

Friday Communion Service

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[0 : 00] This is the beginning of our communion weekend, and we know that on Sunday morning we will be participating in what is central to the weekend as we gather at the Lord's table.

And as we do, we will eat a little bit of bread, we'll sip a little wine, and we're very familiar with that. We know that that's what's going to happen. Many of us, perhaps most of us, have participated in that way, even in this place, on so many occasions.

That may not be true for all of us, but for many that is true. And the very familiarity with what it is that we will be doing can grant to what we're going to be doing an air of normality. We don't think of it as anything other than normal. That's what we do. That's what the communion service involves. But if we were able, and it's very difficult for us to do this, but if we were able to step back and observe what it is we're doing, and if we were able to do so without prior knowledge, I think we would observe that which is, by any measure, quite peculiar. A group of people eating a tiny little bit of bread, sipping a little bit of wine. What's the point? What purpose is served by consuming this little snack, if we can call it that? Why do we participate? Why will we participate on Sunday morning?

Now, some of you could respond, and it would be an entirely reasonable response. Well, the reason we do it is out of obedience. We've read the passages. We've read the words that Jesus directed to His disciples, and by extension, He directs to us. Do this in remembrance of me.

Do this. Eat, drink. We are instructed, we're commanded by our Lord to do this. And if our Lord commands us, then we have to obey. And that is, of course, true. That is a good reason for participating. But I think we can, and it's good to explore this matter a little further, with a view to eating and drinking with discernment, with understanding. We know how, Paul, we haven't read all of the passage, but we know how Paul highlights this as something that's important, that if we participate in the Lord's Supper, we should do so with discernment. The phrase we find is discerning the body. There needs to be discernment. There needs to be understanding concerning what it is we're doing.

[3 : 08] That is important. Why is it important? Well, perhaps for a number of reasons, but we could certainly highlight one. With greater understanding of what we're doing will come greater benefit, greater spiritual benefit. And perhaps more importantly, although it goes in parallel with that spiritual benefit or that greater spiritual benefit, there is greater and deeper gratitude.

The more we understand what we're doing, what it signifies, what is happening at the Lord's table as we participate, then we will have greater reason to be grateful. That greater and deeper understanding will produce, or certainly ought to produce, greater and deeper gratitude.

Now, this evening I'm going to do something a little bit unusual, in that I'm going to explore the meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper, and particularly we're going to focus on its purpose, and I'm going to do so with the help of our Confession of Faith, the Westminster Confession of Faith. Now, everything I say, I trust, will be grounded in the Bible, particularly the passages that we've read. But the structure of what I'm going to say will rely on and will employ a chapter or one section of a chapter in our Confession. Now, you should have received a wee bit of paper when you came in this evening, and that gives you a little bit the outline of what I'm going to be covering this evening. Now, it is important to stress when we make use of the Confession to remind ourselves of the place that the Confession has in our church. We ordinarily call the Confession of Faith our subordinate standard, and I think the phrase, the term is self-explanatory, but forgive me if I insult your intelligence, but what that means, of course, is that it is subordinate to the Bible. The Bible is our ultimate source of authority, infallible, inspired. The Confession is not infallible. It's not inspired. It is subordinate to the Scriptures. Nonetheless, we are persuaded that in great measure it is faithful in distilling biblical truth into a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine. And so, in that

measure, it is a very useful thing for us. It's interesting how in other traditions, confessions are used, even traditions that are very similar to our own, and we might find this rather strange. We might even be somewhat suspect of it.

But I was speaking with one of our recent guest preachers at a previous communion, James Eglinton. Now, some of you will remember from his time with us that he recently spent two or three years in Holland doing postdoctoral research. And over the weekend, of course, there was opportunity to have a chat with him, and he was sharing a little bit about the church that he and his family participated in in Holland, a Dutch Reformed church, very similar to ourselves in terms of doctrine.

And what he said regarding that church, or one of the aspects of it that I found intriguing, was how it was the custom, the tradition, custom, in that church. And seemingly, this was fairly common across the Reformed churches in Holland, that on Sunday evenings, the preacher, the minister, would, I don't know if you'd say preach through or teach through, I don't know what the term would be or the verb to use would be, the Heidelberg Catechism at the Sunday evening service. This is what they did. I'm not convinced, it seems a little bit of a, I don't know if that would, how helpful that would be, or I think we tend, we have a kind of feeling that, oh, you can't preach from a confession, you preach from the Bible. That said, I think we probably go to the other extreme of hardly making reference at all to the confession, and we no doubt miss out on a great deal as a result.

