

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church  
September 25, 2016

## **What Happens in the Eucharist? 1 Corinthians 11:23-34**

It has been our practice here at Bridgeway for quite some time to reverse the order of service on the last Sunday of the month in order to facilitate in a more meaningful way the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Some of you may wonder why we regard the Lord's Supper as being of such great importance that we celebrate it *monthly*. Others of you have asked me why we don't celebrate it *weekly*. A few of you, very few, I hope, may wonder why we celebrate it at all. And there are even some who still wonder what it means. Why is it so important? Is it not just another meaningless religious ritual? What is the Lord's Supper all about?

Those are some of the questions that I hope today's message will answer. It has been almost 8 years since I last preached on the topic of the Lord's Table, so I think it is fitting that we direct our attention to it once more here at Bridgeway. We will do this by asking and then answering ten questions.

### **First, what should we call this sacrament, this ordinance?**

The word *Eucharist* comes from the Greek verb *eucharisteo* and simply means "to give thanks". The noun form, *eucharistia*, means "thankfulness," "gratitude," "thanksgiving," and the adjective *eucharistos* means "thankful."

The verb is used in 1 Corinthians 11:24 in connection with the words of institution: "and when he [Jesus] had *given thanks*, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" If you prefer "Lord's Supper" or "communion" (1 Cor. 10:16) or even the "Lord's Table" (1 Cor. 10:21), that's fine. But let's move beyond the label to the meaning of it all.

One more thing. Is the Lord's Supper a "*sacrament*" or an "*ordinance*"? Protestant evangelicals have generally used the word "ordinance" in recognition of the fact that Christ commanded or "ordained" that we celebrate it. In more liturgical churches, such as the Episcopal, Anglican, and especially the Roman Catholic Church, the word "sacrament" is preferred. Either word is appropriate, as long as we understand what actually happens or, conversely, *doesn't* happen when we partake of the elements. More on this below.

### **Second, the importance of this sacrament is due in large part to its origin: Jesus Christ!**

Many believe that 1 Corinthians was written before the synoptic gospels and is therefore the earliest canonical record we have of this sacrament.

We read in v. 23 – "For *I received from the Lord* what I also delivered to you . . ." There are two ways of taking this reference to the divine origin of the Supper. Paul may simply be saying that Jesus originally instituted the sacrament and was thus the first link in a chain reaching from him to Paul. "Eyewitnesses reported to others what the Lord had said and done, these repeated it to others again, and so in due course the tradition reached Paul, who thus had it 'from the Lord' not immediately but by unbroken transmission" (Barrett, 265).

On the other hand, Paul may mean that he received his information concerning the Supper directly from Jesus (note the emphatic "I", possibly his way of saying that his knowledge came to him unmediated by others). Recall Galatians 1:11-12 where Paul says he received the gospel, not from men, but "through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Perhaps he gained his knowledge of the Eucharist in the same manner.

A possible compromise solution is that *Paul received knowledge of the tradition from other people, but was given the interpretation of it directly from Jesus*. The point of interest, however, is that the sacrament is, in a sense, a "trust" that Paul first "received" from Jesus Christ and then solemnly "delivered" to us. It is a sacred institution entrusted to us by him for perpetual observance and reverential protection.

### **Third, what is the purpose of the Eucharist?**

Let me say it as clearly as I can right from the start: ***The Eucharist does not save us. It does not atone for our sin.*** Your salvation is not in jeopardy if you happen to miss it for several months in a row. Rather, a careful reading of the passage reveals that the sacrament is designed to accomplish one primary goal: ***to elicit remembrance of the person and work of Christ.*** This is not meant to deny that the Eucharist also serves to mediate the sanctifying (not saving) grace of Christ to us. More on this later.

