

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Worship Series		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	7		Mason Depew
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A Sacred Feast

Introduction: The Lord's Supper is one of the greatest gifts Christ has given to his church as we strive to be his faithful witnesses in this world. In the midst of this dark, fallen world what typically fills our senses will all be tainted by sin and misery. Therefore our Lord saw fit to give significance to bread and wine, so that we do not just hear that God is good to us in the sermon, but we can literally taste and see that the Lord is good! Sadly, however, there are many confusions surrounding the Supper that need to be cleared up if Christians are to really appreciate what a wonderful blessing it is. The two largest questions you will find people having are: 1) *How* does the Supper work and 2) Am I *unworthy* to take it? We will look for answers to both of these key questions in this text, with much guidance from our Reformed tradition on this difficult subject.

1. Verses 23-26 - Consider that first question of how the Supper works when you read these verses. What is actually happening when we take the Supper? The Reformed view is neither literal nor simply a memorial. We confess that the bread and the wine are **signs** and **seals** of the Gospel.¹ These are key words to understand what Paul is talking about here.
 - a. What is a **sign**? A sign is something that points to or represents something besides itself.² A stop sign, for example, signifies certain traffic laws that apply to the intersection at which it is posted.
 - i. Many people today assume that signs, like words in a language, or the clothes that men and women respectively wear, are arbitrary social constructs and therefore can be completely **separated** from their meaning. But we need signs to live, so if you really believe this you will get into trouble. While it's true that a stop sign could have been designed to be a different shape or color, if you drive past one without stopping, a police officer may still give you a citation. Likewise, although Christ could conceivably have chosen different elements to represent his body, the Lord's Supper signifies something very real: his broken body and shed blood held forth to you. Since Jesus and the Apostle Paul both talk about the elements of bread and

¹ "Q.What are the sacraments? A.The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use he might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel. And this is the promise: that God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross." - Heidelberg Catechism #66

² Augustine gave this classic explanation of signs in contrast to things: "All instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learnt by means of signs. I now use the word 'thing' in a strict sense, to signify that which is never employed as a sign of anything else: for example, wood, stone, cattle, and other things of that kind. Not, however, the wood which we read Moses cast into the bitter waters to make them sweet, nor the stone which Jacob used as a pillow, nor the ram which Abraham offered up instead of his son; for these, though they are things, are also signs of other things. There are signs of another kind, those which are never employed except as signs: for example, words. No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence may be understood what I call signs: those things, to wit, which are used to indicate something else. Accordingly, every sign is also a thing; for what is not a thing is nothing at all. Every thing, however, is not also a sign." - *On Christian Teaching*, 1.2

- wine as if they are Christ's body and blood, we should treat them with care, as if they are his body and blood!³
- ii. On the other extreme, some people **confuse** signs with what they signify and almost merge them together.⁴ This would be like a rebellious teenager thinking if he steals a stop sign and puts it on his bedroom door, it will stop his parents from entering. Of course, once the sign is disconnected from the intersection at which it is supposed to signify traffic law, it loses all its power. Likewise, if we eat of the bread and drink the wine without *remembering* Christ (verse 24), the elements have no good effect on you.⁵ This is also why Paul says you must discern the body in verse 29. You must be thinking about what the bread and the wine **signify**.⁶
 - iii. This is also why we first hear the words of institution from a pastor. If you do not have the Word in mind as you take the Supper (or if it was read to you in a language you don't understand, like Latin), the signs have been disconnected from what they signify. You are treating them like they are just bread and wine with no other significance. That is sacrilegious, like taking the Lord's name in vain.
 - iv. It is important for us to maintain this balance between **separation** and **confusion** so we affirm both the biblical truths that Christ is meaningfully present for us when we take the Supper, *but also that he is really ascended at the Father's right hand!* His human body cannot be physically in the bread if his body is in heaven! The Reformed answer to resolving this tension has been to emphasize that the Holy Spirit is present with us when we worship and therefore lifts us up, so to speak, into the presence of the Lord. Therefore there *is* a real connection to Christ's human body, but it's not because he comes *down* again and again or never left, as Roman Catholics and Lutherans believe. Our connection with Christ is because the Spirit lifts us *up* to him.⁷
 - v. This also helps us explain what Paul meant in the previous chapter: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (10:16) The wine is not literally the blood and the bread is not literally the body, but through them we *participate* in the real Christ. The Spirit uses these physical signs to give us a real, mysterious, but meaningful connection to our Lord. He really does work his power in us when we take the Supper!

