

## Recovering the Ordinary in the Lord's Supper

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One thing that makes Christmas traditions so meaningful is the simple fact that they only come around once a year. On one night of each year Lacey and I go, pick out a Christmas tree, bring it home and decorate it. Because we do this only one night out of the year it is a very special event for our family. Each year I also look forward to going Christmas caroling with our church – an event that is significantly meaningful largely because we do it just once a year.

Obviously, these traditions would quickly lose their meaning and value if they were done more frequently. If I had to put up a Christmas tree each week I would very quickly quit calling this a special event. Likewise, if we went Christmas caroling each week of the year it would soon become more mundane than meaningful for us.

Many of us think of the Lord's Supper in a similar way. We believe that because the Lord's Supper is held infrequently, its meaning and significance is magnified when we do actually partake of it. Some may suggest that a more frequent Communion would simply take away from the special nature of the sacrament. In other words, the great danger of weekly Communion would be that it would become mundane, repetitious, meaningless, and perhaps ordinary.

Should we, however, think of the Lord's Supper in this way? There are other traditions within my own family that we do almost every day. For example, every day when I come home I hug both Lacey and Emily. As often as is possible Lacey and I dine together in the evening. Because we value the relationship we have with one another we make hugs and dinners together an ordinary part of our daily life. If Lacey were to hug me only once a month, as special as that one hug would be, I would starve for her attention and affection the rest of the month.

What type of tradition should the Lord's Supper be for us? Should it be taken infrequently so as to magnify its meaning when we actually do partake of it? Or, should it be taken frequently (weekly) and be considered an ordinary part of our worship together? In answering these questions it will be helpful to briefly describe what actually is happening as we come to the Lord's Table.

First, The Lord's Supper is a **memorial**. Jesus makes this quite clear when he tells his disciples, "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). When we come to the table we are remembering Christ and his saving work on the cross. The importance of remembering how God has saved us is underscored in the Old Testament. Time and time again Israel is told to "remember" the Lord and how he had saved them from the hands of the Egyptians (Deut. 5:15; 7:18; 8:18; 15:15; 16:12; Ps. 77:11; Eccl. 12:1). In fact, one of the primary goals of the Passover feast, the precursor to the Lord's Supper, was that by participating, Israel would "remember" how God saved them from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 16:3). Frequently, when Israel falls into sin the reason for their fall is that they "forgot" the Lord (Jdg. 3:7; 1 Sam. 12:9; Ps. 78:40-42). In establishing the Lord's Supper as a memorial meal, God has given us a safeguard to keep us from forgetting Christ. In the Lord's Supper we experience a tangible memorial that calls to mind the truth that God really has saved us through Christ's broken body and shed blood.

The Lord's Supper is also a **proclamation of the gospel**. Paul tells us, "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Not only is the gospel presented to us, but we *proclaim* the gospel whenever we

participate in the Lord's Supper. By partaking of this meal we are proclaiming to ourselves and to the world that salvation can only come by the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper is a **sign and seal of the covenant of grace**. As a sign, the bread and the wine point us to a reality beyond themselves, namely the body and blood of Christ. As a seal, the Lord's Supper confirms our actual inclusion in the covenant of grace. In the Old Testament covenants were generally sealed over meals. Before Isaac would pronounce his covenant blessing on his son Esau, he asked that Esau prepare a meal "so that I may give you my blessing before I die" (Gen. 27:4). When God confirmed his covenant with Moses and Israel at Mt. Sinai, Moses and the elders of Israel ate and drank in the presence of God (Ex. 24:11). Significantly, at the original Passover the people of Israel were distinguished from the Egyptians and confirmed as God's covenant people through their participation in the feast (Ex. 12). In other words the Passover feast was a seal of their inclusion within God's covenant community. Because covenants are sealed over meals, Jesus tells his disciples, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Lk. 22:20). By drinking from the cup our inclusion in the covenant of grace is sealed and ratified.

Another important thing that happens at the Lord's Supper is we are **truly and spiritually united with Christ**. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul asks, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" Whenever we come to the table we are not merely remembering Christ; we are actually partaking of Christ as well. While we affirm that Christ is not physically present in the meal, we nonetheless affirm his true spiritual presence. As the body is strengthened and nourished by food and drink, at the Lord's Supper our faith is strengthened and nourished by feeding on Christ.

Having now considered what is happening at the Lord's Supper it should be apparent that the meaning of it is not grounded in our subjective perceptions of the meal. Rather, the meaning of the Lord's Supper is grounded in the reality of what God is actually doing at the meal. In this meal God Himself has given us a means by which we are to remember Christ; God Himself has given us a means by which we are to proclaim the death of Christ; God Himself signifies and seals our inclusion within the covenant of grace; and God Himself truly and spiritually unites us with Christ. Therefore, the argument that a more frequent Communion will detract from the meaning and significance of the event simply cannot stand, for we cannot detract from what God is doing.

It seems to me that many churches have communion infrequently, not because they want to carefully guard it as a meaningful event, but because it has in many ways already lost its meaning. If in partaking of the Lord's Supper we actually are communing with the resurrected Christ – what possible reason could we give for only doing this once a month? Is it possible to commune too frequently with our Lord? Is it possible to be spiritually united with him in this sacrament too frequently? Is it possible to remember Christ and proclaim his death too frequently? Just as I would starve for the affection of Lacey if she hugged me only once a month – aren't we starving ourselves for communion with Christ when we feed on him only once a month?

Because we are God's covenant children, we should dine frequently at his table. We would do well to remember that the Westminster Confession of Faith describes the sacraments as "ordinary" means of grace (WSC 88). This does not mean that the Lord's Supper is to be dull, bland, or monotonous. This does, however, mean that God intends for Communion to be an ordinary part of our worship.