

Challenges Christians Face

Institution of the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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Institution of the Lord's Supper

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of proper Christian worship. Let's learn about that in a message I am calling, "Institution of the Lord's Supper."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26:

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Introduction

Question 93 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What are the sacraments of the New Testament?" The answer is: "The sacraments of the New Testament are baptism and the Lord's Supper."¹

Jesus instituted these two New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (which is also called communion). He did that by example and also by instruction.

However, Jesus did not make up something completely new. He was continuing the two Old Testament sacraments of circumcision and the Passover. He simply transformed them from Old Tes-

¹ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

tament sacraments into New Testament sacraments.

The Old Testament sacrament of circumcision signified entrance into the covenant community of God's people. God called Abram into a covenant relationship with himself, and told him that he and all his offspring must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (cf. Genesis 17:9-14). Abraham and all of his male descendents were circumcised as a sign of their entrance into the covenant community of God's people. Centuries later, Jesus himself was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), thereby signifying his entrance into the covenant community of God's people.

When Jesus was about 30 years old, he started his public ministry. Just before he started his public ministry, however, he went to his cousin, John the Baptist, to be baptized by him (Matthew 3:13-17). After 3 years of ministry, Jesus was crucified and buried. Three days later he came back to life again. He then spent 40 days on earth, appearing on various occasions to different people (1 Corinthians 15:4-6). It was during these 40 days of instruction, and prior to his ascension into heaven, that Jesus commanded his disciples as follows: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

So, by example and by instruction Jesus instituted the New Testament sacrament of baptism, which replaced the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision. Baptism, like circumcision, is a sign of entrance into the covenant community of God's people. In the New Testament it signifies our *union* with Christ and with God's people. That is why, for example, the entire congregation takes a vow to support the parents of a child being baptized in the Christian nurture of that child.

Now, the Old Testament sacrament of the Passover meal signified fellowship (or communion) within the covenant community of God's people. Circumcision (and its New Testament counterpart of baptism) was administered only once to the recipient. However, the Passover meal was to be celebrated regularly, once a year (Deuteronomy 16:1).

Challenges Christians Face

God instituted the Passover meal when he delivered his people after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. God sent ten plagues to the Egyptians to persuade the Pharaoh to let the people of God go. After each plague Pharaoh refused to let the people of God go. God announced that the tenth plague would be the angel of death killing the firstborn child in every family. The angel of death, however, would pass over every house that had the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of that house. Inside the house the inhabitants were to eat the lamb, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. God said to his people, “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast” (Exodus 12:1-14). Throughout the Old Testament God’s people celebrated the Passover meal in memory of God’s supreme deliverance of them from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Centuries later Jesus regularly celebrated the Passover meal as a sign of his communion with God and the people of God. At the end of his public ministry, which lasted only three years, Jesus had one last supper with his disciples. During the celebration of that Passover meal Jesus transformed it into what we now know as the Lord’s Supper. Furthermore, he instructed his disciples that they were to continue celebrating the Lord’s Supper until he returned (1 Corinthians 11:26).

So, again, by example and by instruction Jesus instituted the New Testament sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which replaced the Old Testament sacrament of the Passover meal. The Lord’s Supper signifies our *communion* with Christ and with God’s people. That is why the Lord’s Supper is also called “communion.” And, as we shall, it is to be celebrated regularly in the church.

The apostle Paul established the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the church at Corinth when he planted it. Although he did not personally baptize many of the Christians in the Corinthian church (cf. 1:14-16), he affirmed baptism as a non-negotiable act of obedience to the Lord for all believers.

We learned in the previous lesson that the Corinthian church

regularly gathered together in order to share a special meal. These meals were known as “love feasts” (Jude 12). It was like our modern potluck meal. Everyone brought something to eat and drink to the large home of a wealthy Christian. The Christians enjoyed a regular meal together, which was then concluded with the Lord’s Supper. The purpose of the love feast was to stress fellowship, affection, and mutual caring among the Christians.

Sadly, what Paul had taught the Corinthian Christians about the Lord’s Supper was forgotten, and the Lord’s Supper was being abused. The poor Christians could not get off work early enough to join the rich Christians. The poor Christians also did not have much food or drink at all to bring to the love feast. So, the rich Christians often started without waiting for the poor Christians. The entire meal degenerated into a gluttonous, drunken revelry. It was so bad that Paul was compelled to say to the Corinthian Christians, “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat” (1 Corinthians 11:20).