³ "Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ hath not enjoined to us the use of his Sacraments in vain, so he works in us all that he represents to us by these holy signs, though the manner surpasses our understanding, and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Ghost are hidden and incomprehensible." - Belgic Confession, Art. XXXV.

⁴ For example, many Lutherans emphasize that Jesus said, "This IS my body... This IS my blood." But think about the setting: would the disciples think he meant that literally, when his unbroken body and unshed blood were sitting there right in front of them?

⁵ "Further, though the Sacraments are connected with the thing signified, nevertheless both are not received by all men: the ungodly indeed receives the Sacrament to his condemnation, but he doth not receive the truth of the Sacrament. As Judas and Simon the sorcerer both, indeed, received the Sacrament, but not Christ, who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers." - Belgic Confession, Art. XXXV.

⁶ In his commentary, C. K. Barrett works through the several different interpretations that have been offered of this phrase, "discerning the body," but ends up endorsing the traditional interpretation that it refers to Christ's body as the most likely. Many people try to counter this interpretation by saying Paul should have said "discerning **his** body" if that is what he meant, but this misses that in Greek, the article, which is translated "the" here can also indicate possession. So "discerning **his** body" actually is a valid English translation of the Greek here.

⁷ This is how Calvin can say, sounding almost like a Lutheran out of context, "In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them." - *Institutes*, 4.17.10. Elsewhere he explained more precisely how this works when he wrote, "In the Supper of the Lord, the external minister holds forth the external symbols, the bread of the Lord and the wine of the Lord, which are perceived by the organs of our body, consumed and swallowed. The internal minister, the Holy Spirit, not by external organs of the body, but by his secret virtue, feeds the souls of the faithful, both truly and efficaciously, with the body and the blood of the Lord unto eternal life, as truly as they know themselves to be nourished for this mortal life by bread and wine." - *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (1954), 174.

b. What is a **seal**?

- i. By calling the sacraments seals, we are saying that they *confirm* God's promises to us and therefore build us up in faith.⁸ This is similar to how a king's seal on a document lets you know it is authentic and whatever commitments he has made on it are official and on the record. So when we take the Lord's Supper after **hearing** a sermon, it confirms and strengthens the Gospel promises that you just heard. It makes them feel that much more real and tangible, as you **see, touch, taste, and smell** the bread and the wine. The Lord speaks to us through all five of our senses!

2. Verses 27-32 - These verses raise the second of those crucial questions on so many people's minds: What does it mean to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner?

- a. First of all, it is vital to note that Paul is saying *the way you take it*, and not you yourself, may be unworthy. If he wanted to communicate that you should examine your heart to see if there be any sin there, he would have said something more like "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord with an *unclean conscience*..." In fact, Paul refers to the conscience eight times in the previous three chapters from 1 Corinthians 8-10, so he certainly could have used this word if that is what he meant.

- i. The idea of doing something in "an unworthy manner" is very strange to us, because we live in a time when, as it is often said, nothing is sacred anymore. In other words, modern Americans almost never feel *reverence* in their ordinary lives, because they never think they are encountering something *holy*, something that utterly transcends themselves. We also tend to be pragmatists, believing that whatever gets the job done is good enough. But when it comes to the things of God, pragmatism is not enough. There actually is a right and a wrong way to handle his gifts, with reverence, and the Corinthians were failing at this.
- ii. Simply put, Paul's point is that we must not treat the Lord's Supper as if it were an ordinary meal. We are supposed to treat it as the *extraordinary* meal that it is. Therefore we ought to come to the table with reverence and gratitude, appreciating what it means and not treating it casually.
- iii. Examining ourselves is a key part of this (11:28), not so that you *cannot* eat but so that you *can*, as Paul says there. Paul is describing the proper way of eating and drinking in a *worthy* manner. You need to know you are a sinner in order to see your need for Christ. If you partake without reflecting on who you are before the Lord first, you will not appreciate the gravity of your situation apart from Christ and therefore treat his sacrifice as a small thing.

b. How did the Corinthians fail at this?

