

Let a Man Examine Himself

I Corinthians 11:23-30, Trinity Sunday XIX

September 28, 2008

Beloved of the Lord.....It may seem unusual to have a sermon regarding the Lord's Supper one week before Communion Sunday. However today, after service many will announce their intent to commune, and from our text we see the importance of examining ourselves before Holy Communion. Self-examination is necessary because if we eat and drink unworthily without faith in the body and blood of Christ, we eat and drink damnation to ourselves "not discerning the Lord's body". We therefore examine ourselves to see 1) whether we are sorry for our sins, 2) whether we believe the true body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament, 3) whether we believe there is forgiveness of sins in this sacrament, and 4) whether we have the sincere desire to amend our sinful ways. When we consider whether or not we are "worthy" for Holy Communion, our worthiness has nothing to do with the size nor number of our sins, for one sin or a thousand sins are equally an abomination in the sight of God. Thanks be to God then, our worthiness for Holy Communion consists only in this: we believe that even though we are sinners worthy of God's wrath, the Lord, our merciful Lord, for our salvation has placed into this Sacrament His own life-giving and precious body and blood along with the forgiveness of sins. "True worthiness consists in faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins'" (Cat. Q. 322).

I. Those who are unworthy and unprepared. Because of the importance of self-examination, at the front of our catechism we find a list of questions and answers drawn up by Luther, for those who intend to commune. Our catechism says, "These questions and answers are no child's play, but are drawn up with great earnestness of purpose by the venerable and pious Dr. Luther for both young and old. Let each one take heed and likewise consider it a serious matter; for St. Paul writes to the Galatians, chapter six: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked."

But let us now address more perfectly how we examine ourselves before receiving Holy Communion. FIRST, we must be able to discern the Lord's body, for "he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." To discern the Lord's body means to recognize and distinguish that the true body and blood of Christ are truly present "in, with, and under the bread and wine". The bread does not represent the body, nor does the wine represent the blood, but in a supernatural and invisible manner, the true body and blood of Christ are literally there. The Reformed churches today commit a great crime against God when they say it is impossible for the

true body and blood of Christ to be present in the Sacrament. They reason that since the body of Christ ascended up into heaven, His body and blood cannot be both in heaven and on earth (in Communion) at the same time. But doesn't the Bible say "With God all things are possible"? If we have faith that God is God, that He is omnipresent, it is not hard to believe that for our sake and for our salvation, God can place His own body and blood in this Sacrament wherever it is celebrated around the world, and also His body is at the same time in heaven! Did you know that while Jesus was on earth, about to bodily ascend up into heaven, Jesus promised His disciples, "I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that WHERE I AM, there ye may be also"? While He was there before their eyes on earth, He was saying, I AM IN HEAVEN RIGHT NOW, and there you will one day be also! Let us therefore discern the Lord's body and understand, the true body and blood of Christ Jesus our Lord are indeed "in, with, and under the bread and wine" wherever the Sacrament is rightly observed. We orally receive in a supernatural manner, the body and blood of Christ.

The SECOND way in which we examine ourselves, is by seeing whether or not we are truly sorry in our heart over our sins. Koehler writes, "Neither the number nor the greatness of our sins make us unworthy; it depends on how we feel about our sins, whether we are penitent or not, that determines our worthiness or unworthiness. He who does not know his sin, cannot repent, and sees no need of forgiveness, and therefore has no faith in the forgiveness through Christ." If we are sorry for our sins against God, but all means we should commune. But if we are not sorry for our sins, we are living in a state of impenitence. If we know a certain thing is indeed sinful yet we continue in the sin stubbornly refusing to forsake it, such a person will not receive God's forgiveness in Holy Communion. Impenitence over even one sin kills faith in the forgiveness of all sins. An example of this would be an unmarried man and woman sleeping together. If they then receive Holy Communion when they are not sorry in their heart over their sins, they eat and drink damnation to themselves. "Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." This is why there are times when a pastor must suspend someone from Holy Communion. If he has come to know firsthand that a member of the congregation is living in a state of impenitence, he cannot commune them to their own damnation. To do so the pastor brings damnation upon himself as well. Instead he must with love urge them first to repent of their sinful ways and seek the Lord's forgiveness - of course this is the duty of every Christian. God gladly forgives and receives those who in their heart long to be forgiven. God does not despise the broken and contrite heart. If there is

repentance then, the pastor in the stead of Christ and congregation gladly absolves and declare their sins forgiven through the merits of Jesus. The Office of the Keys is given to the Church, all Christians. We direct those who are troubled by their sins to the Means of Grace, whereby all hearts are assured of God's mercy.

