Paul notes that each element is explained in terms of the Exodus narrative, but he makes it clear that, in what F. F. Bruce calls the "passion Passover,"⁶ Jesus gives a new explanation to some of the bread and wine on the table.
- Paul mentions that Jesus distributed the bread and wine after He *"had given thanks."* It is from this phrase, "giving thanks" (eucharisternas), that we derive the word Eucharist as a synonym for Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper.
- Paul emphasizes that Jesus refers to the cup as the *"new covenant in My blood."* Paul is linking what Jesus said to Jeremiah's prophetic words about the "new covenant" that God would make with His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34), indicating that this new covenant is about to be ratified through Christ's sacrificial death.
- Paul also includes Christ's statement that the broken bread is *"for you,"* indicating the theological significance of the act. Christ's body was broken "on our behalf" and "for our benefit."

b. In remembrance of Me

Why do we observe the Lord's Supper? One outstanding reason is because Jesus told His followers to do this *"in remembrance"* of Him. Several commentators have addressed the biblical meaning of "remembering," observing that it is much more than simply recalling an event or action. F. F. Bruce⁷ explains that biblical remembrance is "more than a mental exercise; it involves a realization of what is remembered."

Dustin Crowe, in an article on the Lord's Supper⁸ states that, in the Bible, "a call to remember – especially when tied to a covenant sign or ceremony – is a vibrant, powerful, and participatory concept where we recalibrate our lives according to what's being remembered." He gives two Old Testament examples to support his explanation. One is the Flood, after which God placed a rainbow in the heavens and said, "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature" (Genesis 9:16-17). The sign of the rainbow helps us remember God's promise that still applies today. A second instance is the Passover meal.

EXODUS 12:13-14 *"The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will come upon you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ 'Now this day shall be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance."*

When the Israelites participated in this meal it was "not dry history to be learned but dynamic history to be lived." In fact, it was that particular meal that Jesus and His disciples were "remembering" in the upper room when Jesus instituted this new covenant. When the Lord's Supper is served, Christians "remember" what Christ did on the Cross to accomplish our salvation.

I love how Charles Swindoll described the Lord's Supper and Christ's purpose for it. He states, "It is a confession of faith without words – faith in the incarnation of the Son of God and His atoning sacrifice for our sins." ⁹ And Dr. Harry Ironside observed,

There is no time when Christ's presence is so definitely realized and so distinctly felt as when remembering Him in the breaking of bread...The Lord's Supper is a continual reminder of the vicarious character of His death, and that is one reason why our blessed Lord is so desirous that it should be celebrated frequently. ¹⁰

+ Paul Adds Further Instructions + Encouragement

Following the explanation of the Lord's Supper and the significance of the bread and wine (11:23-25), Paul continues his instructions to the Corinthians:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:26-28 *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸ But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*

a. You proclaim the Lord's death

Dr. Ironside observes, in his commentary on I Corinthians, that Christians who participate in the Lord's Supper are thereby preaching a sermon. "By their very actions they are declaring that His death was not merely that of a martyr for righteousness' sake, but that it was death as a sacrifice, that He died for sinners, that He shed His blood for sinners." ¹¹

In his excellent book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott states that it is unfortunate that we become so familiar with the observance of the Lord's Supper that we lose the full impact of what we are doing. Stott explains that Jesus, in that Passover meal with His disciples, was dramatizing His death before it took place and teaching several vital lessons about its meaning and purpose. He explains that Jesus was teaching His disciples – and us:

1. The centrality of His death. Stott explains that “there is no Christianity without the cross.”
2. The purpose of His death, which was to ratify the new covenant and bring people into this covenant relationship with God.
3. The need to appropriate His death personally. Stott declares that the Lord’s Supper is not a “slightly sentimental forget-me-not,” but rather a service rich in spiritual significance.¹²

