

Reformation Sunday: The significance of the Lord's Supper

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[0 : 00] This morning I want to introduce you to three men. Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer. These were brave men and key figures in the Reformation in England during the 16th century, without whom this church and our denomination would most likely not exist.

But all three of these men ended their life by being burned alive for the crime of teaching what the Bible says.

Simply doing what I'm doing this morning. They gave their lives for that. And such was the world in those years during the Reformation and post-counter-Reformation after that, where Bible truth, what we read in the Bible, what we take for granted, was considered contraband.

It was illegal. And it was as in demand on the street as any illegal drug is today. If only people were as addicted to the Bible today as illegal drugs, then we wouldn't have a drug problem.

Of course, we take it for granted because it's so readily available. But back then, 500 years ago, it was illegal even to own a copy of the Bible if you weren't licensed for it.

[1 : 19] There used to be secret Bible studies in back alleys in London. And if you were caught, you would be put in jail. And these three men, Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer, they were leaders of that Protestant Reformation in England.

And what's interesting about their trials, though, is the particular teaching that got them convicted and executed. So there were a number of teachings that they espoused from Scripture that were contrary to the Roman Catholic teachings.

But the one that actually got them arrested and got them tried and got them executed was their doctrine of the Lord's Supper, what we also call Holy Communion. They were willing, these men were willing to give their lives for a correct and biblical understanding of what the Lord's Supper is.

And so this morning, on Reformation Sunday, in honor of these men, I want to devote this sermon to that same goal that they gave their lives for.

Thankful that I will hopefully not be burned alive for doing it. So this morning, I want to help you understand why the Lord's Supper that we're going to partake in later is such an important part of what we actually do as Christians, and why these men thought it was worth giving their lives to ensure that we understand it properly.

[2 : 40] And so I hope you will listen carefully in honor of them. Because let's be honest, it is quite a strange ceremony, isn't it, that Christians do on a monthly, some churches a weekly basis.

We take a little piece of bread and a little cup of grape juice, and then we look at them and we stay very quiet, and we hold them, and then all at once, on cue, we eat and drink them all together.

Now, if you're a visitor and you're not used to this, you could be forgiven for thinking that you've stumbled into some kind of weight loss cult. Why on earth do we do this? Well, most would answer, most Christians would answer, we do this because Jesus told us to, which is true.

In the Lord's, in the Last Supper, the night before Jesus died, he was with his disciples, and he took bread and wine, and he told his disciples to share it, and then to keep doing that as a regular thing, on a regular basis, as a way of remembering what he was going to do for them the next day, his body and his blood that was given on the cross.

And so, yes, Jesus told us to do this, but that still doesn't answer the question, why? Why did he tell us to do it, and why was he so adamant that it's important for us to do on a regular basis?

[3 : 56] Well, throughout the history of the church, there have been three main ways of understanding why the Lord's Supper is so important, and what it actually does for us as Christians when we partake in it.

So, I want to tell you each of those three views, so you can understand, you know, where the debates have been over the last 2,000 years. So, the first view is the Roman Catholic view.

And the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper is that as you eat the bread and the grape juice, you are actually physically eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus, which is what then actually saves you from your sins and washes your sins away.

The very act of eating and drinking saves you, in the Roman Catholic view. And that at every communion, or mass as they call it, Jesus is therefore being re-sacrificed over and over again.

For your sins. And that is the particular view, of course, that the Reformers 500 years ago opposed. So, that's the first view, the Roman Catholic view. The second view, which is a common view in many Protestant churches today, and that's why I've called it the modern view, is the complete opposite.

[5 : 12] The complete opposite of the Roman Catholic view. And that is that there is no spiritual effect in taking communion. It does nothing, apart from help you to remember what Jesus did and give you a chance to reflect on that.

In which case, we don't really need to do it because we can achieve the same result just by, you know, reading the Bible and thinking about Jesus on the cross. The actual eating of the bread and drinking of the wine, or the grape juice, in our case, which is basically non-alcoholic wine, all of that is not really needed in the modern view.

