

A Sacrament to strengthen you

Like our physical bodies, our faith can be strengthened by both exercise and nutrition. This is no doubt why God allows us to suffer various trials, so that our faith can be exercised, and also why God has provided for us the so-called 'means of grace' – the Bible, Prayer, Christian Fellowship, and the Sacraments, - so that our faith may be fed.

Protestant churches have always held that there are only two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church have held to seven sacraments, and also that some of these sacraments are the means for transferring 'saving grace' to a person who partakes of them; for example, *Christening* is understood by these churches to be a means of washing away original sin. Protestants however have held that the sacraments are 'strengthening graces', that is, gifts given not to save a person, but to strengthen and confirm them in their Christian faith.

Icebreaker



Most families have rituals to celebrate special occasions like birthdays and significant achievements and religious and national holidays. What are some things that your family does to mark out special times? (eg presenting a birthday cake with candles, raising a toast with champagne, eating dumplings for Chinese New Year, etc.)

Read: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.

²² Don't you have homes 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 praise you? Certainly not!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night 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, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. ³² When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. ³⁴ If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.

Introduction

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is both bitter and sweet. Sweet, because he loves them and wishes them to grow to maturity in the Faith. Bitter, because they seem to have so much so wrong, and need such major correction, like in their observance of the Lord's Supper. In fact, such was the discrepancy between what they were doing and what Paul expected them to be doing, that he wrote this eleventh chapter to correct the misalignment.

Paul's manner in writing presents a challenge in using this section of his letter to gain an understanding of the Lord's Supper. The content of the text is a rebuke, and not an introductory lesson on the sacraments. But keeping this in mind, the text still furnishes solid material to achieve a fair understanding of the sacrament.

Question 1

(v17-22) If you knew nothing about these Christians at Corinth, what impression would you get of them from these verses? What mistakes do you think they were making?



Question 2

(v23-26) Referring to instruction about the observance of the Lord's Supper, Paul says that he passed on to the Church what he received from the Lord. What is significant in this passage, is what Paul "leaves in" and "leaves out" from what we read in the Gospel narratives that describe the Lord's Supper (eg Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and John 13). For instance, Paul mentions nothing here of washing each other's feet, or sharing the bitter herbs of the Passover Meal, etc, but only of the bread and wine. What do you think this implies?

Question 3

(v23-26) These verses get to the heart of the meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper. Paul explains that at the Last Supper, Jesus used bread and wine as symbols of his approaching death – the bread broken, a picture of his crucified body, and the red wine,

a picture of his blood poured out to secure redemption, - and it is this that Jesus wants his Church to remember primarily.

There are many wonderful things about our Lord Jesus and his days on earth, namely his words, his teaching, his miracles, etc. Why do you think he wants us, above all things, to remember his death?

Case Study 1

Penny knew not to expect “special feelings” when she took the Lord’s Supper for the first time, but she did feel that she loved Jesus all the more for standing in her place to bear the punishment for her guilt. And though she felt all her imperfections acutely, she did feel more clear in her understanding of grace, in seeing not her achievements on the Communion Table, but simply the bread and wine, and was glad that she had a perfect Saviour. And as she took the bread and wine, she also felt a love for the other Christians who sat with her in the church, and was glad that she had friends in the Faith; and as she remembered her friends and family who still did not know the Lord, a pang of spiritual concern touched her heart. As the Supper finished, although she did not feel tingles in her body, nor any adrenalin-type-rush coursing through her soul, she felt glad that she was a Christian, and knew that one day Jesus would return and set all things right, and she resolved afresh that she would never turn back.

Do you think that Penny was strengthened in her faith during her participation in the Lord’s Supper? What points of connection do you share with her experience?

Question 4



(v27-28) Paul calls for the church members at Corinth to examine themselves. Often this examination is understood to be in a *vertical* direction, that is, to ask whether I am walking truly and consistently with the Lord. What things in this passage, suggest that the examination should also have a *horizontal* component, that is, to ask whether I am being loving to my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Question 5

(v30-34) Paul warns us here that there is a consequence for selfish and insensitive behaviour in a church community, like ignoring other Christians who are different racially (eg Jew & Gentile) or socially (eg rich & poor). What advice does Paul give here to the Corinthian Church about how to resist such selfish behaviour?

Case Study 2

The Church at Lilliput had problems. When it came to celebrating the Lord’s Supper, Anthony said that it should not be called the Lord’s Supper, but Communion. Betsy said that the wine should be served first, before the bread. Cameron said that there should be a roster of people who do the serving, and not just the Minister. Donna said that instead of small, pre-cut pieces of bread, there should be just one loaf passed around the congregation. Ethan said that the wine should be alcoholic, and not mere grape juice. Felicity said that people should form a circle to receive the elements, and not sit in pews like in a school room. Graham said that there should be ‘peace and quiet’ while the

elements were being eaten, and not music. Heather said that every participant should be strictly examined by the Elders before they took the Lord's Supper. Ian said that the Lord's Supper should be served in the context of a larger church dinner, to which all should be invited. Jill said that Keith wanted to participate by Zoom at home, using his own bread and wine. Lilly said that each person should 'greet one another with a holy kiss' before the Supper is served. Mark said that communicants should also recite the *Apostles' Creed* as well as giving each other the holy kiss. Nancy said that the bread and wine should not be served together, but separately and with sufficient time in between to think and reflect. Owen said that the silver cup and Communion trays and the white table cloth gave the impression that the ceremony was 'high church'. Petra said that gluten-free bread should be included on the trays. Quinn said that the reading of the *Institution of the Lord's Supper*, namely the passage from 1 Corinthians 11, should always be read at the commencement of the Communion service. Rosy said that the Lord's Supper should be served every Sunday and not just once a quarter. Steve said that his elderly grandmother asked if he could bring some of the Communion elements home for her, because she was too sick to attend the service.



Tina said that it would be nice, once in a while, to wash each other's feet as part of the Communion ceremony. Ulrich said that if you took Communion at the morning service, you really shouldn't take it again in the evening service. Violet said that the Minister should put the bread on your tongue, and not offer it to you on a plate. Warren said that he had lost his temper with Xavier before the service, and that he was still angry, and was therefore ineligible to take Communion. Yvonne said that the children should wait till they were 16 years old, and make a profession of faith, before they were admitted to the Lord's Table. Zane said that at his former church, they always did Communion the right way.

What things still puzzle you about the Church's observance of Communion? (...that is the Church-at-large.) If you could say a few words to the Lilliputian Church before they sat down (or even stood!) to celebrate the Lord's Supper, what would they be? (Be as kind as you can.)

Prayer

One of the old Church Fathers, Augustine (354-430AD), once famously said: *"In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity"*.

Pray that our churches and church leaders might have these graces of unity, liberty, and charity, and *clarity* as well, in the right order, and in their right place, and in good measure, and in practice and not just in theory.