

The Lord's Supper in Biblical Perspective: Consider the Source

I Corinthians 11:23a

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Prayer:

Our Father in Heaven as we come to wait upon You and hear what You have to say to us in Your Word, we pray that the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be obvious. We pray that You will grant to each of us the understanding that we need so that in our preparation of participating in the sacraments later, we'll do that with love for You, worship to Yourself, declaration of Your death until You come again and all the things that are a part of that sacrament. We pray that You will give us a clearer and deeper understanding of the Gospel as believers, and as any yet who are reading this who may not yet be believers. We pray that the Gospel will be clear for salvation for those who need it and strengthening in Christ for those of us who are Yours by Your grace already. We pray this in Christ's Name, Amen.

Let's look at I Corinthians 11:23 and the statement which I will read to you will be the basis and heart of what I will be sharing in this study. We'll start off with just the first part of this verse and we'll look at the last part a little later. I Corinthians 11:23a says [23] *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...* I have been called on to give some information about the relationship between the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the Reformation. I consider it a high privilege to be able to do this and when I started looking at this passage to see how I would approach it I stopped right where I just stopped reading just a few moments ago because I think that captures the need that was discovered at the time of the Reformation as to where the authority was. There were people who knew where it was already. There people like Luther who had come to realize some things from Romans 1:17 but we'll see here what else was discovered during the Protestant Reformation that we need to keep in mind even to this day as far as the sacrament of Communion is concerned.

I think the best way to do this is to examine what was believed in three periods of history. The first one will be the early New Testament period. The second will be the Medieval Period leading up to the Reformation and then thirdly, the post

Reformation belief even up to our day. Now let's look at I Corinthians 11:23 in its entirety. I Corinthians 11:23–32 says

[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.

After looking at that first part of I Corinthians 11:23 I decided to title this study "Consider the Source" because that is what that phrase does—*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...* That statement gives recognition immediately as to what's happening. Obviously Paul was an Apostle and when he said "I received..." that was part of a job of an Apostle, to receive instruction from the Lord to pass on to the church for the welfare of the church for evangelism, church planting, discipleship and all the things that are a part of the propagation of the Gospel and the Kingdom. That is also what had become to be lost later on and I'll go into how it got lost a little bit later on.

Yet I stopped right there and came to realize that there is not a wasted word in the Scripture and we've known that all along. Pastor Reeder says "I believe not only in every word but the order of the words" and I agree with that. So the very first words in that verse say "I received" and the Apostle Paul was called by the Lord. He was made an Apostle and instructed directly by Christ. He also received revelation by the Holy Spirit and these things came to be inscribed in the New Testament as to letters to churches and in some cases to individuals for the welfare of the church.

Then Paul said "I received from the Lord..." He received directly from the Lord and he also received from the Holy Spirit. I will be talking about the problems leading up to the Reformation where the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was concerned but Paul said "I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you." The delivery part was done by preaching and also done by writing of books of the Bible under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What did he write? He wrote

this book of I Corinthians where this sacrament is concerned and received that directly from the Lord.

What the things that are contained in this instruction about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Number one, they are given to people who already know they belong to the Lord. They are given for purposes of reflection, for personal spiritual growth and development and for the group that is receiving this it is for their participation of the Gospel – the declaration of the death of Christ until He comes again. That was true then and it is true now so there is a sense in which you present the Gospel, maybe without having realized it although if you heard this read you picked up on it somewhere along the way that when you participate in the bread and the cup you are evangelizing, you are declaring the death of the Lord until He comes.

What is the Gospel? The Gospel is that we are sinners, we're helpless by ourselves and ultimately the work of Christ can satisfy the work of the Father and only the ministry of the Holy Spirit turning on the light which is regeneration, giving us an understanding ourselves, insight into the fact that Christ is the only possibility of our being forgiven and for our being reconciled to the Lord. When it says that we declare the death of the Lord until He comes, all of that is implied and is implicitly given in the statement where it says "As you take this you declare Christ's death until He comes again.

In the early New Testament church, there was no real difficulty, to a great degree not entirely because this instruction is given against the backdrop of some problems that were taking place in Corinth, but this instruction was given for purposes of clarification and for the most part as early New Testament Christians received the sacrament they did it with clarity of instructions from the Apostles. What went wrong? In the Medieval Time and the pre-Reformation time things had gone awry.

I want to give you a quote from a man named Allen Strange who is a professor at Mid- America Seminary. In his analysis of his assessment of the Lord's Supper leading up to and right before the Reformation, here's what he said. "The Roman Church commits such an error because, historically, it neglected the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin is, as Warfield said, the "theologian of the Holy Spirit," but Aquinas and the other medievalists were not, jumping over the Spirit in their theologies and proceeding directly from Christology (the study of Christ) to ecclesiology (the study of the church). When ecclesiology is not based on a proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, it yields sacerdotalism (salvation comes through the sacraments, so if you were approved by the church to receive the sacraments and you receive the sacraments then they would say you were receiving salvation in the process of that)—a theory of priestly intermediation in which, practically, the church replaces the Holy Spirit." There were various ways that this receiving took place. There were times when only the priests would

receive the mass which will get to shortly, but eventually the church replaced the Holy Spirit.

What were some of the other outcomes of this? In claiming to have reduced the Scripture which the Roman Church did, they did not acknowledge that the Scripture came from the Holy Spirit such as we would based on passages like II Timothy 3:16 and I Peter 1:21. There was a claim upon the Roman Church that the Roman Church produced the Scripture so in claiming this, the church claimed authority which really belonged only to the Holy Spirit. So the church put itself over the Bible and in the place of the Holy Spirit and this resulted in the belief that we have come to describe in church history as transubstantiation.