It's just a nice visual reminder, just a sermon. Now, of course, the problem with this modern view, while it's an understandable reaction to the Roman Catholic view, it doesn't do justice to how important Jesus and the apostles considered the Lord's Supper, as we see in Scripture, and the importance of actually, physically eating and drinking it.

And so there is a third view on the why of the Lord's Supper, which is, in fact, the Reformed view, which people like Martin Luther and John Calvin and Cranmer and Ridley and Latimer held and gave their lives to defend.

And it's a view which we, as a Reformed Anglican church, hold to. And that view is the view that taking the physical Lord's Supper, even though it's not much to look at, has real spiritual benefits for us, and it is the means by which God confirms and puts into effect the things that the bread and wine actually represent.

[6 : 56] And that's why it's called an effectual means of grace. Now, I know that that view is not familiar to many Christians today, and it sounds almost magical, but it's not.

And the Bible does speak of it in that way. And the Bible also helps us to understand why that Reformed view is, in fact, the right one, even though it might sound weird to us.

And so to the Bible, we will now turn. And when we do, we discover, firstly, that it's clear that the Roman Catholic view can't be right. So Jesus doesn't need to be re-sacrificed at every communion, because, for example, Hebrews tells us, you don't have to turn there, it tells us in Hebrews 10, 14, that he made a one, never-to-be-repeated sacrifice that counts for all time for those who believe.

And then also against the Roman Catholic view, the Bible teaches us that not all who eat communion will automatically be saved. Jesus tells us, for example, in John 6, that it's only the one who looks to the Son and believes in Him who shall have eternal life and be raised on the last day.

And so, without faith in what the Lord's Supper represents, it can do nothing for you. And so the Roman Catholic view can't stand when we actually open the Bible and read what it says, and that's probably one of the reasons why they outlawed the Bible 500 years ago.

[8 : 22] Okay, but then why not just have faith, like the modern view? Why is the Lord's Supper still necessary for us to partake in? Why do the Reformers believe it's more than just a visual aid?

Well, to understand that, we need to turn now to 1 Corinthians 11. Paul in 1 Corinthians was writing to a fairly newly established Christian church in Corinth, but he had heard some disturbing reports about what was going on in that church, which most of this letter 1 Corinthians is written to address.

And one of these problems was how they were actually carrying out the Lord's Supper in their church. And in Paul's addressing that particular issue for that Corinthian church, we get to learn quite a lot about just the Lord's Supper itself and what it means.

And that's why, even though he was talking to a particular Corinthian issue, it has a lot to say to us in teaching us about this ceremony of the supper.

So what was going on in the Corinthian church is when they ate and drank the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper, they did it as part of a bigger meal together, but it seems that only certain people, those who could afford to be part of the bigger meal, would then take part in the Lord's Supper, while those who didn't have food would be left out.

[9 : 44] Which means that the rich people had more access and more right to the Lord's Supper than the poor people. Now you can imagine how that made the Apostle Paul feel.

And so he wrote to them and he said, listen, if you want a big meal, then just eat at home, okay? When we come together for communion, it's not about making your tummy full and it's certainly not about showing how rich or important you are.

There's something much more vital going on in the Lord's Supper, which he then teaches them about. From verse 23, you can follow along in your Bibles, chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians. He says, for I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you.

Now what he's saying there is, as an Apostle, he got these instructions directly from Jesus. And then he says, the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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. 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.

[10 : 49] For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. So then, 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.

Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

That is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. So there's a lot of important things he says about the Lord's Supper in this passage that we've got to understand.

Firstly, he says this ceremony is something that God came up with. It's not our idea. It's not a human church tradition that we invented. No, it was given to us, to the church, through the apostles, by God.