[7:57] Anyway, this evening, we are going to do something just a little bit different by using one section of this chapter, very much tied to the passages that we've read, to help us understand what the Lord's Supper is, and particularly what its purpose is. Now, the section in question, it's on the sheet of paper that you were given. The chapter is chapter 29 of the Lord's Supper, and that chapter has several short sections, I think eight, if my memory serves me right. But our concern this evening is simply with the first section, and the totality of the text of it is in front of you, or should be in front of you. I'll just read out this first section of that chapter, and it reads as follows.

Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in His church unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death, the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him, and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him and with each other as members of His mystical body. Now, this section that we've just read identifies a number of truths concerning the Lord's Supper. It identifies very clearly and very obviously who the author of the sacrament is, our Lord Jesus, and the language, much of the language, not all of the language, but is much of the language simply taken directly from the pages of Scripture. So, it's Jesus who instituted the Supper. He's the author of it. The section also highlights when this took place, when it was instituted. We know, of course, the answer to that, in the night wherein He was betrayed, straight from the Bible. It further indicates when and for what period it is to be observed in His church, where I should say, and for what period in His church, unto the end of the world. It's a perpetual ordinance or sacrament, until He returns. Again, that's straight from the Bible. This do until I come. But then what it also does, and that's what we're interested in this evening, is it gives a number of reasons or purposes, purposes, God-ordained purposes for the Supper. There in that little section, the word for is a giveaway in terms of purpose, for the, and then we have, I think you can identify just reading through it, five purposes of the Lord's Supper. You can find them yourselves. It's right there in front of you, for the perpetual remembrance of His sacrifice, the sealing of all benefits to us, our spiritual nourishment and growth, that's three, our further engagement in the duties that we have, and then as a bond and pledge of our communion with Him and with one another. So, five purposes of the Supper.

Now, what I want to do is simply go through these five briefly now. The first one that's identified here as a reason for, as the purpose of the Lord's Supper is, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death. So, the first purpose is remembrance. It's to remember. Now, that's maybe, I don't know. We're all different. Maybe we have different backgrounds, and so we may not all be of the same mind on this, but I would imagine that for most of us, that's the thing that's most prominent.

You know, if I'd asked you, even as you came into church this evening, you know, what is the purpose of the Lord's Supper? I imagine that most would have begun with some reference to this matter of remembering, of it being a remembrance. Well, that certainly is a purpose, the first one

that's identified here, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus in His death. So, it's for the purposes to remember. What do we remember? Well, it's very obvious, isn't it? It is His death.

The passages that we've read in Matthew and then the words of Jesus echoed as Paul writes to the Corinthians. The Corinthians make that very clear. Jesus speaks of His body broken. He's using picture language, but it's very clear that He's referring to His death, His body broken, His blood shed.

[13:06] What we remember is the death of Jesus, and we can think of certain aspects of His death that we particularly remember as we participate. We remember its painful nature. The very language Jesus uses is, I think, intended to impact, to move us as we consider just the way in which, the manner in which, the circumstances in which He died for us. A painful, cruel, a terrible death. And we remember that.

We don't principally focus on that, but that is part of what we remember. We remember also its vicarious character in the place of, Jesus Himself speaks of, His body broken for you. And so, as He institutes the sacrament, He is stressing that His death had that character. It was in the place of, He died for others. He died for His people. And we remember that. As we gather around the table, we don't simply remember that Jesus died, but we remember that He died for me, that He died for those who are together with me participating in the supper. We remember also its efficacy as a sufficient sacrifice for sin. Two millennia have passed, and still believers, disciples of Jesus, gather at His table, remember His death, and in remembering are reminded that that death has secured and continues to secure for believers forgiveness of sins, that it was a sacrifice that was sufficient, that the Father looked down and was satisfied by what His Son had done. And we remember that. We remember its perpetual value, its value today, as valuable, as effective as on the day that it occurred. We remember His death. We remember His death. And why do we remember His death? With what purpose?

Well, as we remember, as we consciously focus and remember His death, that will awaken in us, and we trust deepen our understanding, but also our joyful gratitude. And so, we participate grateful and joyful as we as we remember what it is Jesus did for us, the death that He died in our place. So, that's the first purpose for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus in His death. But then, the confession identifies a second purpose, the sealing all benefits thereof, that is, His death, unto true believers.

