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Promise and Warning: The Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians

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PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IS DIALECTICAL. IT ENCOMPASSES both God's yes to life and God's no to sin, both the promise of salvation and the warning of judgment. Paul affirms the promise of salvation when he says that the Lord's supper is a "new covenant" in Jesus' blood that brings "communion" with the Lord and with other Christians (1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:25).¹ Yet Paul also warns that those who eat and drink in an unworthy manner are answerable for the Lord's body and blood, and he calls people to examine themselves since those who partake without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves (11:27-29).

The tensions between God's yes and God's no in Paul's writings have profoundly shaped communion practices in past generations. The recognition that the supper promises communion in the body and blood of Christ has drawn to the

¹The Greek term *κοινωνία* was translated "communion" in the King James Version. This verse is the biblical basis for calling the supper "Holy Communion." The NIV renders it "participation" while the NRSV translates it "sharing."

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There is a yes and a no in Paul's understanding of the Lord's supper—a yes to life and promise and Christ, a no to sin and death and other religious claims. A biblically based participation in communion will hear both with equal clarity.

Lord's table those Christians who seek to be strengthened in the faith, while Paul's warnings and the call for self-examination have meant that people have regularly been instructed in the faith and been given opportunity for confession and absolution prior to partaking of the meal. Luther was attentive to the promises when he wrote in his *Large Catechism* that those who feel their weakness should come "joyfully to the sacrament and receive refreshment, comfort, and strength." Luther was equally attentive to the warnings when he said that "we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come," warning that "those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away."² The tensions between the promises and the warnings that appear in Paul's writing are basic to adequate treatment of the Lord's supper in exegesis, in contemporary theology, and in church practice. The words that Jesus spoke over the bread and cup are quoted in somewhat different forms by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul; but perhaps surprisingly it is Paul who most fully explores the theological and practical implications of the meal in 1 Corinthians 10-11.³ Consideration of what he says in these chapters is both unsettling and rewarding.

I. GRACE AND SIN

Paul addressed issues surrounding the Lord's supper by quoting the words of Jesus as he received them (1 Cor 11:23-25). The tradition he cites identifies the setting in which Jesus spoke: it was "on the night when he was betrayed" (11:23). The time of the supper could have been identified in other ways—it was the night Jesus was arrested, the night he was tried, the night before the crucifixion—but in the tradition that Paul repeats, it is betrayal that forms the backdrop for Jesus' words. Early Christians found the betrayal of Jesus to be one of the most disturbing aspects of the passion because the perpetrator was one of Jesus' intimates, Judas Iscariot. The memory of the betrayal was a troubling reminder about the power of sin and evil among Jesus' closest associates. Yet it was precisely "on the night when he was betrayed" that Jesus "took bread," "gave thanks," and "broke it." Jesus' words and actions stand over against the threat posed by human sin. The breaking of the bread portended the breaking of his body through crucifixion at the hands of sinners, while the words "for you" declare that Jesus' death was not

²The quotations from Luther's *Large Catechism* (5:72; 5:2; 5:58) are from *The Book of Concord (BC)*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 455; 447; 453. On the practice of administering the supper only to those who have been examined and absolved see *The Augsburg Confession* 15:1, in *BC*, 61.

³Apart from 1 Corinthians 10-11 the New Testament says almost nothing about the way the Lord's supper was actually practiced in congregations. The book of Acts says that Christians took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, whether eating in the company of other believers (Acts 2:42, 46) or in an ordinary meal among pagans (27:35). This suggests that the act of giving thanks was common for all meals, regardless of their character. Breaking bread in Acts 20:7 seems to be associated with a gathering for worship; in 20:11 it seems to be an ordinary meal. Moreover, Christians in Acts are never said to have shared a cup of wine along with the bread. For surveys of the issues, see James G. D. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (2nd ed.; London: SCM and Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 161-168; Hans-Josef Klauck, "Lord's Supper," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 4:362-372; Bruce Chilton, *A Feast of Meanings: Eucharistic Theologies from Jesus through Johannine Circles* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 1-11.

simply one more meaningless death among many; it was a gift given to people who live in a world permeated by sin. Recognizing that sin is a reality that had infected even Jesus' closest associates throws Jesus' words into relief. Christ did not speak or die to affirm people *in* sin but to wrest them *from* sin for life with God. Jesus' death is *for* you because it is *against* your sin.

