

The Institution of the Lord's Supper  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
6/1/2014

Reformed folk believe that the only way God has ever related to us has always been by way of a covenant. A covenant is an agreement, a contract. God starts it and lays out the terms, and we agree to it. Of course, we are not equal to God in this agreement. He is the ruler, and we are the people being ruled. A covenant has several parts to it. Usually there is a history of the relationship between the two parties (this happens in the preamble). There is a listing of the responsibilities of each party, and a list of blessings (for keeping the terms of the covenant) and curses (for breaking the terms). And the conclusion of every covenantal agreement was a meal. The meal was an extremely important part of the covenantal agreement. The meal meant that the two parties now trusted each other, and were related to each other in a new way that had not previously been the case. They shared the table. That means a lot more to the ancient near eastern peoples than it does to us today. Hospitality was (and still is!) sacred among all peoples in the Middle East. During a meal, there was no hostility or war. It meant peace, at least for as long as the meal lasted. If you think about the climate of the Middle East, a lot of it being desert, this makes sense. Hospitality was not a merely social concern. It was life or death. As we have seen so far in our studies on the Lord's Supper, this is not merely a matter of fond and sentimental remembrance of something that happened long ago. This is an active participation in Christ's death and resurrection. The meal has all those connotations that hospitality and covenant evoke to the mind of someone living in the Middle East. We are going to explore what those connotations are, as well as the situation in Corinth which gave rise to Paul's instruction here.

The immediate context of our passage is something of a shock if we are unfamiliar to it. Paul is giving the Corinthians a very strong verbal reprimand for the way in which they are botching the Lord's Supper. There are factions in the church, which hurts the church no end. If the Lord's Supper is supposed to celebrate our unity in the Lord, then factions would obviously completely undermine that unity. There was a second problem as well: the rich people were involving themselves in gluttony and drunkenness at the Lord's Supper, and were thus putting the poor people to shame. Again, if the Lord's Supper is celebrating our unity in the body, then having the rich look down on the poor is really a denial of what the Supper is all about.

In this context, Paul introduces his teaching on the Lord's Supper with the word "For." That word is important. In this context, it means that what the Corinthians were doing is going to look really bad when Paul set it next to the teaching that he had received. So, our entire passage (verses 23-26) serve as a corrective to the Corinthians. They were mishandling the Lord's Supper, so Paul has to set them straight about how the Lord's Supper is really supposed to work.

The way the Lord's Supper is really supposed to work is as a covenantal meal. What is in the background here is the famous passage from Jeremiah 31:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

Those words “from the least of them to the greatest of them” should have clued the Corinthians in on the fact that they were equal in standing before the Lord, no matter what the social status. Their sins would be forgiven because of the blood of Jesus Christ shed for them. The law would be put in people's hearts and minds through the new birth. It is a beautiful description of what Jesus came to do. You can hear the echoes of that Jeremiah passage here in 1 Corinthians 11. The most obvious echo is the “*new covenant* in My blood,” the words of Jesus uttered at the Last Supper. What Jesus was saying there was that the forgiveness of sins promised in Jeremiah would happen through the blood of Jesus Christ. The covenant would be ratified with blood, and the death of the mediator. We take part in that ratification, and also Jesus' death and resurrection, when we partake of the bread and wine.

The second aspect of the covenant meal that we have already looked at in some depth last week is the memory. We're going to look at a different angle of that memory this week. Jesus tells His disciples to do this “in remembrance of Me.” We saw last week that such memory is an active participation in what Jesus did by being united to Him by faith. It is not a mere memory. This week we see that such active remembrance is a necessary part of all covenants in the Bible. Particularly in the Passover celebration, the catechism of the young people was all about remembering what God did in Egypt, and participating in that deliverance through the Passover meal. It is the same thing with the Lord's Supper. We remember how it was that Jesus started this new covenant promised in Jeremiah. It is covenantal memory that we are talking about here. He did that through the shedding of His blood, the separation of blood from body in His death on the cross.

Strongly connected to this aspect of memory is the way in which the celebration was passed down from Jesus to the apostles. Paul makes a special point of this in verse 23. Paul received from the Lord what he was going to write down in the next few verses. It did not come from a human source. It did not come from the traditions of the Jews. It came straight from Jesus to Paul. Paul is the messenger, then, who communicates to the Corinthians what he received from Jesus. Notice that Paul describes his message as something he has already given them in the past. Paul is not here teaching the Corinthians something new, but is reminding them of what they already know. This is one of the reasons why repetition is so necessary in the

Christian life: we forget. As my church history professor liked to say, "The Christian life is a combination of amnesia and déjà-vu: 'I know that I've forgotten this already some time before.'" The repetition has another bonus: we often come to a deeper understanding of something after hearing it many times. We must come to expect this about Scripture and about the Lord's Supper. They are both inexhaustible in the spiritual benefit they can give us, if we attend to the Word and Sacrament with just such an expectation. If we expect to be bored, then we probably will be bored. But if we expect to be fed, and pray that the Lord will feed us, then we will be fed. Remembrance helps us greatly in this aspect of covenantal living.