Secondly, he says that the point of the Lord's Supper is to proclaim the death of Jesus, as he puts it, to represent what the death of Jesus really means. But thirdly, he says, if you eat or drink of it in an unworthy manner, bad stuff will happen.

[12 : 00] And that is probably one of the most shocking things he says about the Lord's Supper in this passage. That in Corinth, people were participating in this ceremony in what he calls an unworthy manner, so much so that God afflicted them in judgment with illness and even death.

That's what he means by, that is why many among you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep. Okay, so, does that mean that if you don't take the Lord's Supper properly, you'll get sick?

Well, yes, it does if you lived in Corinth 2,000 years ago. You probably would have. Not because the bread was off, but because God was angry. And in the early church, you must understand, God sometimes used extreme methods to protect his church from error in its formative years.

Now, it's different now that we have the Bible to keep us on track, so that kind of extreme intervention is not necessary, thankfully. But what it teaches us is that God took this ceremony deadly seriously, and so should we.

It teaches us that taking it in an unworthy manner has real negative effects. Whoever eats and drinks unworthily, Paul says, eats and drinks judgment on themselves.

[13 : 23] Taking it unworthily had real negative effects in Corinth. And so it stands to reason that the opposite must also be true. That taking it properly has positive effects, real effects, which of course explains why God insisted that we take it even today.

That we don't just believe the gospel, but we also participate in this gospel ceremony that God came up with for our good. Okay, so we can see from the Bible that this is good for us as Christians.

But that still doesn't answer the question, well how is it actually good for us? Why is the ceremony itself and the taking of the wine or the grape juice and the bread so vital, so important?

Well I'll tell you why. And it's connected with actually what we've been learning in Genesis over the past few weeks. The reason the Lord's Supper is such an important ceremony that has real spiritual benefit for us is that it is a covenant meal.

It's no ordinary thing. It is a covenant meal. It is a sacred meal that accompanies and ratifies covenant promises. It's why we call it in fact a sacrament.

[14 : 45] it means sacred thing. Now of course we're not used to the idea of sacred things or a sacred covenant ceremony. But they were well understood in the ancient world.

Because you see when covenants were made and in fact Dylan helped us to see this last week in Genesis 15. When covenants were made normally between kings or nations they would often have a meal afterwards to seal and confirm that covenant.

It's a meal that the covenant parties would eat together to confirm that this new relationship is now in place. That's the significance of the meal. That's what people would have understood a covenant meal to be.

As I say we don't really have similar things today. I guess the closest equivalent is probably a wedding reception. So after a marriage covenant is made there's normally a meal afterwards right?

And it's a significant meal. not just because it's tasty and there's good wine and stuff but it's a significant meal because it's actually the husband and wife's first meal together as a married couple.

[15 : 52] It's a very important meal in that way. It's the first of many meals they'll have together in this new relationship. And it also a meal after a wedding also has the effect of binding the families of the bride and the groom together in fellowship as a common family.

And of course there's nothing that quite says family quite like eating together. And in a similar way the Lord's Supper is a confirmation that all who partake in it are now part of God's covenant family.

And that also of course helps us to understand why what the Corinthians were doing was actually so bad. Why God was so angry because not only were they sinning against each other but they were doing it during the very meal which was meant to confirm they were members of God's family together.

Do you see why it was such a bad thing that they were doing? It's the significance of the meal and that ceremony actually made the sin even worse. It would be similar to someone discovering the groom fooling around with one of the bridesmaids in a back room at his own wedding reception.

You know that's the kind of gravity of what was going on in Corinth. Okay so the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal. Do you see that? Do you understand that? In it God is ratifying and confirming the covenant arrangement that we are under and that the family that he has caused us to be a part of.

[17 : 18] That's what we're doing when we eat the Lord's Supper. But there's more. It's more than a covenant meal the Bible teaches us. It's also a covenant sign.

God has put these two ideas together in one thing. The covenant meal and the covenant sign in one ceremony, the Lord's Supper. Now we've already been exposed to covenant signs in the Bible in Genesis.

