

LORD'S SUPPER FAQ

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Sixth Wednesday in Lent

March 24, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 11, verses 17 through 34. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. We read in Jesus' name.

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

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.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—³⁴ if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's start with a little review. Last week we began talking about the Lord's Supper. And there were two very simple points. We asked, "What is it?" and, "What's it for?" First, "What is it?" Do you remember? The bread is the body of Christ, and the wine is the blood of Christ. Or, as the Small Catechism explains it: "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given unto us Christians to eat and to drink, as it was instituted by Christ Himself."

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Second, "What's it for?" Do you remember? It is for the forgiveness of your sins. The catechism asks it this way: "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" And it answers, "It is pointed out in these words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' Through these words, the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given unto us in the Sacrament. For where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

These are the two most basic points to understand concerning the Lord's Supper. It is the body and blood of Jesus, and it is for the forgiveness of your sins. The Small Catechism teaches this very clearly. But the ultimate authority, of course, is Scripture. So we go back to Jesus' words of institution, where he said, **"This is my body,"** and, **"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"** (Matt. 26:26, 28). With these words, Jesus declares both what it is and what it's for. It's really that simple.

We actually review these two points every time we receive the Lord's Supper together. The "Exhortation before Communion" reminds us what we should believe and do. We should pay careful attention to these words every time we receive the Lord's Supper together:

In order that you may receive this Holy Sacrament in a worthy manner you should carefully consider what you must now believe and do. From the words of Christ: "This is My body, which is given for you; This is My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins;" you should believe that Jesus Christ is present with His body and blood, as the words declare.

From Christ's words, "For the forgiveness of sins," you should also believe that Jesus Christ gives to you His body and blood to confirm unto you the forgiveness of all your sins.

Those are the two points of what it is and what it's for. It is the body and blood of Jesus, and it is for the forgiveness of sins.

Now let's consider a few questions that arise from these two points. The first question that probably arises in many people's minds is, "Really?"

We recognize that what we confess the Lord's Supper to be is pretty unbelievable. The Small Catechism presents the question this way: "How can the bodily eating and drinking produce such great benefits?" Answer: "The eating and drinking, indeed, do not produce them, but the words: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' For besides the bodily eating and drinking, these words are the chief thing in the Sacrament; and anyone who believes them has what they say and declare, namely, the forgiveness of sins." Luther goes right back to the words of Scripture. What does Jesus say it is? What does Jesus say it does? That's the bottom line.

So Luther teaches that the power is in the Word of God. And this applies both to the Lord's Supper and to Baptism. The power is in the Word of God. If we just ate bread and drank wine without the promise of Jesus, it would be nothing. Even if we said, "This is the body of Christ, given for you," and, "This is the blood of Christ, shed for you," if there were no command from Christ to do this, it would still be ordinary bread and wine, and no Sacrament. The Word of God makes it what it is. And those who believe that Word of God receive the benefits. The Sacraments are what they are, regardless of what we believe. Our faith does not make the Sacraments. But our faith receives them. So it is those who believe the promise of God who receive the benefits of the Sacraments.

The power is in the Word of God. That means that the Sacraments are God's work. They are not man's work. This seems to be the place where a lot of people get hung up. The Sacraments

are outward and physical things. We even participate, physically, in receiving them. This makes them seem like works, and pretty easy works at that. But our physical participation is really nothing. Our physical participation is not a work that commends us to God. It's simply the manner in which God has ordained for us to receive his gifts. The Sacraments are God's work.

I'm going to back up to Baptism for just a moment, because I didn't mention this passage when we considered Baptism, and it really sheds a lot of light on this truth of the Sacraments being God's work. Pay attention to who does the work. In Ephesians 5(:25-27), Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word." Who cleansed the Church "by the washing of water with the word"? Jesus did. It doesn't say that we cleansed ourselves by being baptized. It doesn't even say that the Church cleansed her members by baptizing them. It says that Christ cleansed the Church. So it's not man's work; it's God's work. When God attaches his promise to something—and this principle applies both to Baptism and the Lord's Supper—when God attaches his promise to something, even if it's something physical, it is the promise of God that makes that thing effective.

When we're thinking of the Sacraments, and this part also applies to the Word of God and the absolution, it's helpful to make a distinction between the winning of forgiveness and the delivery of forgiveness. We are forgiven because Jesus died and rose again. That's what he did to earn forgiveness. And he delivers that forgiveness to us through the Word and the Sacraments. Sometimes we use the term "means of grace" to refer to them. We don't call them "sources of grace." Jesus on the cross is the source of God's grace. But we call the Word and Sacraments "means." They are the delivery vehicles. It's like if someone sends you a gift through the mail. That person doesn't actually deliver it to you. The FedEx guy, or someone like him, brings it to your door. He might even put it in your hands. But he's not the one giving you the gift. You still acknowledge the sender as the giver of the gift, and rightly so. The Word of God and the Sacraments Christ instituted are like the FedEx guy of salvation. They are not the source of God's grace. They are the means God uses to deliver his grace.