The second part of Jesus' words says that after supper he took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." The expression "new covenant" recalls that through Jeremiah God promised to establish a new covenant with Israel and Judah in which he would "forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:31-34). The announcement that the new covenant was being inaugurated through the blood of Jesus presents people with the promise of release from sin so that they will know that God is truly their God and might have God's will inscribed upon their hearts. Yet it also serves as a tacit reminder that even God's chosen people had a stubborn propensity to sin, since a new covenant was only necessary because Israel had repeatedly broken the old covenant. Jeremiah's oracle recalled how God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt and made a covenant with them, yet it was "a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord" (Jer 31:32). The new covenant promises release from sin over against the backdrop of Israel's persistent unfaithfulness. Just the announcement that Jesus' body would be given "for you" stands over against impending betrayal. There is no purpose in the shedding of Jesus' blood and no purpose in the establishing of a new covenant if people have been faithful. It is in the face of sin that God does something new through the blood of Christ.

After quoting the words of Jesus, Paul summarizes their import by saying that "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Each component of this statement bears consideration. At the heart of Paul's argument is the declaration that the Lord's supper is proclamation. Paul quoted the words of Jesus which concluded, "Do this as often as (ὡσάκις) you drink it in remembrance of me" (11:28); then he picked up this language in the next verse by saying that "as often as (ὡσάκις) you eat the bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:29). These parallel sentences identify remembrance with proclamation. The congregation does not remember the death of Jesus by silently calling it to mind but by speaking of it. To remember the Lord's death is to proclaim it.⁴ Identifying proclamation as the essential mark of the supper defines the direction of the action involved. To "proclaim" (καταγγελλεῖν) is to address the word of God to people, not to make an offering to God. Paul said that when he first arrived in Corinth, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God *to you* in lofty words or wisdom," but "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (2:1-2). The direction of the proclamation corresponds to the direction of Jesus'

⁴See especially, G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Eucharist in Bible and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983) 12-16; Ernst Käsemann, "The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 120-21.

promise: “This is my body given *for you*” (11:24). It is a word from Christ to his followers.⁵

What Christians proclaim in the supper is the Lord’s death. Through preaching, the crucified Christ encounters listeners as both promise and warning—this is true whether the proclamation takes place in conjunction with the supper or in some other setting. Paul began his letter to the Corinthians by declaring that the cross cuts two ways: those who are perishing are repelled by its foolishness while those who are being saved encounter the power of God through it (1 Cor 1:18). The preaching of the cross threatens the listener by seeking to “destroy the wisdom of the wise,” to “thwart” human pretensions, and to place a stumbling block before those who demand that God act on their terms (1:19-23). Yet the preaching of the cross also promises deliverance, for through it God calls people from sin into faith through the work of the Holy Spirit (1:24-25; 2:1-5).

The purpose of proclaiming the cross is to awaken and strengthen faith. If sin is a broken relationship with God, faith is a restored relationship with God. People are delivered from sin by being brought to faith through the proclamation of Christ’s death. Both the warning and the promise serve this same end: faith. Earlier in the letter Paul said that he sought to destroy human pretensions by proclaiming the cross of Christ for the express purpose that “*faith* might not rest in human wisdom but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:5). That is to say, “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation” of the crucified Christ “to save those who *believe*” (1:21). Since the supper is a proclamation of Christ’s death, it is done in the service of faith.⁶

The Lord’s death is proclaimed “until he comes.” Paul recognized that Christians are not yet fully in the kingdom, but live in a world in which sin and death remain active. Paul understood that, yes, God has dealt decisively with sin through the death of Christ and the coming of the Spirit, but, no, the end has not yet arrived since sin and death remain realities with which Christians must contend. Although the outcome is not in doubt, the battle continues to rage; Christians live where the