So, Paul reminded the Corinthians that the central focus of the Lord’s Supper was the remembrance and proclamation of Christ’s saving work. Remembering this should have led the Corinthians to correct their misconduct.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that the central focus of the Lord’s Supper is the remembrance and proclamation of Christ’s saving work. We learn about this as follows:

1. The Institution of the Lord’s Supper (11:23a)
2. The Elements of the Lord’s Supper (11:23b-25)
3. The Proclamation of the Lord’s Supper (11:26)

I. The Institution of the Lord’s Supper (11:23a)

First, notice the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

Paul said in verse 23a: **“For I received from the Lord what**

I also delivered to you. . . .”

Paul noted that he had **received** from Jesus what he also **delivered** to the Corinthian church. These two words—**received** and **delivered**—when taken together was a technical phrase among the teachers of Paul’s day for the official, sacred transmission of religious traditions. In other words, Paul was not simply passing along some helpful suggestions or pious advice. He was in fact delivering to the Corinthian church official teaching that actually came **from the Lord** Jesus himself.

Paul did not say how he received this official teaching **from the Lord** Jesus. Perhaps it was by direct revelation. Or perhaps he had heard it directly from several of the disciples (such as Peter and James and John) who were in the Upper Room with Jesus when he instituted the Lord’s Supper for the very first time.

Regardless of how Paul received this official teaching **from the Lord**, the Corinthians had previously been instructed in the proper way, but they were no longer carrying out his teaching.

So, Paul next described what was involved in the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

II. The Elements of the Lord’s Supper (11:23b-25)

Second, let’s look at the elements of the Lord’s Supper.

Paul began explaining what was involved in the Lord’s Supper by saying, “. . . **that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed. . . .”**

The very first Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus himself, and he did it **on the night when he was betrayed.**

Although Jesus was celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples in the Upper Room, neither the gospels nor Paul’s account here give all the details of the meal. They concentrate on Jesus’ institution of new meal, the Lord’s Supper, which now supersedes the old meal, the Passover meal.

It is helpful to understand how the Passover meal was observed. The Passover meal began with the host’s pronouncing a

blessing over the first cup of red wine and passing it to the others present. Four cups of wine were passed around during the meal. After the first cup was drunk bitter herbs dipped in a fruit sauce were eaten and a message was given on the meaning of Passover. Then the first part of a hymn, the Hallel (which means “praise” and is related to hallelujah, “praise ye the Lord”), was sung. The Hallel is comprised of Psalms 113–118, and the first part sung was usually Psalm 113 or Psalms 113 and 114. After the second cup was passed around, the host would break and pass around the bread. Then the meal proper, which consisted of the roasted sacrificial lamb, was eaten. The third cup, after prayer, was then passed around and several more of the Hallel Psalms were sung. The fourth cup, which celebrated the coming kingdom, was drunk prior to concluding the meal. The final Hallel Psalm was then sung.

It was during the breaking of the bread, which was distributed after the second cup of wine, that Jesus said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me” (11:24). And it was the third cup of wine that Jesus blessed and that became the cup of communion. “In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (11:25). After Jesus gave some brief words of warning, rebuke, and instruction (Luke 22:21-38), the meal was concluded with the singing of Psalm 118, the final Hallel Psalm (Matthew 26:30).²

Now, as I said, Paul did not explain everything that took place when the Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. But he did teach about the bread and the cup. So, let's see what he said about the bread and the cup.

A. *The Bread (11:23b- 24b)*

First, there is the bread.

Paul said in verses 23b-24 that Jesus **“took bread, and when**

² John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 271-72.

he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

Four verbal ideas describe the activities regarding the bread: **took bread; had given thanks; broke it; and said.**

Jesus **took bread**, that is, he picked it up. The term **bread** may also be translated as “loaf.” It is likely that Jesus picked up a single loaf of bread to symbolize the unity of those eating together.

Next, he gave **thanks**. He prayed and thanked God for the meal and what it symbolized.

Then, Jesus **broke** the bread. Hosts normally broke the bread for their guests (cf. Mark 6:41; John 6:11). Jesus did not intend to communicate that the broken bread was that his body was about to be broken. In fact, John’s Gospel clearly notes that none of Jesus’ bones were broken. Rather, this breaking of the bread simply is a reference to the fact that believers are part of the body of Christ. Paul referred to this earlier in his letter when he said, “The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:16b-17).

Finally, Jesus spoke to the disciples about the symbolism of the bread. Paul summarized Jesus as having **said** three things, when he said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

First, Jesus said, “**This is my body.**” This expression has been the source of much debate throughout church history. There are essentially four views regarding the Lord’s Supper, and the meaning of this expression in particular.