The last element of the covenantal meal that we need to explore is the sacrifice. In the Mosaic covenant, the sacrifices were offered by the people to God. They were responsible for providing the sacrificial animals. But this is not the ultimate way in which the sins of God's people would be forgiven. Even in the covenant made with Abraham, the indications are clear that God will provide the way of forgiveness. Remember that when Abraham separated the two halves of the animals, that God appeared in a smoking pot and passed between the pieces? God was saying by that, "May I become like these animal halves if I do not keep my side of the covenant." But God was saying even more than that. God was saying that He would take on Himself the guilt of breaking the covenant, even if it was we who broke it! So, in the Abrahamic covenant, God promised to take our sins. In the Mosaic covenant, God showed His people how futile it was to try to pay for their sins by their own efforts and sacrifices. But in the new covenant, which Jesus ratified with His own blood, we have the full and final forgiveness of sins.

Besides this large covenantal idea that we have explored, there are a couple of smaller things that we need to notice. The first of these is the grace that Jesus offers. In verse 23, Paul makes a point of saying that two seemingly incompatible events took place on the same night. Jesus was betrayed, and yet Jesus gave Himself. This is God's grace on display in a marvelous way. He can say, along with Joseph, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." Elsewhere Paul will say that Christ died for us while we were still enemies. Surely, it is grace that is offered to us in the Lord's Supper!

A second smaller thing to notice is the connection between Word and Sacrament in verse 26. Paul says that our eating and drinking is a proclamation of our Lord's death. That word "proclamation" is a preaching word. Paul is saying then that the very act of eating and drinking is itself preaching of a certain kind. It is a preaching that has the same message as the sermon: Christ's person and work. But it is a preaching that works in a different way than the sermon. The sermon works only through what we hear. In the Lord's Supper, all five of our senses are engaged. Now, faith comes by hearing, and so we give a priority to the Word. But the sacrament is the seal of the Word. As an analogy, think of a cake. There are two main parts to the cake: the part that is cooked in the oven, and then the icing. You can eat a cake without icing, but it's much more tasty to have it with the icing. You could eat icing all by itself, but that seems to be missing something as well, doesn't it? The icing is what tops off

the cake and makes it obviously a cake. Without the icing, the cake might look like a large biscuit, or some kind of shortbread. Put the icing on it, though, and there is no mistaking it for anything else but a cake. Word and sacrament belong together just like the baked part of a cake goes with the icing. Word and Sacrament belong together. The Word is sealed by the Sacrament. Another analogy that will help is to remember how letters were done in the old days. The letter would be sealed by wax and a signet ring pressed into the melted wax. The Word is the letter, and the sacrament is the seal of that letter. Obviously, the letter has the priority. But the seal is very important, because it guarantees the genuineness of the letter, and that the letter has not been tampered with. It gives reassurance to the recipient of the letter. So God sends His letter to us, a love letter, and He seals it with the sacrament of His own Son's body and blood. If our faith were stronger, we would not need this seal. But God knows and understands our weakness, which is why He has given to us this extra bit of assurance.

Now, in applying practically the text to our lives, we should think about how we receive the Lord's Supper, and how eager we should be for it. I found a very helpful series of very practical questions from the Puritan Thomas Dolittle in his book on the Lord's Supper. I am simply going to ask these questions in somewhat updated language, and this will serve for our application. Do we not often stand in need of being washed in the blood of Christ? Do we not often defile ourselves and gather filth upon our souls? Should we not come often to the fountain of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ? Do we not often disturb our Christian peace? Should we not come often to have our forgiveness sealed and confirmed to our souls in the blood of Christ? Do we not often need something to make us more spiritually alive? Are we not often spiritually dull or lukewarm? Do we not need great help in breaking and softening our hearts so that we will renew our repentance, and also strengthen and confirm our resolve against sin? Don't we fall in love with sin all too readily? Don't we need to remember how much God hates sin? As Dolittle says, "God's displeasure against sin is more obvious in the death of Christ than in turning the angels out of heaven or Adam out of paradise." Don't we need great help in increasing our love for God? Don't we need great help in increasing our faith and hope? Don't we need to remember Jesus more, especially in the way that we have been using the term for active participation in the events of the past? Don't we need help in drawing close to God and to each other? If we need these things, and we surely do, then let us look in expectation to God to feed us by His Word and by His sacraments, so that we will have these questions answered by the Word preached, and by the covenantal meal served to us by our loving Shepherd of souls, Jesus Christ.