⁵The New Testament is consistent in using “proclaim” (καταγγελλεῖν) for the word of God that is addressed to people rather than for words people address to God. See Acts 3:24; 4:2; 13:5, 38; 15:36; 16:17, 21; 17:3, 13, 23; 26:23; 1 Cor 9:14; Phil 1:17-18; Col 1:28; cf. Rom 1:8. The term “eucharist” is based on the Greek word for thanksgiving (εὐχαριστεῖν) which is commonly used for words that people address to God. When applied to the Lord’s supper it reverses the direction of the action, so that the focus of the meal is on what people offer God rather than on what God offers people. The reformers’ insistence that the basic direction of the supper is from God to people led to liturgical reforms such as the elimination of the eucharistic prayer and inclusion of an exhortation to communicants in the service for holy communion.

⁶That the Lord’s supper is rightly used in the context and service of faith is repeatedly emphasized by the reformers. The sacraments were instituted “for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith. For this reason they require faith, and are rightly used when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith” (*Augsburg Confession*, art. 13 [BC, 36]). In his *Small Catechism*, Luther asked how eating and drinking could produce such great effects, and responded that whoever “believes these words has what they say and declare: the forgiveness of sins.” Therefore, “he is truly worthy and prepared who believes these words: ‘for you’ and ‘for the forgiveness of sins,’” but the one who “does not believe these words, or doubts them, is unworthy and unprepared, for the words ‘for you’ require truly believing hearts” (BC, 352).

power of God claims people for life and where sin continues to attempt re-enslavement. Some in the Corinthian congregation failed to grasp this tension and seemed to think that they could bask in their spiritual wealth as potentates in the kingdom of God while Paul and others suffered affliction in the world (4:8-13). Under the new covenant that is inaugurated by the death of Christ and proclaimed through the Lord's supper, God promised forgiveness for sin (Jer 31:34); but the Corinthians apparently thought they were in a position simply to disregard sin, which is a very different matter. In thinking that they were beyond sin, the Corinthians readily fell prey to sin and so became liable to the judgment of God. Therefore, Paul calls for a manner of participation in the Lord's supper that is suitable for life amid these contending powers.

II. SALVATION AND JUDGMENT

The congregation at Corinth seemed to think that the Lord's supper worked in an automatic or quasi-magical manner.⁷ That is, they seemed to think that by partaking of the Lord's supper they became immune from sin and exempt from judgment. To disabuse them of this idea, Paul pointed out the parallel between the experience of the wilderness generation and that of the early church (1 Cor 10:1-13). Those who came out of Egypt experienced a kind of baptism by passing through the sea and living under the pillar of cloud in which God was present. God also nourished them with food in the form of manna and with the water that flowed from the rock. Nevertheless, these gifts did not immunize them from sin. While Moses was on Mount Sinai the people whom God had freed from slavery committed apostasy by building a golden calf (Exodus 32), and those whom God fed with manna came to loathe the food he provided (Numbers 11). When spies brought back produce from Canaan the people refused to enter (Numbers 14), and when God brought them to the verge of the promised land they committed fornication with the Baal of Peor (Numbers 25). God's gracious actions did not remove the threat of sin and when the people committed sins they fell under divine judgment.

The Corinthians were in a similar situation. Just as God delivered Israel of old by bringing them through the sea, the Corinthians experienced God's deliverance through the water of baptism; and just as God sustained Israel of old with food and drink, the Corinthians were nourished with the bread and cup that were shared in the Lord's supper. The food and drink available in the Lord's supper sustained Christians as surely as the manna and the water from the rock sustained the Israelites, but Paul had to remind them that these gifts do not work like magic. The reminder was necessary because the Corinthians—like Israel of old—had a propensity to sin. Their contentiousness was manifest in various factions within the

⁷The idea that the Corinthians thought that partaking of the supper automatically exempted them from judgment is widely recognized. See C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 220, 223; Käsemann, "The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 126; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 443.

congregation (1:10-17), and they were forced to grapple with issues of sexual immorality (chaps. 5-6) and questions of idolatry (chaps. 8-10). Christians are like the wilderness generation in that they have been delivered from bondage by the grace of God but have not yet arrived in the promised land. The supper does not immunize them from sin or exempt them from judgment but is designed to nourish them for a life of resistance to sin and obedience to God.

