1-12-20

Matthew 26:26-30

The Lord’s Supper is something that is central to the worship of Christ. It is one of the two ordinances, the other being baptism, that Jesus Himself told His followers participate in. From that very first time Jesus and the apostles celebrated this meal, Christians throughout the world have been sharing this supper with each other. The Lord’s Supper and what took place at the time have deep significance. I thought it would be beneficial for us to spend the next couple of Sundays considering Communion because it was so important to our Saviour and because it has several layers of depth and meaning.

Let me begin by talking about some basic terms that are associated with the Lord’s Supper since they tend to cause some confusion, and then we can get back to what Scripture has for us. Most Protestant denominations refer to baptism and the Lord’s Supper as ordinances. Basically, an ordinance is a law or command. These two actions are something that Jesus told us to do that have some ritual associated with them. That makes them different from the usual commands of Jesus such as loving your neighbor or spreading the Gospel. These ordinances are symbols of a deeper spiritual meaning. These are the only two ordinances of Jesus.

Another term used is sacrament. Sacrament can have two different meanings so you have to know where the person using the term is coming from. Sacrament comes from the word ‘sacred’ and it refers to a holy ritual in the church. Many Protestants use the word sacrament in the same way as the word ‘ordinance’ and it applies to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When used in this way, the two words are interchangeable.

However, the word sacrament can be used with an additional meaning that is not found in the Bible. This meaning is usually associated with Roman Catholicism and some eastern Orthodox. In this theology, the sacrament itself actually imparts grace to the person receiving it. It is a means of bringing about salvation. The Bible teaches us that grace comes from God alone; that salvation comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ as Saviour. There is no act that we can perform that will save us; we are saved only by accepting Christ using the faith that the Holy Spirit gives to us. Also, these denominations have additional sacraments; penance, conformation, marriage, anointing of the sick, and holy orders; none of which were prescribed as ordinances by Jesus.

One more word is ‘eucharist’. This word is sometimes used to describe the Lord’s Supper or even the bread and wine. The word itself simply means ‘giving thanks’. Giving thanks is a big part of the Communion supper; and, of course, communion shows fellowship; both between Christians and between Christ and ourselves.

In our Scripture for today, Jesus and His disciples are celebrating the Passover. This would not have been the only Passover they had celebrated together and it was certainly not the only meal they had shared. But this one was special. Jesus knew that this would be His last meal with His friends before He faced all the terrible suffering of experiencing God’s wrath in our place. Luke records Jesus’ words that show us His deep emotion and how very human He is.

Luke 22:15

And He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer”.

We see here Jesus’ deep desire to spend some time in fellowship with His disciples. It shows His love for them; it showed that He wanted to spend a meal with people who loved Him before His ordeal. Keeping in mind that Jesus is also fully God, we can go back to Genesis and be reminded that God created us in the first place in order to have fellowship with us. And Jesus wanted this particular meal to be carried out from then on by those who would become His disciples. And we, as people who love Jesus, are folks He wants to be around. He is present with us when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

This is why we need to be so very careful when we partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine. The bread and the wine or juice don’t change, but Christ is in our presence in a very special way. Certainly, when two or more are gathered, Jesus is there. He is here with us as we worship during this service. It is just that Jesus held this last supper in a very special place and He asked us who love Him to remember Him in a special way. If we let it become simply a ceremony without focusing on Jesus, then it is like turning our back on His desire for us to have fellowship with Him.

As mentioned earlier, this was a Passover meal. The Passover meal involved lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and wine. Each had its significance in the meal that went back to remembering the exodus of Israel from Egypt. The lamb was a substitutionary death. On that night in Egypt when the angel of death went through the land, every single household experienced death: Either the death of the first born male, or the death of a lamb. Those of Israel did not experience the death of their first-born son because the lamb took his place. This was a foreshadowing of Jesus taking our place in death and suffering for sins.

The bread was cooked without leaven because the Israelites were in a hurry. Once they were told to leave, they couldn’t fool around, they had to move on. The bitter herbs were the remembrance of four hundred bitter years of slavery in Egypt before the exodus. By Jesus’ day, the Passover meal involved four cups of wine: the cup of sanctification, judgement, redemption, and praise.

What Jesus did during this last supper was to transform the Jewish Passover into a Christian remembrance of Christ. In Jesus, there is a new exodus. In the first, the Jews were released from Egypt by the power of God, and brought into the promised land. Unfortunately, the people of Israel failed miserably in their duties to God. Jesus brings about the new exodus; again, by the power of God. This is the exodus from the kingdom of satan; this is our freedom from slavery to sin.

Jesus became the sacrificial lamb who died in our place. Additionally, it is Jesus who consumed the bitter herbs when He suffered the wrath of God on the cross. Neither of these elements is directly involved in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus put our focus on the bread and the wine.

During the meal, Jesus picked up a loaf of bread and pronounced a blessing; this would have been giving thanks to God for His provision. Next, Jesus broke the loaf of bread and handed it to His disciples. The breaking of the bread demonstrated that His own body was to be broken; none of His bones were broken, but His body was ruined and put to death. He gave the disciples the bread in the same way that He would be giving up His own body for the benefit of all His followers.