Some have said the Eucharist has two ends, (1) to remember, and (2) to proclaim his death. Although there is no great error in this, it isn't textually accurate. There is only one command, literally, "this be doing unto my remembrance." The proclamation of Christ's death till he comes is not a second command but a ***consequence*** of fulfilling the first. As we are partaking, and by partaking remembering, we will be proclaiming his death. The proclaiming is wrapped up in the remembering as an inevitable corollary. This is substantiated by the word "for" with which v. 26 begins. That is, what we find in v. 26 is a consequence or product of our rightly observing the command to "remember" in vv. 24-25. We should also note that "you proclaim" in v. 26 is a statement of fact, not a command.

#### **Fourth, what does it mean to "remember" Christ?**

The best way to answer this question is with a number of observations.

*First*, it is a remembrance that is ***commanded***. We do not gather to celebrate the table of the Lord at our own initiative or because we think it is a good idea. We gather and celebrate because Jesus himself commanded that we do so. This command also reveals the weakness of the flesh even in those who have been born again, for it is remarkable that we who have been redeemed by Christ should need to be urged to remember him.

*Second*, it is a remembrance which takes a ***tangible, visible form***. The elements are designed to stimulate our spiritual senses by physical means. It's not sufficient simply to *say*, "Remember." We must go on to present to the eye and to the touch and to our taste this tangible representation of the truth about which we are speaking. And again, it is surely an act of merciful condescension to our weakness as sinners that the Lord has established the sacrament in this way.

*Third*, it is a remembrance designed to ***strengthen*** us spiritually. The Eucharist serves to intensify and increase our understanding of Christ's death and our confidence in its saving power. When we partake in faith the Holy Spirit uses these elements to deepen our awareness of Christ's love and abiding presence. The Spirit uses our ingestion of these elements to activate within us a heightened confidence and trust in the finality and sufficiency of Christ's death. It is one of the many means or instruments by which the Spirit changes us and transforms us more and more into the image of Jesus. Therefore, ***although the Eucharist does not save us, it most assuredly does sanctify us.***

*Fourth*, it is a ***personal*** remembrance. We are not told to remember the *night* on which the sacrament was instituted. Neither the *betrayal* nor the *trial* nor even the *crucifixion* itself is the focus of our attention. Rather it is a remembrance of ***Jesus himself*** betrayed, tried, and crucified. Remember ***"ME"***, says Jesus. "Recall and be strengthened and encouraged by all that I have been, am, and forever will be to you. My person, my work, all that is yours by grace," says Jesus, "let it take root in your souls and feed on Me."

*Fifth*, S. Lewis Johnson makes this observation:

"He says, 'This is MY body.' What is most remarkable about the words is the fact that He was telling these young Jewish men that they should no longer celebrate the God-appointed festival of the Passover and substitute in its place remembrance of Him! Do not think of Moses; think of Me! It must have been a staggering thing to them, if they thought upon the transformation of the ceremony, from Passover to Lord's Supper. And, the fact that He made this significant demand of them, and the fact that they accepted this startling change of ceremony tell us much of the authority and dignity of the King. It was a plain statement to the effect that He was the true Passover lamb, that His death is the real atoning sacrifice, and that His blood is the genuine spiritual safety of the believer. Marvelous indeed!" ("The First Lord's Supper," *Believers Bible Bulletin* [October 11, 1981], 4).

*Sixth*, in this activity of remembering there is more than simply commemoration: there is also ***confession***. Whoever comes to the Lord's Table not only commemorates the death of Christ for sinners but also confesses, "Christ died for

*me.*” Note v. 24 – “This is my body which is for *you.*” What happened to Christ’s body was for me, and in my participating in the sacrament I thereby make confession to that effect.

*Seventh*, the inevitable corollary to remembrance is *proclamation*. We rightly remember the death of our close friends and family members. But we don’t celebrate their deaths, nor do we proclaim them. Most would regard it as unusually morbid to constantly commemorate the death of a family member. But here we are told to remember and celebrate and proclaim Christ’s death until he comes.

