

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 12/1/96 PM
1 Corinthians 11:26 "Traditions, Traditions (A Biblical Look at Communion)"

Do you like traditions? We are all affected by traditions whether we realize it or not, even in the church. Not all traditions are bad, case in point, Communion.

At least twelve times a year, usually on the first Sunday of the month, we observe the ordinance known as Communion. It's a tradition. Concerning the origin of this tradition, the apostle Paul gave this explanation in 1 Corinthians 11:23, "For I have received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you." In the section that follows, as you well know, the apostle explains that the Lord Jesus Himself instituted Communion on the night He was betrayed.

In 1 Corinthians 11, then, Paul told the church at Corinth, "I delivered to you what the Lord gave to me. I passed on to you a tradition that Jesus started some 25 or so years ago. Communion."

Communion is a good tradition. The Church has celebrated it for twenty centuries now. It's a commanded tradition. The problem with a tradition (*any* tradition) is that it can become so commonplace that it loses its significance. That's what had happened in Corinth, and that's why Paul gave this instruction in 1 Corinthians 11.

Wheelersburg Baptist Church came into existence in 1878. We have a history, a past, a heritage. We have traditions. That can serve us well, but it can also paralyze us. We must always ask ourselves, "Why do we do what we do?"

Why do we observe communion? What is the purpose of communion? That's an excellent question to answer (especially on the night of our annual business meeting, for our goal is not *business as usual*, but *business according to the Word*). In a word, communion is a *proclamation*.

Proposition: Tonight as we consider the *tradition* of Communion, we are going to seek to answer three questions relating to this proclamation, as explained in 1 Corinthians 11:26.

I. When do we proclaim?

Our text is verse 26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show (proclaim) the Lord's death till he come." Notice verse 26 begins with the connective "for," which is a transition word. It takes us back to verses 23-25 where Paul just quoted the words spoken by Jesus while at the Last Supper with His disciples. Paul repeated the tradition that Jesus started in the Upper Room and then passed on to the apostle. The tradition, as you well know, involved eating a meal together and sharing two very special elements--a loaf of bread, and a cup of wine.

What happens, Paul asks, when believers gather to partake of these elements of bread and the cup? The answer, according to verse 26, is that whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup we are proclaiming the Lord's death.

May I ask you a question? Why did Paul repeat the tradition of Communion for the Corinthians? Had they forgotten the words? Had the pastor and deacons lost the order of service that explained how they were to observe the ordinance? Was the problem that the Christians in Corinth were failing to put Communion on the calendar?

No, to all of the above. The problem wasn't that the members were skipping Communion, nor that the leaders forgot the order of service. The problem was that in just one generation, they had lost the significance of Communion.

That's why Paul begins verse 26, "For." In other words, he is saying, "You're missing the purpose of Communion, so allow me to remind you the reason the Lord commanded us to observe it. Here it is. Whenever you eat the bread and drink the cup, you are proclaiming our Lord's death."

The word "proclaim" (NIV; "show" in the KJV) literally means "to report down." It appears in 1 Cor 2:1, "*declaring* unto you the testimony of God." In 9:14 it's translated "preach" (also in Col 1:28). It's our privilege and responsibility to proclaim the Word of Christ and the Person of Christ using our lips. We speak Christ. We tell others of Christ. That's verbal proclamation.

But there's another way we proclaim Christ's person and work. What is it according to 1 Corinthians 11:26? By means of the Communion service. Communion is a visible proclamation.

Please don't miss this. When properly observed, communion speaks for itself. In a real sense, the Lord never intended it to be tacked onto a service after the message was preached, for in and of itself, it *is* a message. It is a proclamation of Jesus' atoning work.

When does this proclamation occur? Paul says, "As often as you eat and drink." Proclamation occurs every time the church meets to observe the Lord's Table. For some that's once a week (in the early church). For others, once a month. And for others, once every six months. The frequency isn't the issue, but participation is. It ought to be a priority for every Church, for every Christian.