Paul urged Christians to examine themselves before partaking of the Lord's supper because in the meal sinners encounter the crucified Christ. "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). He understood that since God dealt seriously with sin through the meal, those who come should be prepared for this. Ernst Käsemann commented that everyone who partakes "is confronted with the Judge of all," so that the "presence of the Judge compels those who are thus confronted to judge themselves."⁸ Paul does not speak of self-examination in a way that makes God's grace finally dependent upon human effort, but neither does he allow faith or self-examination to be treated as peripheral matters. Rather, he argues that when people are confronted with the death of Christ in the supper, the response of faith entails self-examination as well as reception of the bread and wine, since the cross both discloses the reality of sin and promises release from sin.

Self-examination has two dimensions. When people come to the supper they meet both Christ and other people (10:16-17); therefore, they should examine themselves in relation to Christ and other people. (1) Attention to one's relationship with Christ is important because sin is in its most fundamental sense a broken relationship with God and Christ. In the verses that precede the call for self-examination, Paul repeats the words that Christ spoke "on the night he was betrayed" (11:23) and speaks of the judgment that falls upon those who are answerable for the death of Christ (11:27). His words are designed to move participants away from faithlessness toward embracing the Christ who is proclaimed in the meal. (2) Attention to one's relationship with other people is important because a broken relationship with God issues in broken relationships with other people. The Corinthians came to the Lord's supper while showing callousness toward others in the community and humiliating the poor. Paul censured them in order to move them away from conduct that destroyed community toward conduct that would build up the community (11:17-22, 33-34).

Paul's reference to "discerning the body" (11:29) is another way of speaking about consideration of one's relationship to Christ and to other people.⁹ (1) In a primary sense, "the body" (σῶμα) refers to the person of Jesus, whose death is

⁸"The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," 126.

⁹The significance of "discerning the body" has been widely discussed. For example, Barrett concludes that "the body" refers primarily to Jesus, since 11:27 mentioned the body and blood of the Lord (*A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 274-275). Fee argues that the body refers to the community as in 10:17, although this interpretation ignores 10:16 and actually runs counter to his interpretation of the passage as a whole, which he (rightly) says has to do with the worshiper's relationship to Jesus and to the community (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 563-564, cf. 532-533).

announced by the meal. Earlier in 1 Corinthians the term "body" was used for the human body, but in 10:16 Paul spoke of the believer's communion with Jesus through his blood and body. Just prior to the remark about "discerning the body," Paul repeated that Jesus' "body" and blood were given for them (11:24), and he warned about guilt for "the body" and blood of the Lord (11:27). To "discern the body" is to recognize that those who come to the table are confronted by Christ, whose body was crucified for them. Paul does not engage in arguments about the nature of Christ's body in the meal; he does say that people encounter Christ there (10:16). (2) In a secondary sense, "the body" refers to the community of believers. Paul prepared the readers of his letter to connect Christ's "body" with the community by commenting that partaking of Christ's body in the form of bread makes for one body in the form of a community (10:17). A relationship with Christ cannot be separated from relationships with other people, and when the Corinthians were callous to the needs of others, Paul spoke a word of judgment: "When you come together it is not really to eat the Lord's supper," since "each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk." By humiliating those who have nothing they show contempt for the church of God (11:20-22).

When people come to the Lord's supper they are confronted with the proclamation of Christ's death. Those who show contempt for the Christ who is proclaimed there or who disregard the needs of others in the community participate in "an unworthy manner" and place themselves under the judgment of God (11:27). It has sometimes been thought that in this passage Paul warns that people eat and drink to their own damnation, but this is not what the text says. Paul warns that God's judgment is done for *corrective* purposes. Those who come with callousness toward Christ or his people expose themselves to disciplinary or corrective action on God's part, and this action is designed to turn people away from sin so that they "may *not* be condemned along with the world" (11:32). The goal of God's action is finally the salvation rather than the destruction of the person.

III. INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Paul pointed out that there are both inclusive and exclusive aspects to the meal. The words of Jesus that Paul quoted referred to the new covenant in Jesus' blood. A covenant relationship has both inclusive and exclusive aspects. According to the Old Testament, those who lived in the covenant belonged to a particular God and were included among God's particular people: out of all peoples they were God's treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exod 19:5). At the same time, the covenant relationship excluded the worship of other gods and those who engaged in such worship were guilty of breaking the covenant (Exod 20:1-3; Deut 8:18-19; 17:2-3; 29:25-29; Judg 2:19-20; Jer 11:10). Like the first covenant, the new covenant was an act in which God claims people for a distinctive relationship with himself and with his particular people. What is new is that the claim is even more complete since it will be fully internalized: God said, "I will

put *my* law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be *my* people" (Jer 31:33).

The Lord's supper proclaims that God has inaugurated the new covenant through the blood of Jesus (1 Cor 11:25). In a positive sense, this means that those who partake of the supper can find in it authentic communion with God and inclusion among God's chosen people. This is evident when Paul asks rhetorically, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?" (10:16). The answer is clearly yes, the cup and bread are a communion with Christ. Moreover, those who are in relationship with Christ are also included among his people, as Paul makes clear in the next verse: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (10:17). Thus the supper presents the promise of belonging to God and to God's people through Christ.

The corollary to this, however, is that those who are included in this communion are excluded from the worship of other gods and from the societies whose meals promote such worship. The Corinthians lived in a religiously diverse environment where there were shrines to Apollo, Aphrodite, Asclepius, Isis, Sarapis, and other deities. Greco-Roman gods and goddesses did not demand exclusive allegiance from their worshipers and people could move from one religious cult to another with relative ease. The meat that was available in Corinth was generally from animals that had been sacrificed in honor of one of these deities, which created problems for Christians who wanted to eat meat but did not want to support idolatry. The issue of eating meat from animals that had been offered to idols arose in various social settings ranging from the purchase of meat on the open market (10:25), to meals in private homes (10:27), to meals conducted in pagan shrines (8:10). Paul acknowledged that Christians have freedom in Christ which allowed them to eat food whatever its source (10:25, 27), but he argued that this freedom did not extend to meals that were devoted to the worship of other gods. Paul declared that "there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (8:6). Therefore, to serve another god would not be freedom but enslavement to other powers. Paul considered idolatry demonic and insisted that "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (10:21). Inclusion in a relationship with God and God's people in Christ meant exclusion from relationships with other gods.

The interplay between the divine yes and the divine no in 1 Corinthians constantly presses for clarity and integrity in practices surrounding the Lord's supper, whether Paul's words are being heard by Christians in the first or the twentieth century. The contemporary church, like the Corinthians of old, readily falls into the kind of complacency that finds it distasteful or tiresome to confront the ongoing realities of human sin; and many may find it simply irrelevant to urge those partaking of the Lord's supper to shun idolatry, since our neighbors no longer offer sacrifices in honor of Apollo or Aphrodite. Yet sin remains, even in the

hearts and communities of Christians; and idolatry remains whenever we fear, love, and trust anyone or anything more than the God who sent Jesus to die for us. Paul persistently argues that in the supper people encounter the crucified Christ who is both God's no to sin and his yes to life; that faith's response to the crucified Christ entails both self-examination and grateful reception of the bread and wine. Paul recalls that Jesus identified the supper with the "new covenant," which promised to bring forgiveness for sins while extending God's claim upon people by working obedience to the law that God would inscribe upon their hearts. And Paul insists that participation in the Lord's supper means both inclusion in communion with God and his people as well as exclusion from the table of idols; for it is only in the singular relationship with God and Christ that true freedom is found. ⊕