When Jesus gave them the bread he said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” I think that all of us here understand Jesus’ words as symbolic. But there are other church groups that take a more literal meaning.

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches hold that in the hands of the priest, the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus. This is called transubstantiation. The unfortunate result of this is that they believe that Jesus is sacrificed over and over each time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. We know this isn’t correct because we are told in Hebrews 10:12,

but [Jesus], having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God

Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was complete and perfect, nothing needs to be added. Additionally, in these churches, the bread and wine are worshiped as Christ, which is idolatry.

The Lutheran church has the idea that although the bread and wine don’t themselves change, the physical body and blood of Christ is present throughout the bread and wine. The body and blood are somehow mixed in with the particles of the elements. This is called consubstantiation.

There are several reasons to believe that Jesus was speaking symbolically here. For one thing, everybody at the table saw Him pick up the bread from the table. They also saw that all of Jesus was sitting there holding the bread. Also, eating of human flesh was never something God declared acceptable. God is unchanging; He wouldn’t command us to do something contrary to His own law.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that the man Jesus is exactly that: a man. Because He is a man, He is restricted in all the ways that human-beings are. Even now, Jesus still exists as a man, but He has His glorified body and all its benefits. So, He can only be in one place at a time. He can’t be in all the places communion is being celebrated at once. Also, His human body is finite; there is only so much of Him. Please keep in mind that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. The man part has the limitations. In His Godhood, He is infinite, He is everywhere at once, He is unlimited. But His Godhood is spirit, not flesh.

Our understanding is that Jesus was speaking symbolically when He referred to the bread as His body.

Verse 27 tells us that Jesus took a cup of wine and again gave thanks to God for His blessings and provision. Next, Jesus shared the cup (and yes, it was wine, not grape juice) with His disciples telling them that it was His blood. As with His body and the bread, He was speaking symbolically.

The whole idea of feeding on the body and blood of Christ is that we get our life from Him. He becomes our nourishment; He sustains us. When we accept Jesus as Saviour, He becomes a part of us like the food we eat becomes a part of us. Jesus is a Saviour who doesn’t simply stand beside or behind us, He indwells us so that we become a part of Him and He a part of us. The Lord’s Supper is a visual reminder of how close of a relationship we have with Jesus.

Jesus told His disciples that His blood was the blood of a covenant; and that it was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. This time the blood was not metaphorical; He meant His very own blood. Covenants were always sealed in blood. If we think back to all the covenants God made with His people, a blood sacrifice was involved. Something gave its life to seal the covenant. Up to this point, it had always been an animal; but now, it was to be the Son of God.

Jesus also said His blood would be poured out. It was the usual practice in a sacrifice to collect all the blood of the animal and pour it out on the ground. The normal Roman crucifixion didn’t really involve that much blood. The person was nailed to the cross, but then left to die of suffocation. Think about what Jesus went through: the beatings, the crown of thorns, the scourging, and the spear thrust into His side. Jesus lost a lot of blood; His blood was poured out on the ground.

Jesus ended with “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” This verse is sometimes used by people to say that because Jesus won’t drink, then we shouldn’t either. But this is not understanding what He is saying. Remember that the first Passover meal was eaten while the Israelites were still in Egypt. The meal looked forward to their deliverance from slavery; but it also looked forward to Israel being established in the land that God had promised them.

Likewise, the first Lord’s Supper looked forward to the deliverance from slavery to sin, which didn’t take place until after the crucifixion. It also looked forward to the fulfilled Kingdom of Christ, when Jesus’ kingdom is established and all sin and evil is done away with. Once His kingdom is established, Jesus will sit down with all His people at the wedding supper of the Lamb, and we will all drink the fruit of the vine together with our Lord.

Different congregations celebrate the Lord’s Supper in different ways and sometimes we get stuck on rules. Do we use wine or grape juice? Some will use only unleavened bread while others will use leavened. Some will celebrate once a week, some once a month, some only four times a year. Where does the communion table set and who is able to serve it? All these are up to the local church body; to get tied up in various rules is to miss the point entirely.

When we take the Lord’s Supper, we think on these things: How the Lord’s body was broken and His blood was poured out, just so that He could have fellowship with us forever. How deeply He loves us; we cannot fathom how He cares for us. The death He died provides us with eternal life. This is the importance of the Lord’s Supper.

Prayer

Almighty God, we gratefully and humbly worship You because in Your great mercy You did not even spare Your own Son in order to bring us into fellowship with You. Although You had no need for us in Your perfection, You created us to have fellowship with You. In spite of Your generosity, we turned away from You, our good and loving creator, in rebellion. Still, in wondrous grace, You made a way for us to come back to You.

In what You have done Your glory shines through. It is magnified for all to see; and one day, all will glorify You on bended knee. Glory be to Jesus Christ; You are the only begotten of the Father and You are our only Saviour.

In the supper You instituted, we proclaim Your death; a death on our behalf, a death You did not deserve. But You are risen and alive and seated at the right hand of Your Father. We await Your coming to establish Your kingdom.

In Your most holy name we pray

Amen