b. *Until He comes*

James Montgomery Boice has written about the past, present, and future significance of the Lord’s Supper. As we observe the Lord’s Supper, we look to the past and remember Christ’s substitutionary atonement and the inauguration of the new covenant. We also focus on the present as we examine ourselves when we come to this service of fellowship and communion with Christ. And we look to the future. Boice says we “long for that day when we will see Him face to face and be like Him. The communion service is a reminder of that day. It is a foreshadowing of the great marriage supper of the Lamb. It is an encouragement to faith and an impulse to a higher level of holiness.”¹³ What is a memorial act, therefore, becomes an act of anticipation as well. Warren Wiersbe says something similar in his commentary on this passage. He states that, as we observe the Lord’s Supper, we look back (v. 23–26) to the shed blood and broken body of Jesus, we look ahead (v. 26) to His return, we look within (v. 27–28) as we examine ourselves, and we look around (v. 33–34) as we “discern the Lord’s body,” the church.¹⁴

c. *Let a man examine himself*

Wayne Grudem, in *Systematic Theology*, gives us valuable insight into what Paul meant when he wrote about eating or drinking “*in an unworthy manner*.” Because of the problems in how the Corinthians were acting when they came together, Paul is probably suggesting that we examine ourselves to see if our relationships within the body of Christ reflect the character of the Lord. Thus, Paul’s reference to “not discerning the body” most likely means not considering our brothers and sisters when we come to the Lord’s Supper.¹⁵ Leon Morris points out that there is a sense in which we all partake “unworthily.” But, he states, “we can come worthily, in faith and with a due performance of all that is fitting.”¹⁶

✚ Conclusion

Dr. Ironside reminds us that you can go to Heaven even if you have never once partaken of the Lord’s Supper, but “if your heart is filled with love for Him, you will be glad from time to time to gather with His people to remember Him.”¹⁷ Baptism and the Lord’s Supper do not have anything to do with our salvation but picture the way in which we are saved – through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. And yet, states Ironside, “they are of great importance because they help to draw our hearts out to Him and to give us a more vivid realization of our identification with him who loved us and gave Himself for us.”¹⁸

Charles Swindoll points out the benefits a believer receives from participating in the Lord's Supper. He states that proper observance of the Supper "brings real spiritual benefit to believers who unite around this all-important celebration, demonstrating unity with one another, the remembrance of the Savior's death, and an attitude of praise and thanksgiving toward God."¹⁹ Swindoll relates the Lord's Supper to a "family reunion" of the family of God.

Because the Lord's Supper calls all of us to reconsider Christ's person and work on our behalf, it urges us to rededicate ourselves to living the gospel in our everyday walk and talk. It asks us to reconcile with others as we approach the Table as one body. It requires that we confess and repent of unconfessed sin prior to partaking.²⁰

In *Treasuring God in Our Traditions*, a lovely book by Noel Piper (wife of John Piper), there is a chapter that describes how traditions teach us. They teach through repetition and regularity, planning, and consistency. Some traditions have great value because, through them, "we learn about and recognize and experience the faithfulness of our God, who promises, 'I will not leave you or forsake you'" (Joshua 1:5).²¹ Such traditions, because they become oft-repeated events in our lives, act like "God's glue" that binds us together as a family. When we come together to observe the Lord's Supper, we experience what Piper writes about. When we come to the Table of our Lord, as brothers and sisters in Christ, it truly is a family tradition to celebrate – and for which to be filled with gratitude.

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¹ Hawthorne, Gerald and Martin, Ralph, ed., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 1993. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove.

² www.second.org

³ bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000

⁴ Bruce, F.F., *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians*, 1971. Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.

⁵ Hawthorne and Martin, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians*.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-ordinances-of-the-church

⁹ Swindoll, Charles R., *Living Insights New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 2017. Tyndale House, Carol Stream.

¹⁰ Ironside, H. A., *I Corinthians*, 1938. Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, New Jersey.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Stott, John R. W., *The Cross of Christ*, 1986. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove.

¹³ Boice, James Montgomery, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 1981. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove.

¹⁴ Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol 1*, 1989. Victor Books, Wheaton.

¹⁵ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, 1994. Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids.

¹⁶ Morris, Leon, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 7*, 1985. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove.

¹⁷ Ironside, H. A., *I Corinthians*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Swindoll, Charles, *Living Insights New Testament Commentary*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Piper, Noel, *Treasuring God in Our Traditions*, 2003. Crossway Books, Wheaton.