

The heart of communion

1 Corinthians 11:17–34

Beloved, this morning's sermon will have a slightly different format, in that though we will still do our exegesis on the passage we are focusing on ... there will also be a topical element in it. Because this morning we will be looking at the meaning of communion and how we are to approach the Lord's table and the elements of bread and wine, or in our case grape juice. And in a rather lengthy article written by Keith Mathison, I found his introduction quite interesting ... and something perhaps many of us can relate to. He says, 'Have you ever noticed the strangeness of the Lord's Supper? Many of us have been attending church for so many years that this thing we do every week, or every month has become somewhat routine. Its strangeness no longer strikes us. But step back and imagine what it looks like to someone attending a church for the first time. Imagine what it looks like to a child. With some differences among churches in the details of the liturgy, the members of the church receive bread, which they eat in a ceremonial way after the pastor repeats the words of Jesus: "This is my body." Then they receive wine or grape juice, which they ceremonially drink after the pastor repeats the words of Jesus: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." What in the world is going on here? What is the Lord's Supper? Scripture anticipates that the sacraments instituted by God will raise questions among believers. When the Passover was instituted, for instance, Moses said, "And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses'". The Lord knew that the Passover would require explanation. He knew that Israelite children would wonder about the meaning of the rituals. We should expect nothing different when it comes to our children and the Lord's Supper. But do we know how to answer such questions? What do we say when our children ask, "What do you mean by this service?" And I want to pause at this point ... and let you ponder how you would answer such a question... The answer I came up with ... after much consideration is this ... The Lord's Supper is an act we participate in during church that symbolizes the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of His blood on the cross for us and for our sins. It is not a real supper or even a sit-down dinner. As a church, we drink grape juice and eat pieces of bread. And through that act we are reminded as a church the importance of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. And sometimes you might hear it called Communion. We participate in the Lord's Supper because Jesus established it before He died on the cross. He had all of His friends, the disciples, around Him at the Passover Meal or as we call it, the Last Supper.

And so beloved, as we now come to the Scriptures, we will be looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 17 to 34 in 3 parts. First in verses 17 to 22, we will look at

'the offences'. Second in verses 23 to 26, we will be reminded of 'the institution'. And finally in verses 27 to 34, we will look at 'the practical outcome'. And the reason for us studying this Scripture alongside our teaching on communion this morning is simple ... and I encourage you to keep this in the back of your mind throughout ... As we come together to celebrate communion ... we are to be humbly reminded of the sacrifice that our Saviour made for us ... and by His sacrifice the forgiveness we now have in Him ... for it was by the breaking of His body ... symbolized in the bread ... and shedding of His blood ... symbolized in the grape juice... that we have been brought into a right relationship with Him ... and so we do this to be reminded of the love of our Saviour! The love that saw Him lay down His life for you and for me... A truth that should humble us!

So let us begin by looking at 'the offence'. The apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Corinthian church, has been informed of an unpraiseworthy problem ... for when the Corinthian church met together it was not for better ... but actually for worse. And the problem was that there were divisions amongst the people. In what was supposed to be a solemn ... dignified service ... from verse 17 it seems clear that it was far from edifying... or even dignified... but rather seemed disruptive. And Paul notes that there will no doubt be differences ... they are inevitable ... especially in a community that saw the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Christians all crossing paths. However, God's approval rested on those whom He had set apart ... those of 'the Way'... the followers of Christ. And the events that were taking place in the church revealed who these authentic Christians were... You see in there coming together, the various groups, thought that they were honouring God by selfishly getting drunk and eating in front of the poor ... something that someone who had truly met with Jesus would never do. The Lord's supper is not supposed to be a prideful display of wealth ... in which the poor are neglected ... for the Lord's table is open to everyone who submits their lives to Him ... regardless of status, regardless of language, and regardless of race ... for it is His table ... the Creator of all. We must never assume that by wealth or status we are elevated before the cross ... the cross of Christ is on level ground before every man, woman, and child ... and if we do not submit ourselves to the Lord in all humility ... pride will lead us straight to hell. As Jesus said to His disciples ... "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven." And this is not because of their wealth ... but because they depend more on their wealth ... than they do on Jesus Christ ... a very sad reality in the society we live in today ... I remember doing door to door evangelism in Scarborough ... a rather wealthy part of Cape Town ... and the response we got more often than not when asking if we could pray for people... is that we should rather go over the hill to the townships ... they need God more ...