The word translated “proclaim” (v. 26) means to announce by word of mouth, and in the NT is often used of proclaiming the gospel. Although the nature of Christ’s death is silently portrayed by the action of partaking of the elements, it is also appropriate that a verbal explanation be given. *Every observance of the Eucharist ought in some sense to be a lesson on the atonement.* Each time you participate in the Lord’s Supper you are transformed into a preacher! Proclaim his death! Make it known!

#### **Fifth, in what sense, if at all, can it be said that Jesus Christ is “present” in the elements of the Eucharist?**

In saying that the primary purpose of the Lord’s Supper is to “remember” Jesus in his atoning sacrifice for us, I’m not saying that there is no sense in which he should be thought of us as “present” at the Table. As you know, there have typically been four answers to the question of Christ’s presence.

One view is that of the Roman Catholic Church which argues that when the priest utters the words: “This is my body, this is my blood,” the elements of bread and wine are supernaturally transformed into the literal physical body and blood of Christ. The elements continue to look, taste, and smell like bread and wine, but they are truly the physical body and blood of Jesus. This is known as the doctrine of *transubstantiation*.

Another view is that of the Lutheran Church which argues that the bread and wine are not changed or transformed. They remain only bread and wine. But in some way in, with, under, and around the bread and wine the physical body and blood of Christ are literally and physically present.

A view popular among most Southern Baptists and people in Bible churches is that the bread and wine remain unchanged. There is no literal, physical presence of the body and blood of Jesus in any sense. The elements are altogether and only *symbolic* of his body and blood offered on the cross.

One final view that one finds among Anglicans, Presbyterians, and those who embrace a more Reformed or Calvinistic view of theology, is that the person of *Jesus is uniquely and extraordinarily present in a spiritual sense.* His body and blood are not physically present in the elements, but through the work of the Holy Spirit, when we eat the bread and drink from the cup we experience a heightened and intensified spiritual presence of Christ. *When we receive the elements in faith, we are enabled by the Spirit to enjoy and experience and receive a greater manifestation of the spiritual power and presence of Jesus than we do ordinarily and at other times.* This is the view that I personally embrace.

#### **Sixth, the Eucharist is also an ordinance of hope!**

We should also note that the Eucharist is *prospective* in nature as well as *retrospective*. It looks to the future and not merely to the past. It is a service of hope, for it constantly reminds us that one day he who is now only represented in the bread and wine will be with us in person, and the fellowship which is now incomplete will at that time be consummated in perfection. *We celebrate the death of a Savior, but not the death of a dead Savior.* He is going to come again and therefore he is alive.

In summary, we both look back to his death and we remember, and forward to his coming and we hope. The Lord’s Supper is thus *“charged with perpetual anticipation”* (John Murray, III:285). I pray that each time you receive the elements with thanksgiving you will both commemorate and celebrate. Even so, come Lord Jesus!

#### **Seventh, what does it mean to partake of the Lord’s Supper in an “unworthy manner” (11:27)?**

Note the word “therefore” with which v. 27 begins (it could be translated “it follows that,” expressing result). The point is that because of the sacred nature of the sacrament one must be reverent in the use of it. Because the Lord is exalted, remembered, and proclaimed in the sacrament, flippancy and indifference are grave offences.

Let’s begin in answering this question by noting what partaking in an “unworthy manner” does **not** mean.

Sadly, many Christians have stayed away from the Lord’s Table because they are overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame from their sin. They are painfully aware of how far short they have fallen from what God requires of us and thus they feel profoundly “unworthy” to partake of the elements. Some have said to me, “Sam, I am so ashamed of myself and depressed by my constant sin that I must stay away from the Lord’s Table.” No! You are precisely the person for whom the Lord’s Table is intended! It is the person who has *no* awareness of their sin that should *not* come.

To take the elements of the Supper unworthily or in an unworthy manner is to take it without regard to *its* worth, not *yours*! It is to come flippantly, casually, complacently, light-heartedly, and without regard for the gravity of your sin. But to be burdened by your sin, to be conscious of it, to be weighed down with a sense of your own guilt and unworthiness is precisely how you should come to the Table. To come with the knowledge that your sin would exclude you from God’s presence were it not for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is precisely the mindset and the orientation of your heart that is essential.