So how can bodily eating and drinking produce such great benefits? The power is in the promise of God.

Next question. And I hear this from time to time. "How can I ever be worthy to receive the Lord's Supper?" And it's not surprising that this question comes up. In the "Exhortation before Communion," we actually raise the issue of worthiness when we say, "In order that you may receive this Holy Sacrament in a worthy manner you should carefully consider what you must now believe and do." And in the passage we read from 1 Corinthians, Paul warns us, "Whoever ... eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (11:27). We hear these statements about worthiness, and it's not surprising that we think, *Well, there's no way I could possibly be worthy. I mean, who am I? I am an unworthy sinner.* And this is true. You are an unworthy sinner. And so am I. We are all unworthy sinners. But this should not keep us away from the Sacrament. Rather, it should compel us to go, because, there, Christ promises to deliver the forgiveness he won at the cross. We will never be worthy of Christ's gift. But that's not the point. The point is not us being worthy, but us eating and drinking in a worthy manner.

One way to understand it is that it's the difference between an adjective and an adverb. The word "worthy" is an adjective. It describes a noun, like you and me. We are not worthy. But the

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word “worthily” is an adverb. It describes an action. In this case, it describes the action of eating and drinking. So unworthy sinners can eat and drink in a worthy manner.

And in this text, Paul describes the difference between a worthy manner and an unworthy manner. We must examine ourselves (11:28). Part of this, I suppose, would include examining our thoughts, words, and deeds to recognize that we are sinners and that we need Christ's forgiveness. But Paul especially emphasizes examining what we believe. He says, “Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (11:29).

Commentators ask, “Which body is Paul talking about? Is he talking about the bread? Or is he talking about the congregation?” Because both are rightly called the body of Christ. And both are in the context of this passage. Paul has just recorded the words of institution, where Jesus says, “**This is my body.**” And he also addresses issues within the congregation.

The Corinthians apparently made a meal out of it when they observed the Lord's Supper, which Paul actually told them to stop doing (11:34). The problem was that there were divisions in the congregation, and the different factions would not share the Lord's Supper with each other (11:18-21). Because of this, Paul actually says that what they were doing was not really the Lord's Supper (11:20).

So both of these possibilities are valid. Paul could mean that we must discern that the bread is the body of Christ. Or he could mean that we must discern that the other members of the congregation are members of the same body of Christ. But there's a third option: both. And I think this is the best way to understand it. Discerning the body of Christ means confessing that the bread is the body of Christ, and my neighbor next to me at the altar is a member of the same body. So it's impossible to receive the body of Christ without communing with our neighbor at the altar.

A chapter earlier, in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, Paul speaks of both the bread and the congregation as the body of Christ. He says, “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? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” So discerning the body means both, that we confess the bread to be the true body of Jesus, and we confess our fellow Christians to be members of the same body. So in the “Exhortation before Communion” we emphasize the importance of believing that the bread is the body of Christ, and the wine is the blood of Christ, but we also remember that we “should ... unite in giving thanks to Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for so great a gift, and should love one another with a pure heart.” This, also, is part of what it means to discern the body.

And Paul issues a warning to those who eat and drink unworthily. He says they eat and drink judgment on themselves (11:29). We want to avoid this. This is part of the reason why we do confirmation before admitting our young people to the Lord's Supper. We want them to be able to discern the body. It's also part of the reason for this sermon. We want all of us to be able to discern the body.

Concerning those Corinthians who ate and drank unworthily, Paul says, “This is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (11:30). That sounds serious! I'm not sure if he's talking about physical illness and death or spiritual illness and death. Either way, this should be avoided. Spiritual illness and death is actually worse. The consequences of eating and drinking unworthily can be quite severe.

I remember one of my seminary professors (Pastor Bob Lee) saying that this is one of the strongest biblical proofs for our confession that the bread is the true body of Christ and the wine

is the true blood of Christ. If they are mere symbols, then they couldn't cause us actual harm. But there is a danger about them because they are what Jesus says they are. So the Lord's Supper is what it is, regardless of what we think it is. When Christians receive the Lord's Supper, we receive the body and blood of Jesus. When unbelievers receive the Lord's Supper, they also receive the body and blood of Jesus. When Christians receive it in an unworthy manner, they also receive the body and blood of Jesus. The difference is whether we receive the benefits or the judgment.

We will never be worthy of Christ's body and blood. We always come as unworthy sinners. But we come in a worthy manner when we confess our sins, believe that the bread and wine are the true body and blood of Jesus, and recognize that our fellow Christians are members of the same body. This is what it means to eat and drink in a worthy manner.

One more question. And we're past the four critical questions the catechism deals with, but I hear this one enough that we should deal with it sometime. This one is related to the last question, but it's more of a modern issue. Sometimes people will say, "Pastor, I went to a Lutheran church while on vacation, and they wouldn't give me the Lord's Supper! What's up with that?"

