

To correct any abuse of the Lord’s table at Corinth, Paul warns them to “*flee from idolatry*” in 10:14. Then, to show the people at Corinth that he respects them, he says “*I speak to sensible people,*” but he is concerned about them. Paul goes back to the very beginning to remind his readers of the institution of the supper by our Lord and then discuss its meaning. In four short verses (11:23-26) he reminds us how it all started and of its original purpose. This represents the first written account of the origin of the Lord’s Supper that chronologically precedes the writing of the gospel accounts. Paul, of course, was not personally present at the Last Supper so it is the early Christian community’s account of the supper that he faithfully passes on. In Paul’s brief account he makes at least six points to remind us of its true meaning.

*First*, the Lord’s Supper is rooted in history. It was a certain man, the Lord Jesus; and it was a certain night, “*on the night he was betrayed*” (v. 23); and it was a certain event in which he took real bread and wine and instituted the holy meal. Right? The Passover meal that had preceded the Lord’s Supper *looked back* in Israel’s history to the event by which God delivered Israel out of the bondage of Egypt. The Lord’s Supper, when it was instituted by our Lord at the Last Supper, *looked forward* to an event of deliverance for all humankind, namely, Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. At the feast of the Passover, it was traditional for a child to ask of his father, “Why is this night different from other nights?” and this would be the clue for the father to recount how God delivered Israel. Paul’s explanation is an effort to remind the Corinthians of the historical roots of the sacred supper in which they were doing “*more harm than good*” (11:17).

*Second*, the Lord’s Supper is about God’s gift. We catch the work of sacrifice in Christ’s words “*this is my body, which is for you.*” In this statement he identifies himself with the Paschal Lamb, the lamb that was sacrificed in connection with the Passover. But we make a mistake if we interpret the admonition to “*do this in remembrance of me*” (v. 24) as a call to remember only his death. We are also to remember that his death brings life. We are to

remember his life and his miracles and his teaching, his resurrection, and the hope that it brings, and we are to remember his purpose in this world.

For quite a few years I found participating in the Lord's Supper to be kind of depressing. I never told anyone about it for fear they would misunderstand me, but I didn't really look forward to the services when we observed Communion. I had the same feeling about some of the Holy Week services. There seemed to be a morbid preoccupation with the human cruelty and sinfulness that led to Christ's death. I just couldn't understand why the Lord wanted me to do something as a part of our worship that left me so glum. Then I realized that in the observance the Lord wanted me to remember *everything* about him—his love for me, his forgiveness, his purpose, his hope, his presence, and his power. It was only when my thoughts and prayers connected with Communion began to remember all these things that I found myself refreshed and renewed by my participation in the sacrament.

*Third*, the Lord's Supper celebrates a new covenant—that we'll talk even more about next week. The history of Israel was the story of a covenant that God initiated with them. It was a relationship in which Yahweh acted on their behalf and asked from them obedience in return. When Christ said, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*" (v. 25), he was announcing that he had entered into a new relationship with those for whom he came to die upon the cross. We are more familiar these days with contracts than we are with covenants. Most often when we buy a house, or sell a house, borrow money, or take a job, we are asked to sign a contract. This means that we enter into an agreement according to the terms of the contract. Paul's reminder to his readers was that they had entered into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that had terms or expectations connected with it.

*Fourth*, there is in the observing of the Lord's Supper a proclamation. Paul says that every time we take Communion, we "*proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (v. 26). This is a word of evangelism, but also a word of hope. In this supper, Christ gave the church another way of preaching the gospel, a way for eyes to see as well as for ears to hear.

When I traveled to Egypt 12 years ago, I was given the privilege of preaching one Sunday night at the Presbyterian Church in Al-Qanatir in the delta region of Cairo. I was blessed to have Dr. Freddy Elbaiaidy as my translator and our meeting that day began a friendship that I have treasured for 12 years. I chatted with a few folks after the service who also knew some English. One of my colleagues who went to preach at another church in Cairo experienced a mix up with the translator who was to meet him at the church. He preached a sermon, nevertheless, realizing that those who were listening to his sermon in all probability had a limited understanding of English. Yet part of the service was devoted to celebrating the Lord's Supper. Consequently, he was surprised to hear from a few in the congregation how meaningful the service was to them. Their limited English made it hard for them to understand the sermon, but they knew very well the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. As Christ himself had anticipated, they heard the sermon with their eyes and with their other senses.

The message Paul gives in verses 27-34 is an effort to apply what he has said about the institution of the Lord's Supper to the abuses that were practiced in Corinth. His main point is that the observance ought to cause everyone who participates to stop and examine himself or herself. The warning not to drink of the cup "*in an unworthy manner*" (v. 27) was not intended to introduce a new law to the sacrament. It was a reference to the divisiveness, the selfishness, and the drunkenness that had crept into their observance. Paul was saying, in effect, "Take a good look at what you are doing. Do you think your behavior is worthy of this holy meal?" I'm sure that every believer who heard Paul's message understood exactly what he meant. Unfortunately, some today misapply it and as a result create all sorts of anxiety as they come to receive the Lord's Supper.

What does it mean to take the Supper "unworthily?" Does it mean that those who do not have perfect lives should not participate? Does it mean that if we can think of any way in which we do not measure up that we should not participate? The answer is "no." This is not a discussion of the *perfection* of the worshiper but rather the *integrity* of the worship. The Lord's Supper is a continuing reminder that there is forgiveness for the sinner and strength for the

weak and weary. But the warning is to not come to the Lord's Supper when we are insensitive to the Lord's presence, unloving toward our fellow church members, or forgetful of Jesus' great sacrifice on our behalf. If we truly enter the spirit of the Supper, we will see by examination our own unworthiness of God's grace and love. This ought to make it easier for us to love one another.

There are two more things to take to heart. *Fifth*, the Lord's Supper is a "sign" of our union with Christ's body in heaven. Everything that is true about Christ is now true about you and me (John Calvin's *Institutes*, IV.XVII.2). "Signs" point to a greater reality. This holy meal points us to the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and stamps the reality of Jesus as Lord and Savior on our lives by faith through the Holy Spirit. The word *sacrament*, by the way, means a "sacred sign." *Sixth*, the Lord's Supper is also a "sign" of our union with Christ's body on earth: the church. Our faith—like this sacrament—is deeply personal, but not private. As this holy meal draws us into deeper gratitude for and dependence on Jesus, it also draws us into deeper gratitude for and dependence on our brothers and sisters in Christ.

A key word from 1 Corinthians 10:16 is "participation" (*koinonia* in Greek). We might be more familiar with the translation of the word in 1 John: "fellowship." That means "fellowship time" is more than coffee after church! In this meal we are simultaneously *participating* in Christ's death and resurrection and in our fellowship with one another. St. Cyprian wrote that "you cannot have God as Father without having the church as Mother." God created us for *communion*, that is, a right relationship with God and with one another. The Lord's Supper, then, is a *participation* with Christ and with one another. The practical application of this is "*discerning the body of Christ*" (11:29) to avoid bringing judgment on ourselves. If our union with Christ's body is central to this sacrament, we will not want to participate in a way that causes ourselves, or anyone else, to be disconnected with Christ or his church.

In examining ourselves and discerning the body, the truly good news is that our worthiness is not based on *our* worthiness. It is based on Christ's worthiness. Because he alone is worthy! Amen.