The first view is transubstantiation. This is the view of the Roman Catholic Church. This view holds that the bread and wine literally turns into the body and blood of Jesus. However, that clearly cannot be the case because Jesus was literally present at the first institution of the Lord’s Supper when he handed out the bread and the wine.

The second view is consubstantiation. This is the view of the Lutheran Church. This view holds that Christ’s body and blood are

present with, in, and under the bread and wine, but that the substance of the bread and wine do not change. This view is hard to support from the text itself.

The third view is the symbolic view. This is the view of most Protestant churches. This view states that the bread and wine are merely symbols that encourage us to focus on the body and blood of Christ.

And the fourth view is the spiritual view. This is the view of Presbyterian churches. This view states that Christ himself is not physically present. He is, however, present spiritually when the people of God celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Second, Jesus said, “. . . **which is for you. . . .**” When Jesus died on the cross, he did not die to pay for his own sin (for he had none). He suffered and died on behalf of others. Jesus paid the penalty for the sin of fallen sinners like ourselves. His death is of infinite value and it is offered to all. The payment for sin that Jesus accomplished is available to every single person who turns to Jesus in faith, confession, and repentance (1 John 1:9-2:2). Yet, in these words of the Lord's Supper, Jesus said that he gave his life for a particular group of people: his own followers. His death pays for the sins only of those who believe in him.

And third, Jesus said, “**Do this in remembrance of me.**” This is a command from the Lord Jesus himself. Participating in the Lord's Supper is not optional for Christians. The Lord's Supper is to be celebrated on a regular basis if we are to be faithful to the Lord Jesus who died to pay the penalty for our sin. In fact, one commentator goes so far as to say, and I agree with him, “Not to partake of the Lord's Supper is disobedience and a sin.”³

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during a celebration of the Passover meal. The Passover meal, you recall, commemorated the Exodus (Exodus 12:14-27). By telling his disciples to replace the Old Testament sacrament of the Passover meal with the New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus was in fact claiming

³ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 272.

that his work supersedes the Exodus. And surely it does! Jesus frees us from spiritual bondage and slavery to sin. Jesus gives every Christian the sure hope of a heavenly Promised land that endures forever and ever. Jesus gives power to live a transformed life.

The centrality of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper is the main point of this passage.

B. The Cup (11:25)

And second, there is the cup.

Paul said in verse 25: **“In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”**

Paul noted the parallel between the distribution of the bread and **the cup** by saying that the cup was distributed **in the same way** as the bread.

Whereas verses 23-24 mention talking, thanking, breaking, and speaking, verse 25 only mentions talking and speaking. The expression, **“in the same way,”** however, indicates that Paul intentionally abbreviated his description of the procedure regarding the cup.

The cup of wine in the Passover meal represented the lamb's blood on the doorposts of the house. Now, the cup of wine in the Lord's Supper represents the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

When Jesus said that **this cup** was **the new covenant in his blood**, he was not referring to the covenant of grace replacing the covenant of works. Instead, he meant that it was a **new covenant** in that it is the inauguration of the final covenant to which all Old Testament covenants pointed. The Passover meal and the Exodus are now replaced by the Lord's Supper and the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away our sin forever.

III. The Proclamation of the Lord's Supper (11:26)

Finally, let's look at the proclamation of the Lord's Supper.

Paul said in verse 26: **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”**

Paul did not specify how often the Lord's Supper was to be celebrated. Some say it should be yearly, like the Passover meal. Others say weekly. Paul simply indicated that it needed to be done regularly. We, of course, celebrate it monthly.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of the Lord's death. It is a proclamation to ourselves and to the watching world that Jesus is the only way of salvation. It is to join with the apostle Peter, who concluded one of the very first Christian sermons with this statement: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

And we are to celebrate the Lord's Supper until Jesus comes back again.

Conclusion

Let me close with John MacArthur's statement about what is involved in the Lord's Supper. MacArthur states:

When a believer comes to the Lord's table, he remembers Christ's work on the cross (11:25), he partakes of Christ's spiritual presence in the fellowship, not the elements themselves (10:16), he communes with the saints (10:17), he worships in holiness (10:20-22), he proclaims salvation in Christ (11:24-25), and he anticipates the return of the Lord (11:26) and the coming Kingdom (Matthew 26:29).⁴

May God help us to celebrate the Lord's Supper in this way.

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 273.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Lord Jesus, we celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly. We thank you for the apostle Paul's instruction in how we are to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Help us to think carefully about what it means to approach the Lord's Supper.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve the only true God who is faithful.