It's very important for us to be very clear. I'm sure we are, but I stress it nonetheless, to be clear that the Lord's Supper does not secure the benefits of Christ's death. It is His death that secures the benefits of His death. The supper doesn't secure those benefits. But what the confession indicates, drawing from the Scriptures, is that what the Supper does is, the language it uses, is it seals those benefits secured by the death of Christ. What does that mean, to say that it seals those benefits? Well, we could put it this way, and we could probably try and put it in a number of ways, but let's try this way. The Supper is God's way of assuring us of our part in the benefits of Jesus' death. It's as if in the Supper, God declares, He speaks to us, and He says to us as we participate, the death of my Son and all its benefits are for you. So, we don't, in some academic, distant way, have a list of the benefits and say, well, these are the benefits that Christ secured.

Isn't that amazing? But it's nothing to do with me. As we participate in the Supper, it's as if God is saying, these benefits, they're for you. They were secured for you. They're sealed to us in that sense.

[17:57] Indeed, the idea of a seal might allow us to go a little further and say that at the Supper, the Father says to us, He declares to us, you are mine. And because you're mine, the benefits of the death of my Son are for you. The sealing of all benefits thereof of the death unto true believers.

Now, the extent to which we will profit from this sealing will be in the measure that we appreciate and appropriate by faith the benefits of Christ's death. Now, what are they? We've mentioned already this phrase. It's in the section, the benefits of Christ's death. What are those benefits? Well, there's any number. In the passages that speak of Christ's death, one or two are explicitly mentioned. For example, forgiveness of sins. In the passage we read in Matthew chapter 26, we have explicit reference to forgiveness of sins as a benefit of Christ's death. Let's just remind ourselves of what it says there in verse 28 of Matthew 26. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. The benefits of Christ's death? Well, here is one, that Jesus himself very explicitly identifies forgiveness of sins. This is a benefit.

We can know forgiveness. We can experience forgiveness. We can be granted forgiveness because of what Jesus has done. It's a benefit for us. And that benefit is sealed as we participate in the supper. We're assured that that is for us, that that is something we can know and we can enjoy and be assured of.

But then it's entirely, I think, reasonable and legitimate to say that even though in the passages that specifically speak about the Lord's Supper, we don't have a long list of all the benefits of Christ's death.

[20 : 09] One example we've mentioned that is explicitly mentioned, forgiveness of sins, is entirely reasonable to say that as we draw from the rest of the Bible and particularly from the New Testament, the teaching concerning the other benefits of Christ's death, that those benefits too are sealed to us as we participate.

There, of course, it's important to read and to study and to know God's Word, to have an understanding of all that Christ has secured by His death so that that can be in our mind as we participate and so we can be reminded of it and be encouraged by it. So that's the second purpose that this section identifies.

Notice that this effect of the Lord's Supper, of participating in the Lord's Supper, this purpose and this actual effect in our lives as believers, is only to be experienced, it's only effective for true believers. The mere eating and drinking secures nothing.

The physical act of the wine, the physical act of the wine, that in and of itself secures nothing. We must eat and drink with faith.

And believing, when we eat and drink with faith, then the benefit, the effect is experienced. The third purpose that is identified here, the spiritual nourishment there as in the believers, spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, in the Lord. Now this purpose, our spiritual nourishment and growth, this purpose reminds us that in the Supper the principal participant is the Lord Himself.

[21 : 59] We can sometimes think that at the table we are the participants, the principal participants. We certainly are participants. But we're not the principal participant. The principal participant is the Lord. He is the one who feeds us.

And just as when He gathered His disciples on the first occasion and He fed them, take, eat, He was the one who fed them, who gave them the nourishment that they needed.

And that remains true. So on Sunday morning, it is the Lord who will feed us. It is the Lord who will say to us, take, eat, take, drink. I'm providing this for you. I'm the one who is feeding you.

And as we are fed, so we are nourished. And that's the purpose. That is what is intended. It is for our spiritual nourishment. And as we're nourished, so we grow. We grow in our faith. We grow in our maturity. We grow in our love.

We grow in our depth of understanding of what it is to be a believer. We are nourished and we grow.

[23 : 11] So this purpose that we would be nourished, that we would be fed, also reminds us that the principle, and you might even go so far as to say the only condition for participating is hunger.

You know, in our tradition in the free church, we often, you know, get all het up about who is worthy of participating. What are the conditions that need to be met? What boxes do we need to tick that we would participate?

I think that's less the case today, and that is a good thing. But there's still something of that. Well, what is the condition? If we are going to speak of conditions, what is the condition for participating? Well, given that its purpose is to nourish the hungry, then the condition is hunger. If you're hungry, then you participate.