Paul’s warning about partaking in an “unworthy manner” is directed toward those who make a mockery of the elements by thinking that they are worthy of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, that they deserve to be accepted and forgiven. Those who come to the table conscious of their sin and trusting only in Christ to forgive it are coming in a worthy manner.

Simply put, some refuse to partake of the elements because in their minds they are saying: “Oh, I feel so unworthy.” The fact is, *it is only if you don’t feel unworthy that you shouldn’t come*. If you think you’re worthy of it, that you deserve it, don’t come. But if you know that the only grounds for coming to the table is the worth of Jesus and what he has done for you as an unworthy sinner, then please come and partake!

We must also keep in mind the first century context of Paul’s warning. The Eucharist in the early church was evidently held in conjunction with a general meal. The problem arose due to the social and economic differences among the many members. The church was composed of both wealthy and poor, slaves and ex-slaves. Typically people would eat and drink what they brought to the gathering, rather than sharing it with others in the way that we do in a “pot luck dinner.” The wealthy, notes Howard Marshall, “brought so much food and drink that they could indulge in gluttony and even in drunkenness. The poor, however, had little or nothing to bring with the result that some of them went hungry and could not enjoy a decent meal. Paul further says that some people, presumably those who had more to eat, began eating before the others” (50).

Paul was clearly disturbed by this abuse of the Lord’s Table and the way in which it violated the unity and love in the body of Christ which the supper itself was designed to display (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17). This lack of concern and disregard for their poorer brethren, coupled with their riotous behavior, constituted their sin. Selfishness and lack of love were the essence of their transgression, a fact that must be kept in mind as we seek to make contemporary application of Paul’s words.

We must also pay close attention to how closely the conclusion of v. 27 is related to the premise established in vv. 23-26. These latter verses state that the sacrament is designed to cultivate in us loving remembrance of all Christ accomplished on our behalf. At the table we reflect on the nature and sufficiency of his death and thereby proclaim it to the world until he comes. “*Therefore . . .*” (v. 27). That is, *to partake in an unworthy manner is to do so without giving full consideration to the nature of the supper as it is explained in vv. 23-26*. It is to partake with motives incompatible with the intent of Christ when he instituted the sacrament. It is to come to the table with thoughts other than of his person and work. It is to come thinking of tomorrow’s worries rather than Christ’s return. It is to come remembering yesterday’s disappointments rather than Christ’s death. To partake in an unworthy manner is to partake either in ignorance of or conscious disregard for the instruction found in vv. 23-26.

**Eighth, is “confession of known sin” essential when we partake?**

If known sin is a hindrance to proper regard for what the Supper is designed to accomplish, Yes. If confession of sin is necessary to enable one to adequately approach the table in that frame of mind and with those motives proper to its observance, then by all means confess! But we must remember that confession of sin is **not** primarily (nor even secondarily) what Paul had in mind when he warned against partaking in an unworthy manner.

Having said that, never come to the Lord's Table thinking that by partaking of these elements you are pacifying an angry God. Never come to the Table thinking that by doing so you are transforming an irritable and wrathful God into a joyful and loving one. The elements are designed to remind us that whatever wrath and anger and righteous judgment that God had toward us as sinners has been forever and eternally endured and satisfied by Jesus!

### **Ninth, what are the consequences for Christians who partake in an unworthy manner?**

Paul speaks of being "guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27b). By this he means that guilt is incurred when one profanes what is sacred by treating it as something that is common. To despise the symbol is to despise that to which it points. By abusing the Eucharist we are acting with the calloused indifference and even malicious enmity of those who crucified him. Proper regard for the Lord's Supper is no small matter!