II. We are worthy and well prepared by faith alone.

Moving on now to the THIRD way we examine ourselves: Do we have faith that Christ Jesus is our Savior from sin? Luther put it this way: What then has Christ done for you that you trust in Him? The answer?..... He died for me and shed His blood for me on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. We are worthy and well prepared by faith in Jesus' blood and righteousness. If we don't believe that Jesus is our Savior we should not commune. But if "we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe", then by all means we should commune. No special degree of faith is required. If we are weak in faith, or scared God will not receive us due to the size and number of our sins, by all means we should commune so that God can strengthen our faith in His mercy. In Holy Communion God helps remove our unbelief, that is He removes our doubts, by giving us His own body and blood. We taste and receive the sweetness of God's forgiveness. Even if our faith is but a spark, a smoking flax, so that we but tremble and quake on the brink of falling away, "the body and blood of Christ serve as a seal to make this promise more sure to us" (Koehler). When we commune God swears to us with His own body and blood, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." When you look at the visible means of the bread and wine, by faith you see or discern the body and blood of Christ are there, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins." In these Means of Grace God is saying to you in all sincerity, "See here what I have given you and be not afraid, only believe. My body, my blood are sure tokens to you of My forgiveness. I have loved you with an everlasting love, and with these means of Grace I draw you into mine own heart, my own bosom. You are my beloved and your name is written in heaven. Through my body and My blood I have already tasted death for you, so that you can now here taste life everlasting."

What stronger sign, seal, or testimony could God give us greater than the Means of Grace He gives us in the Lord's Supper? Almighty God who lives in the heaven of heavens reaches down from his heavenly throne and in His nail-printed hands He offers us heavenly food, heavenly manna, this Bread of Life, in with and under the bread and wine. Having received by faith, having tasted the sweet body and blood of our Lord, we can get up off our penitent knees, and arise and stand up as new creatures. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all

things are become new." What is new? It is not that in Holy Communion God gives us a new supply of forgiveness. Each believer already stands in a state of grace by faith in Christ Jesus. He has already given us whole and complete His grace in both baptism and the preaching of the Gospel. What is different in Holy Communion is the manner, the way God gives the gift, namely through His own body and blood. "In the Holy Supper Christ deals with each communicant individually and personally, and seals to him His promise of grace and forgiveness."

Our FOURTH and last way of examining ourselves, is by seeing "whether we have the good and earnest purpose with the aid of God the Holy Spirit henceforth to amend our sinful lives." Thus if we have stolen, we confess the sin and return the goods before communing. If we have had a bad fight with our neighbor and sinned against him, we first go to them confess our sin, and be reconciled before communing. If our neighbor has trespassed against us, we freely forgive as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us, before communing. You see in order to amend our sinful ways, we continually need God's help every step of the way. We cannot do anything good and right in the sight of God, unless we first see the love God has given to us, through the cross of Jesus Christ. On the cross Jesus said to a world that had not asked to be forgiven, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." This grace, this love of Christ then works in us, producing faith and the fruit of faith - which is good works.

Our last and final point for the day, is the unity of faith we enjoy in Holy Communion. We practice "close" communion because the Lord's Supper is a testimony to the unity of faith. It is out of love that we do not commune those of a different faith. I Corinthians 1:10 says, "Now I beseech you brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." We are perfectly joined together when we hold fast to the same doctrine and faith taught by our same Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. May God in His grace continue to grant us this wonderful unity of faith and may we remember to commune often "to obtain strength for a holier life." Amen.

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