If you have an appetite for forgiveness of sins, then you participate. If you have an appetite for the benefits of Christ's death, then you participate.

[24 : 19] If you have no appetite for these things, well, then why participate? It would be like sitting down to a meal when you're not hungry. You know how difficult that is. I suppose if we're going to push the illustration, you can maybe acknowledge that even when you're not hungry, it's necessary to eat.

But, of course, we enjoy the experience so much more when we're hungry. When we're hungry, when we're driven to eat, we need to eat.

So this is the condition. Its purpose is to nourish us. What's the condition? Well, we need to be hungry. If I can just read for you to kind of develop this just a little, this aspect of being nourished.

I'll just read the answer of the larger catechism, which is a parallel document to the confession on this matter. It's question 170, and it says this, And this purpose, Nourishment, not only this purpose, but this purpose in particular, that we are nourished, explains why the Lord's Supper, unlike baptism, the other sacrament, is one that we need to participate in repeatedly.

Baptism is a sacrament of initiation. Once is sufficient. There's no need to be baptized more than once. But the Lord's Supper is very different.

[26 : 12] It's to feed us. And so we always need to eat. We always need to be fed. And so we participate repeatedly. But then the penultimate purpose, and we're nearly there, the penultimate purpose that the confession identifies of the Lord's Supper is, For there, that is believers, further engagement in and to all duties which they, or we, owe unto Him.

Now this is maybe a purpose that we wouldn't immediately identify. I think if we'd been asked, you know, without prior knowledge, as it were, to scribble down some of the purposes of the Lord's Supper, I wonder how many of us would have put down something to this effect.

I suspect I certainly wouldn't have done. But what the confession is recognizing is that the Supper is intended as a spur to further and deeper obedience and service.

You see, as we participate, we're reminded who we belong to. It's the Lord's Supper, and we are the Lord's people, and that's why we're there. And we're reminded of the debt of gratitude that we owe to the one that we belong to.

We have been bought with a price, to use biblical language. So the Lord's Supper reminds us of that, whose we are, and the great price that was paid to secure us and to bring us in to God's family.

[27 : 36] And this, in turn, is a spur to engagement, to use the word that's employed here, engagement in and to all the duties that we owe to Him.

Now, if it's going to achieve that purpose, one thing we need to do is just pause for a moment and think, well, what are the duties that we owe to the Lord? What are the duties that we have? There are some that are common to all of us, and there are some that are particular to us, depending on the gifts that we have and the responsibilities that we've given and the ministries that we're involved in in the church.

And it's important. It's an opportunity, the Lord's Supper, to just ponder and pause for a moment.

Well, I'm receiving all of this. God has done all of this for me. Now, what am I doing?

How am I fulfilling in gratitude the duties that I have as one of His own? This is a purpose, that it would spur us, that it would encourage us, that it would challenge us to further engagement in the duties that we have of God's people.

We can't participate in the Lord's Supper on Sunday and then on Monday live as if nothing had happened, as if it hadn't taken place. Paul, in a slightly different context, illustrates just how ridiculous that would be.

[28 : 56] In the same chapter, in 1 Corinthians 10 and in verse 21, what does he say? You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too.

You cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. And he has a particular purpose in mind in saying that, but I think we can draw a general principle from that, that there needs to be a consistency.

There needs to be coherence. If we're participating gratefully of the Lord's Supper, then as the week continues, our behavior, our service to God should reflect that.

Indeed, that's its purpose, or one of its purposes, to spur us to this faithful service. Finally, the final purpose that's certainly identified in the confession is that the Lord's Supper is to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, of believers' communion with Him and with each other as members of His mystical body.

Now, the word communion, our usual word for the sacrament, that's what we usually call it, speak about communion, that word is found, again, it's a biblical word, and it's found in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 16 and 17.

[30 : 13] Notice what we read there. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation or communion in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation or a communion in the body of Christ?

And Paul goes on, Because there is one loaf, and we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. As I say, this word communion that the framers of the confession are using,

they're taking it from the Bible, and it's a word that means, and in our version of the Bible is translated, participation.

And that helps us to understand what's being said here. It speaks of how we participate in the blood of Christ. We participate in the body of Christ.

But what does that mean? I think what it means is, it's not that dissimilar to what we've already seen. It means to partake of the benefits of the death of Christ, of what Christ has secured.