- i. They were divided, with many factions in their church. You can see this all throughout the letter, from the beginning where Paul says the Corinthians were fighting over their favorite teachers (1:11-12), including chapter 6, where he says

⁸ B. B. Warfield explained this sealing aspect of the Supper so well when he said, "Whenever the Lord's Supper is spread before us, we are invited to take our place at the sacrificial feast, the substance of which is the flesh and blood of the victim which has been sacrificed once for all at Calvary; and as we eat these in their symbols, we are—certainly not repeating his sacrifice, nor yet prolonging it—but continuing that solemn festival upon it instituted by Christ, by which we testify our "participation in the altar" and claim our part in the benefits right by the offering immolated on it. The sacrificial feast is not the sacrifice, in the sense of the act offering: it is, however, the sacrifice, in the sense of the thing offered, that is eaten in it: and therefore it is presuppositive of the sacrifice as an act offering and it implies that this act has already been performed once for all." - "The Fundamental Significance of the Lord's Supper" in *The Bible Student*, v. iii, 1901, pp. 77-83.

they were suing each other, and up to chapter 11, where he says again that they are divided even when they assemble for worship (11:17-19). This runs directly counter to the Spirit's role in the Supper, which is supposed to be uniting us as one body as he unites us to Christ. The Supper is supposed to be a sign of our bond to one another, but the Corinthians had so undermined that bond it made a mockery of the Supper.

- ii. When they were taking the Supper itself, this division showed itself as the richer members of the church gorging themselves and getting drunk while the poor had nothing (11:21). Paul says this makes the Supper not really the Lord's Supper at all (11:20), and it is so shocking because it humiliates other members and shows contempt for the church as a whole (11:22)!⁹
- iii. When he says in verses 33-34 that they should eat and drink at home, this does not mean that gluttony and drunkenness would be fine if practiced at home, of course. Paul merely means that their sin would be less disgraceful and damaging to the church if done in private rather than in public. Behaving this way at the Lord's Supper, of all times and places, adds extreme sacrilege to already serious sins!
- iv. This, then, shows us what taking the Supper in an unworthy manner means: to eat the bread and drink the wine like you would any other food, without regard for their significance. To treat the **sacred** things of God like they are **common** is a great offense to a holy God. Moreover, to treat the body and blood of Jesus Christ like it is not even worth remembering is a grievous insult to your Savior. That is what Paul wants to put a stop to here.
- v. This is also, by the way, a big part of why we forbid children to partake of the Supper until they profess faith in Christ. They must understand what the Supper means, or they will treat it just like any other food, making the same error as these wealthy Corinthians.

3. Conclusion: The Lord's Supper is an exquisitely beautiful feast of God's grace, given to us through Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit.

- a. As the Belgic Confession puts it so well, "We err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not **by the mouth**, but **by the Spirit** through **faith**. Thus, then, though Christ always sits at the right hand of his Father in the heavens, yet doth he not, therefore, cease to make us partakers of himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates himself with all his benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both himself and the merits of his sufferings and death, nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls, by the eating of his flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of his blood." - Art. XXXV
- b. Too many Christians miss that the point of the Supper is to nourish and sustain struggling sinners. They think of the Supper as if it is a test we have to pass, and therefore a great burden that actually adds to our guilt. This misses the simple fact that we are not inherently worthy, and never can be! But we ought to take the Supper with reverence and sober joy, having examined ourselves to see our sin and being grateful for Christ's sacrifice. This is the whole foundation of our lives before God. Without the body and blood of Christ, which the Supper signifies to us, we would be utterly lost, hopeless, and bound for the just wrath of God against our sins.

⁹ "Paul's point is that, if the rich wish to eat and drink on their own, enjoying better food than their poorer brothers, they should do this at home; if they cannot wait for others (verse 33), if they must indulge to excess, they can at least keep the church's common meal free from practices that can only bring discredit upon it. Their behavior shows contempt for the community as a whole." - C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 263.

- c. Isaac Watts beautifully captures this spirit of reverent, sober joy in his hymn, *How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place*.

“How sweet and awesome is the place
with Christ within the doors,
while everlasting love displays
the choicest of her stores.

While all our hearts and all our songs
join to admire the feast,
each of us cries, with thankful tongue,
"Lord, why was I a guest?

"Why was I made to hear your voice,
and enter while there's room,
when thousands make a wretched choice,
and rather starve than come?"

'Twas the same love that spread the feast
that sweetly drew us in;
else we had still refused to taste,
and perished in our sin.