To eat and drink judgment to oneself (v. 29) is to incur the discipline of the Lord (v. 32). The Christian who partakes unworthily does not incur eternal condemnation. To the contrary, **he incurs temporal chastisement in order that such condemnation may be avoided.** This discipline is identified in v. 30 – "many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (literally, some "sleep").

It is clear that the apostle Paul believes the judgment or discipline suffered by Christians is intended for their good, for their spiritual welfare. God's purpose in making some of the Corinthian believers physically weak and ill is so that they might repent and be spared the eternal judgment that will come upon the sinful and unbelieving world at the end of history. Not only that, but it was precisely to spare them or deliver them from being "condemned along with the world" (v. 32b) that God actually took their lives physically.

According to v. 29, the believer is to be careful about "discerning the body" (v. 29). Other translations render this, "judge the body rightly." The word "**body**" may be a reference to the church, the "body" of believers. Indeed, in vv. 17-22 the problem in Corinth was a failure to show consideration to other members of the church. However, inasmuch as v. 29 is strikingly parallel to v. 27, I take "body" to be a shorthand form of the "body and blood" of the Lord himself. Therefore, not to "discern" or "judge" the "body" rightly means not to perceive and reverence the Lord's Supper as a unique and sacred meal, thereby underestimating and de-valuing its true character.

### **Tenth, how do we avoid partaking in an unworthy manner?**

In v. 28 Paul says we should "examine" ourselves. The word "examine" (*dokimadzo*) most often assumes the success of the test. It refers to the act of proving or testing something with a view to its emerging *approved*. The implication is that the self-examination will have a positive outcome. Either the individual will discover that he/she is already in a proper spiritual condition to receive the elements or, if not, will take the required steps to become so. **Thus the point of self-examination is not to disqualify oneself or to hinder participation but to make partaking of the elements possible and meaningful.**

Also, to "examine" oneself entails analyzing one's understanding of the true meaning of the Eucharist as set forth in vv. 23-26. Why are we partaking? What do we hope to gain? Are we doing so in accordance with the purpose and spirit in which our Lord instituted the supper? Is our partaking reverent? Is it a reflection of that unity in the body of Christ which Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 10:17? To examine oneself is to ask these questions in preparation for approaching the table in a spiritually appropriate frame of mind.

All that we have seen thus far, especially the call to examine ourselves before partaking, indicates that **the Lord's Supper is only for Christians, for those who have consciously embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.** It is not for infants or for children who have not yet come to saving faith.

Some of you have asked me about whether or not your young children should partake. The answer is actually quite simple. Are they born again? Are they capable of knowing and trusting what it means when we say that Christ died

for our sins? Are they capable of examining themselves as Paul instructs in v. 28? Are they able to understand what he means when he speaks of his body being given for us and his blood being shed for us?

***The Lord's Supper is not a "converting" ordinance.*** It is, instead, an ordinance for the "converted". In other words, contrary to what some have said, non-Christians are not to partake of the Table in the hope that by doing so they might be converted to faith in Jesus. The elements are designed only for those who already have faith in Jesus. If you do not yet know Christ as your Savior we respectfully request that you not come forward to receive the elements. Instead, we urge you to think deeply and pray that God would open your eyes and your heart to recognize that your only hope for forgiveness of sins and eternal life is by trusting solely in that to which the elements point: the body and blood of Christ sacrificed for sinners on the cross.

#### *Conclusion*

***Finally, the Eucharist is important primarily because it compels us to acknowledge the centrality of the cross of Christ for all of life.*** The importance of the Eucharist is seen preeminently in the way it reminds us and instructs us concerning the centrality of the sacrificial death of Jesus. When we partake we are visibly and tangibly and powerfully reminded that the cross is the ***foundation*** on which all else in Christianity is built and constructed. It is the ***gravitational center*** around which everything else orbits. It is the ***pinnacle*** toward which everything else points. It is the ***ground*** and ***basis*** of your hope, the ***focus*** of your faith, and the ***fount*** from which all other spiritual blessings flow.