They're visible things that confirm invisible promises. So the rainbow for example in Genesis 9 was the first major covenant sign that accompanied a promise of God.

Remember the flood? That terrifying judgment of God upon the sin of humanity where God wiped out almost all life on the planet?

An event which of course is enough to make all humans since then seriously worried whenever we see it start to rain. So to prevent us from freaking out when we see the clouds come over, God did something.

[18 : 22] He graciously made a promise to all humans never to destroy the world with water again so that we can enjoy the rain rather than fear it. thing is though, how do we know that promise is still in force today?

It was made so long ago. How do we know that that contract hasn't lapsed? Isn't there a chance of that? Isn't there a chance that the promise God made to Noah doesn't actually apply to us anymore?

So how do we know? Well, because God was also gracious enough not just to make that promise but to give us a sign, a rainbow, that whenever we see it, assures us that that promise is still in effect.

It's like a signature on a contract. You know when you sign a contract, that actual physical signature assures you that the contract is in force between the parties? Well, God literally signs his promises with certain parts of his creation.

He signs his contract visibly for us in his creation. Isn't that a wonderful thing? And that's how God has always worked throughout history. When he makes promises, he takes and selects certain visible elements that he's made in his creation, whether it's a rainbow or a goat that took Israel's sins away in the Old Testament or the water that we use in baptism.

[19 : 48] These are all parts of God's creation that we can see that he has then chosen and sanctified and attached promises that we can't see to them so that we can have confidence those promises are still in effect.

That's how a covenant sign works and that is exactly the same with the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. These are elements that he has chosen from his creation to attach to certain promises he makes to us whenever we take them.

Because how do we know that the gospel promises that Jesus made in the Bible 2,000 years ago still are in effect today? How do we really know that? How do we know that Jesus' promises to his disciples the night before he died actually apply to us?

All this time and distance away from them. How do we know that what he did on the cross 2,000 years ago still works to pay for sins in 2019?

How do we know that for sure? Well we know it because God has been gracious enough to attach to those invisible promises visible things from his creation, bread and wine, and then command a regular ceremony to show us those things to confirm to us that his gospel promises are still in effect for us today.

[21 : 08] It's what Paul means in verse 26 when he says that the supper proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. Every time we take of the supper and you see this bread and wine, God is actually through his church confirming that his covenant is still in place to you.

Isn't that amazing? What the Lord's supper tells us when we take it, what God is telling us through it, because it's a visible word, just as important and trustworthy as his words in the Bible, so are the visible words that he has attached his invisible promises to, this bread and wine.

And when we take that, it tells us that Jesus' death death that took place 2,000 years ago to atone for human sin still works in 2019.

But you know what? Communion is even more than that, because it's not just something we look at. And I don't just hold up the bread and the grape juice and you look at it and then I put it down.

There's something more. We also partake in it. We actively take it into ourselves. And that's vitally important, because in doing so, not only do we remember what Jesus did 2,000 years ago, and not only do we know that it's still in effect today, but when you actually eat that bread and drink that wine in faith, you can know for certain that the effect of Jesus' death applies directly to you.

[22 : 44] That's why the eating and drinking is so important. Otherwise, if you just looked at it, it would confirm that God's covenant is still in place and God still promises to atone for human sins in general, but how do you know that applies directly to you?

It's only when you partake in it in faith that you can know for sure that it applies to you. Those general promises of the gospel in taking communion are applied specifically to the individual who takes it.

And that's why in his letter, 1 Corinthians, actually a chapter before, Paul calls taking the Lord's Supper an actual participation of the individual into Jesus and his death.

And it's very important. Have a look in it. Turn a page back to 1 Corinthians 10. He spoke about the Lord's Supper here in a different context, talking about eating meat at the idol temples and why it was bad.