Transubstantiation is the belief that at a certain point with the saying of certain words of declaration – the bread and the cup – though they look the same, literally become the body and blood of Christ. This transubstantiation is a sacrament intended to be adored and worshipped.

How do we view the sacraments of the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of baptism? We view them as means of grace, part of the ordinary means of grace. They are not means of saving grace, but they are means of sanctifying grace. How is that? Let's continue to look at the Lord's Supper. As we approach the Lord's Table we will be asked to examine ourselves. Why are we examining ourselves? We want to know that there is not anything in our mind or heart or attitude that is inconsistent with our relationship with Christ. We want not wanting to be quenching the Spirit in any way. We want not to be a problem in anybody's life as far as the difference in what we act and claim about the Gospel and belonging to the Lord Jesus. So there is the examining part.

This is an opportunity to do very serious prayerful checkup and once we've concluded that we pick up the bread once it has been given to us and we eat it, we are testifying and claiming that we do certainly understand to a degree, you can't understand it exhaustively, the suffering of Christ that was in two forms. It was physical suffering and suffering that we can't understand at all which was expressed in Jesus' words "My God, My God, why have Thou forsaken Me?" It was at that point that He suffered hell for us in the separation from Father. As we realize this, discover it and are reminded of the realities of it, we are also called to a deeper love for and devotion to Him. In the time leading up to the Reformation that was not the case. The case was that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, by transubstantiation and sacerdotalism, became the mass and it was limited as to who could participate in it in many cases if not most. The passage we would read from Matthew 26 says [26] *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."* [27] *And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you."* So the sacraments were not limited to the priests. It was intended for every believer as a time for deepening and strengthening of understanding, love for the Lord Jesus Christ and a time for recommitment in relationship to Him.

During the Reformation this sacrament was, along with many other things, re-set forth and rediscovered by the Reformers. They had disagreements at times as to what was consistent but they came to grips with it and there has been passed down to us in the reformed belief what we have heard already and what we will hear further in this study about the sacrament of Communion. The question I think comes to this point. As we read, examine, declare and recommit our heart and life to Christ, as we come out of this, we're stronger for it. What are some of the dangers and situations we need to be aware of and need not fall into? We need to realize that this sacrament of the Lord's Supper and baptism need to be exercised under the disciplinary authority and care of local officers of Christ in the church. The marks of the church are the true preaching of the Word of God, the true handling of the sacraments under the disciplinary care of the officers of Christ and the local church which goes along with the exercise of discipline according to the instructions of the Scripture. So those are the three factors – the true preaching of the Word of God, the true exercise of discipline, and the true conduct of the sacraments within the confines and protection of that discipline.

With that in mind, there is a limit as to who can exercise leadership in the dispensing of the sacraments. Years ago when I lived and pastored in Florida, there was a group that met monthly to pray, study and there was a degree of mysticism involved in this group. I came to realize they were closing their meetings by saying "Now let's enjoy communion." There was nobody there qualified as an officer of Christ in the church to direct and guide that process. So what was it? It was a sentimental approach or nice thing, but this can't be treated that way. Why? It is because this is the center and heart of the Gospel that we're talking about here and it can't be allowed to be dealt with in ways where if this person does it or this person does it without instruction or guardedness based on the Scripture, it will just after a while begin to just fall apart as it did in the days and years leading up to the Protestant Reformation.

What does our confession of faith say here? The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in the elements themselves, neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend on the piety or the intention of him that does the administering, but upon the work of the Spirit Scripturally, on the word of the institution which is from the Scripture and the promise in the Scripture of benefit to worthy receivers of the sacrament.

Who is a worthy receiver? A worthy receiver is a person who knows they have confessed their sinfulness, repented of their sin, and given their heart and life to Christ. They know at the same time that they still sin. So the fact that we sin does not keep us from the Table but the fact that we don't want to sin must be taken to the Table with us, where we ask for increased strength to resist temptation, a deeper intimacy in our relationship with Christ and that's what this particular part of the Westminster Confession is talking about as far as qualification for participation in the sacraments.

The nature and purpose of the Holy Spirit is very clear to us in this day, having gone through hundreds of years of teaching and there is still some confusion in places, but we understand that the Holy Spirit gave us the Scripture. The Scripture didn't come through the church. We understand that the sacraments are for purposes of means of sanctifying grace and not saving grace. We don't adore the elements, lift them up or elevate them. We simply consume them by faith in Jesus Christ.

I Corinthians 11:23a says [23] *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...* What was happening? In the early church there was a considering of the source. There was a considering of what Christ stipulated in the giving of the sacrament. In pre-Reformation there was a loss of consideration of the source. In post-Reformation, there was a regaining of the consideration of the source, looking again to the instruction of Christ in order to participate in this sacrament with the richness and the delight that accompanies it when we come according to what Paul received and delivered even today to you and me in the recorded Scripture. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Our Father in Heaven we pray that You will grant Your rich blessing to us as we prepare and participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We pray that as the elements are set aside and as the elders dispense the elements to believers in this room that we will examine ourselves and declare our belief in the efficacy of the death of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and that we will walk away from here in greater, deeper intimacy with Him because we consider worshipfully the Source, not the elements, but You, Lord Jesus. You have given us and ordained what we are about to do. May we do it worshipping You and being built up in our love for You, our understanding of You to deeper and greater intimacy and we pray for this in Christ's Name, Amen.

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