A contemporary of Luther, Melancthon, known as the first systematic theologian of the Reformation, or sometimes referred to in that way, he's remembered for one thing in particular, that he stated and recognized, other things as well.

[31 : 28] But he said this, that to know Christ is to know Him in His benefits. What is it to know Christ? Well, it's to know the benefits of Christ, of what Christ has secured for us.

And this participation in the blood of Christ, this participation in the body of Christ, because Sion's almost a little bit strange language, it means that. It's to participate in what the death of Christ has secured.

But also notice, and the confession very much highlights, that we don't only commune with Christ, we don't only participate with Christ, but we participate with one another.

The verse that we read there in Corinthians also speaks of that. It uses the loaf of bread as the illustration of that. It's one loaf, and we're part of that one loaf.

The loaf, the body of Christ. And so the loaf symbolizes our communion with one another, as members of one body. And we need to be wary of participating in a very private, introspective manner.

[32 : 32] Again, that's probably something that's not uncommon in our tradition. Each of us, yes, we're together. It's at a public service. But each of us, very quietly, perhaps with our eyes closed, participating.

I'm not saying you can't have your eyes closed, but the point that has been stressed is that we're doing it together. It's not a private matter. We're part of a body, and we participate together as a body.

We fellowship with one another as we participate. Of course, if that is so, then that unity, that togetherness, that fellowship that is demonstrated as together we participate at the table ought to then continue.

We can't leave it at the table. It shouldn't stay at the table. It ought to continue to accompany us in the manner in which we engage with one another and serve with one another, subsequent to participating as well.

Now, the language that you find there of it being a bond and pledge of our communion with Him is simply to remind us that the communion with Christ and with one another is not secured by the sacrament.

[33 : 44] We've already said that about the benefits. The benefits are not secured by the sacrament. It's the death of Christ that secures the benefits. It's what secures our communion with Christ. But those benefits and that communion is demonstrated and symbolized by the sacrament.

A final question, we will close with this, that has engaged and tormented even generations, concerns how do we understand Christ's presence in the supper or at the supper?

And I'm not going to enter into that in any level of detail, but you'll be aware that there have been different views on that. Obviously, the Roman Catholic view is perhaps familiar, and I'm not going to go into that.

But even within the Reformed tradition or within the Protestant tradition, you have a Lutheran perspective that is different, somewhat different to what we understand to be what is happening regarding Christ's presence at the supper.

As I say, we could go into that, but we're not going to. But I'll simply limit myself to say this, an expression that I read once that I found very helpful in terms of, in a pithy way, really getting across the matter of Christ's presence in supper or at supper.

[35 : 10] And what I read and what I thought was helpful was this, that the Lord, that Jesus, is present not on the table, but at the table. On the table, you have the symbols.

You have the bread. You have the wine. Jesus isn't present on the table. The bread and the wine are bread and wine. That's what they are. They don't become the body and blood of Christ, be it literally, as the Catholic position would claim, or even in some more mysterious way, as the

Lutherans might argue.

But does that mean that he's not present? Does that mean that all we have are symbols? No, Christ is present, but not on the table. He's at the table with us. He's there with us.

Now, I have to say, he's also with us tonight. And I would wager that, rager isn't the right verb, but I would contend that he's no more with us on Sunday morning than he's with us this evening.

He is with us where we gather together as God's people. He is really with us. He's actually with us, but not in any physical way, clearly.

[36 : 18] He's at the right hand of the Father. He ascended into heaven. That is what he is. From there, he intercedes for us, but he is with us by his Spirit as we, by faith, participate in the supper, as we listen to his word, as we fellowship with one another.

So, as you prepare, as we prepare for participating in the Lord's Supper this Sunday, let's pray that God would help us to better appreciate and be blessed by the purposes of the supper.

That even this weekend, as we participate, that it would serve for us as a perpetual remembrance of Christ's death. That it would seal for us the benefits of his death.

That it would prove to be of spiritual nourishment and helping us to grow. That it would spur us to further engagement in service. And that it would be a bond, a pledge of our communion with him, of our participation with him and with each other as members of his body.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for how we can delve into it and with your help we can better understand your word.

[37 : 39] We're conscious of our permanent need of your direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit to speak to us and to order even our thoughts and order our thoughts even as we listen to and process what is said, what has been said even this evening.

To go back to the Scriptures and to ensure that it is from the Scriptures that we come to the conclusions that we come to. Help us then in that permanent task.

And we do pray that as we participate on Sunday at the table that these purposes, God-ordained purposes of the sacrament would be fulfilled in and for us even this weekend.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.