II. What do we proclaim?

Verse 26 again, "You do show the Lord's death." There's more to Communion than eating a piece of bread and drinking a cup of juice. The elements are highly symbolic. They stand for something. They are intended to remind us of something. What's that? Paul tells us, *the Lord's death*.

Communion reminds us as a church of our foundation. We will cease to exist the moment we slide from our bedrock. The Church is built upon the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Every time we observe Communion, we have a picture so clear a child can understand it.

The Bread reminds us that the Living Bread, Jesus Christ, gave His life for us. He came into this world to bring us life that is abundant and eternal. And it cost Him His life. His body was broken and bruised for us. He died in our place and was bruised for our iniquities (Isa 53:3). Jesus told the disciples, "When you see the bread, remember My Body which I gave for you."

The Cup is the fruit of the vine. It reminds us that The Vine, Jesus Christ, shed His blood for us. Through His substitutionary death and victorious resurrection, He established a new covenant. He provided reconciliation for people like you and me, people severed from God by sin. Through Christ we are reconciled to God, and to each other.

What do we proclaim every time we observe Communion? My friend, a silent message rings out! The message is announced that at the heart of Christianity is a Person,

Jesus Christ, Who is our Savior and Lord. Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship. When we participate in Communion we are given an opportunity to renew our dedication and devotion to Him.

By the way, in Communion we *remember* a Person but we also *anticipate* a Person, don't we? "For you do show the Lord's death *till He come*." We look back, but we also look ahead.

III. How should we proclaim?

Since Communion is so important, would it be wise to approach it casually and flippantly? Certainly not. Well, how then can we prepare ourselves for this proclamation event? The answer is given in verse 28.

"But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup." Why did Paul tell the Corinthians that? Why did he exhort them to prepare themselves before Communion? The implication is that they weren't observing it properly. Something was wrong. What was it?

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Gordon Fee deals with the question of why the Corinthian observance of communion was unsatisfactory (pp. 556-8). Why did Paul admonish them?

It probably wasn't because they weren't thinking on Christ properly when the elements were passed. In fact, it probably wasn't because they were failing to be in communion with the Lord *per se*. Rather it was because of their abuse of one another.

There were divisions in the church. Some members were harboring grudges against other members. The unity of the Body was being undermined. There were cliques in the assembly.

Do you know what cliques do to a Communion service? Do you know what kind of effect jealousy and bitterness have on the Lord's Table? In Corinth, by the way Christians were treating each other, they were negating the very point of Jesus' death, that being to create a new people for His name.

The fact is we miss the point of communion if we think of it only in terms of *our* needs, and not in terms of the needs of others.

May I offer a practical suggestion? When you prepare yourself for Communion, ask yourself two questions, not just one. One, is my relationship with the Lord right? Two, and equally essential, are my relationships with the Lord's people right?

The Word of God says, "But let a man examine himself and so let him eat." Communion is a check-up time for us, an occasion to allow the Spirit of God to reveal the condition of our relationship with Christ and His people.

You see, Communion is a tradition, a good tradition, a God-ordained tradition. It's a unique opportunity for us to proclaim the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

Response Time:

Let's focus on the Person and Work of Christ by singing together (have servers come during final verse).

Worship through Singing: #203 "And Can It Be"

In Communion, we proclaim the Lord's death till He come.

Communion

Let's exalt our Lord together in song.

Worship through Singing: #73 "Thou Art Worthy"

As a reminder of our covenant responsibilities to the Lord and to each other, we're to read and invite you to affirm our church covenant.

Affirmation of Church Covenant

Annual Business Meeting (voting on proposed budget and election of officers)

- Distribute ballots (all members age 15? and up)
- Designate counters (current clerk; board members who are going off)
- Explain nomination process
- Cast ballot for officers and budget (floor nominations?)
- Collect ballots