This can be a rather offensive experience. I get it. I've been there too. But it's helpful to understand where they're coming from. This is a practice called "closed communion." And, really, pretty much every Christian Church has some form of closed communion. I've heard people say that the AFLC practices open communion. This is not true. Unless you're giving the Lord's Supper to service dogs and Cabbage Patch Kids, you don't really have open communion. Everyone draws the line somewhere. And we should, because Scripture warns us about eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. So Roman Catholic churches only serve communion to Roman Catholics. Same thing in Eastern Orthodox churches. Most Protestant churches, even if they consider the Lord's Supper to be merely symbolic, will limit it to Christians. Our practice here is to limit it to baptized and confirmed Christians who confess that it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. And even if we don't say, "Lutherans only," that pretty much limits it to Lutherans, because the only other Christians who confess that it is the true body and blood of Jesus are Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and a small percentage of Anglicans. These groups actually make up the majority of Christians in the world, but Roman Catholics won't go to communion outside of a Roman Catholic church, or at least their priests don't want them to. The same is true for Eastern Orthodox Christians. And that just leaves Lutherans and a very small number of Anglicans.

This is kind of a modern problem because of all the different denominations, and even different church bodies within those denominations. Everyone draws the line somewhere. That means it is always open to some and closed to others. We do this, or at least we should do this, out of love for all. We do not want anyone to eat and drink judgment on themselves. That's the reason for the line.

The difference, then, between us and some other Lutheran churches is how we draw the line and how we enforce it. And I have to admit, this is a tricky business. I don't think there is a perfect answer. I don't think our practice is perfect, but I'm not convinced the other practice is much better. We draw the line by using the "Exhortation before Communion." We state what you must believe and do, and then we leave it in your hands to believe and act accordingly. The problem is that the person who doesn't think the Sacrament is anything, also won't think there is any danger with it, when there really is. So they might come anyway, just because everyone else

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is doing it. So some of our Lutheran friends draw the line at membership. This actually protects those who think the Sacrament is nothing by not allowing them to come. But then they end up excluding some Lutherans from other church bodies. This can be offensive. But I think it helps to understand where they're coming from. Also remember that it's their congregation. We can respect that.

I'll give you a little practical advice that might help. First, when you go on vacation, or when you spend the weekend at the lake, go to church! If there isn't an AFLC church there, look for another biblical Lutheran church. Most likely, you'll be able to find a Missouri Synod (LCMS) church somewhere. They're all over the country, while we're mostly in the upper Midwest. Or you might find a Wisconsin Synod church (WELS), or ELS, AALC, LCMC, or Lutheran Brethren. Most churches will say on their website when they celebrate the Lord's Supper, and if you're going there that Sunday, even if it's an AFLC church, let the pastor know you're coming. You can call or email ahead. If you just show up on Sunday morning, and that's probably what you'll do, at least go early enough that you can find the pastor, introduce yourself, tell him where you are a member, say that you would like to receive the Lord's Supper, and let him ask you a couple questions. He might ask you what you believe the Lord's Supper is. And he might ask you why you want to receive it. Remember, those are the two basic points: it is the body and blood of Jesus, and it is for the forgiveness of sins. Then he might give you permission to partake, or he might say that it's just for members. That's okay. Your sins are still forgiven.

Some pastors will still say, "No," but they are more likely to say, "Yes," if you ask ahead of time. And the pastor will appreciate it too. Sometimes visitors do this when they come here. So I get to explain what the Lord's Supper is and who it's for. It usually sets everyone at ease, because the pastor is probably more worried about it than you are.

And if you visit a non-Lutheran church or even a liberal Lutheran church, don't go up for communion. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches won't let you come anyway. Other churches probably will, but we still shouldn't do it, because partaking of communion at a particular church is a sign that we confess the same doctrine. It's an action that says, "We confess the same doctrine together." The problem is: we don't. I wish we did, but we don't. So we should not go to an altar where they say this is merely a symbol. And we should not go to an altar where basic Christian doctrines like the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus are open questions.

That's closed communion, and to one degree or another, almost all Christians practice it. It matters to us because the bread really is the body of Christ, the wine really is the blood of Christ, and while it is given to us for the forgiveness of sins, those who partake in an unworthy manner eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

Okay, that's probably enough for tonight. There are a few other questions we could consider, but these are the ones I hear most often. If you have other questions, please ask. I like questions, even if I don't know the answers to them. It shows me that you're thinking and wrestling with the truths of Scripture. And that's a lot of fun. It helps us grow in our understanding of Christ, and it helps us grow together as Christians.

The bottom line remains this: it is what Jesus says it is, and it does what Jesus says it does. And in order to receive the Sacrament in a worthy manner, we must believe what Jesus says. We always go back to the Word of God on this. The power for the Sacrament comes from the Word

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of God. It is the true body and blood of Jesus Christ, and Jesus gives it to us for the forgiveness of sins. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.