But I just want you to see what he says. 1 Corinthians 10 from verse 16. 13. He makes this point about the Lord's Supper.

[23 : 50] He says, 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?

And then look at verse 18. He uses an illustration. He says, Consider the people of Israel. Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar.

Now just look at those verses. They're quite important. By the way, that word participation is the Greek word *koinonia*, but it also is translated communion. That's why we also call the Lord's Supper communion.

And this passage and its context we'll look at a little bit more in our growth groups. But the basic idea was that it was to understand when the Jews ate the sacrificial meal at the altar, they actually benefited from the effects of that sacrifice.

That was the understanding that Paul is referring to in verse 18. The Jews would come, they would make sacrifices, and then being part of that meal and eating the sacrifice was actually a participation in the benefits of that sacrifice.

[24 : 58] And Paul says then, the same is true for the Lord's Supper. He takes that idea that the Jews had in their altar sacrifices and he says that's actually what is true in the Lord's Supper. By eating the Lord's Supper, you actually participate in that sacrifice Jesus made, it becomes your sacrifice when you participate in the Supper.

And you must participate in that sacrifice if you're to know for sure that your sins are atoned for. As Jesus himself put it in John 6 verse 53, he says, very truly I tell you, these are the words of Jesus, very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

So that's the idea. We can't just know about the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross 2,000 years ago and just know that it happened and just know that its effects were to atone for human sin.

The Bible tells us we must actually participate in that sacrifice, make it our own sacrifice, and that's what we do with the Lord's Supper as we eat it in faith. By participating rightly in the Lord's Supper, you can know for sure that what Jesus did on the cross 2,000 years ago applies directly to you in 2019.

And so I hope this morning you can begin, at least begin to appreciate how important it is for Christians to partake in the Lord's Supper.

[26 : 33] why it was a doctrine that the reformers bled and died over, and why I'm wearing my clerical collar this morning, and will from now on every time we partake in the Lord's Supper, to remind us of this, that it is not me and my authority that I carry this out, but this is an office that God has established through his church, and God is doing something through his ministers and his church, when you partake in the Lord's Supper.

Because it is a covenant ceremony, established, commanded, and preserved by God for 2,000 years, as a way that he regularly, not only reminds us of the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, but actually as you eat and drink it in faith, God is confirming that that sacrifice still applies to you individually, that his invisible gifts of atonement and eternal life are certified as yours whenever you eat and drink his meal that he is giving you, the bread and the wine that he's chosen to attach his invisible promises to.

And he's done that graciously so that you don't have to doubt your salvation if you're a Christian. You know, it's sad. Many Christians look for assurance and don't find it that they're actually saved because they are looking for that assurance inside themselves.

You know what I mean? As a pastor, I've seen it time and time again. People ask me, am I really saved? How do I know for sure? I don't feel my faith is strong enough. I don't feel my love for Jesus is strong enough.

Am I really saved? It's looking, that's the mistake we make. When we look inside at our own strength of our faith or our own strength of our love for Jesus for assurance, but we know all too well how variable and fluctuating those feelings are, don't we?

[28 : 31] And so does God. And so you know what he's done? Because he knows how much we can doubt if we look inside ourselves. He's graciously given us something outside of ourselves to look to for the assurance of where we stand with him.

His covenant signs. As the Anglican 39 articles puts it, the sacraments ordained of Christ are certain sure witnesses and effectual signs of grace and God's good will towards us by which he works invisibly in us to not only quicken but to strengthen and confirm our faith in him.

Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you for your grace in signing your covenant promises in creation, in these elements that you have sanctified and ordained for our good and for the assurance of your good will towards us and for the assurance that we stand as part of your covenant family.

Thank you, Lord, for these signs and we do pray that you would help us to take them seriously. We pray also and thank you for the reformers in history who took these signs and sacraments so seriously that they might have been preserved over all these years for us today to enjoy and to take strength from.

Strengthen us now as we take it in Jesus' name. Amen.