And so having highlighted the injustices taking place in Corinth, Paul now turns his attention to the proper institution of the Lord's supper. And just an interesting side note, this is the earliest account of the institution of the Holy Communion. And Paul highlights the very important truth that in communion, all believers are supposed to be strengthened and comforted in the complete work of Christ. And beloved, this is where we need to pay careful attention for Paul now highlights the fact that in communion, though we do not believe that we partake in the literal body and blood of Christ ... our faith appropriates the blessings which flow from the glorified Christ in virtue of His death. And if we look to the well-known reformer John Calvin, we will learn that he followed Augustine in defining a sacrament, of which communion is one, as "a visible sign of a sacred thing" or as a "visible word" of God. The sacraments, according to Calvin, are inseparably attached to the Word. The sacraments seal the promises found in the Word. Regarding the Lord's Supper, more specifically, it is given to seal the promise that those who partake of the bread and wine in faith truly partake of the body and blood of Christ. John Calvin explains this in terms of the believer's mystical union with Christ. Just as baptism is connected with the believer's initiation into union with Christ, the Lord's Supper strengthens the believer's ongoing union with Christ. According to Calvin, Christ's human body is locally present in heaven, but it does not have to descend in order for believers to truly partake of it because the Holy Spirit effects communion. The Holy Spirit is the bond of the believer's union with Christ. Therefore, that which the minister does on the earthly plane, the Holy Spirit accomplishes on the spiritual plane. In other words, those who partake of the bread and wine in faith are also, by the power of the Holy Spirit, being nourished by the body and blood of Christ. And so beloved, though we do not see the elements as the literal body and blood of Christ ... by the work of the Holy Spirit ... they are set apart for a much holy and spiritual use than merely just being bread and grape juice ... and this is for the benefit of all who believe in life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and submit their lives to Him fully. And so, when we participate in Holy Communion it is a vivid proclamation of the Lord's death ... in word and symbol... Christ's death is set forth before all people... with the anticipation of His grand return!

And the practical outcome of this means that communion is a most solemn rite, instituted by Jesus Himself... and it is charged with deep and sacred meaning... so should be observed with unflinching reverence. And though the reality is that we all actually partake in communion in an unworthy manner ... because of our sin ... and as the Johns first letter says, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be

without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us." And so it is our faith in Jesus that allows us to partake in a worthy manner ... for we trust in His complete work on the cross ... to the extent that as we stand before our righteous and holy, holy, holy God... He does not see our sin ... but rather He sees the righteousness of Christ imputed on us. And so Paul reminds the believers in Corinth and in turn believers across the centuries ... that as we come to the communion table we are to approach it in all humility ... lowly ... not elevating ourselves ... but rather in love ... first and foremost for the Lord our God ... for we are to love Him all our heart, mind and strength... and then with love for our neighbours ... our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ ... for as Christ commanded us at the last supper, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." And if we approach the communion table in love and humility ... with hearts devoted to our Lord and Saviour ... we will be spiritually nourished and strengthened by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

And so beloved, we need to remember that communion is an integral part of Christian worship, and it should cause us to remember our Lord's death and resurrection and to look for His glorious return in the future. It should also remind us of what we receive as a result of His sacrifice. The communion service is a beautiful service ... and it should be approached as such. By the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit, as we eat and drink the bread and wine, by faith we are receiving Christ and being strengthened in our union with Him. And it is not merely a reminder of grace... it is a fresh gift of grace. And I conclude with this, according to Calvin, the Lord's Supper is also "a bond of love" intended to produce mutual love among believers. It is to inspire thanksgiving and gratitude. Because it is at the very heart of Christian worship. All superstition should be removed, and it should be observed in its biblical simplicity. Calvin considered the Lord's Supper to be a divine gift given by Christ himself to His people to nourish and strengthen their faith. As such, it is not to be neglected, but rather celebrated often and with joy.

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