

United In Sacrament

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[0 : 00] Let's turn in our Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 11 as we continue to study together the practical expression of our unity as Christians with each other.

That is to say, we are one together in Christ Jesus. I've been minister of Glasgow City, as you know, for just over 18 years.

I'd like to think I've learned quite a lot throughout all those years. Things that college can't really teach and only practical experience can.

One of these lessons is this. You can change much about the liturgy and the worship of a congregation, but don't mess with how it does communion.

Don't mess with how it does communion. Communion patterns are precious and usually a congregation has very good reasons why it practices the Lord's Supper in the way it does.

[1 : 04] So my advice to you, Stephen, as a young minister starting out is, don't mess with your congregation's communion. Leave your own ideas of how things should be done at the door of the church.

Or at least until you've been its minister for a few decades. The thing is, the practice of the Lord's Supper is the highlight of most Reformed churches' liturgical calendar.

We don't have saints' days, so our high days as the Reformed church are when we gather together to hear the best of preaching, to eat bread and to drink wine together.

The incredibly precious times of oneness and unity where together we experience a fresh outpouring of the Father's love, the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Well, perhaps we've agreed, I hope, that new ministers should leave their ideas of how communion should be done at the door when they come in.

[2 : 09] And yet there are things, are there not, which every Christian should leave at the door of the church when it comes to the practice of the Holy Communion of our Lord.

Things that are just as out of place in a communion service as they would be at any other meeting of the church, but even more so.

Well, in this passage in 1 Corinthians 11, 17 through 34, the Apostle Paul is laying down for us the principles of the practice of the Lord's Supper.

In his own words in verse 23, those are the things he received from the Lord Jesus. They're not hand-me-down Chinese whispers from the other apostles describing how things used to be in the glory days, but they are detailed principles Paul received by direct revelation from the risen Jesus declaring how things are to be.

And as we read this passage from the perspective of our unity in sacrament, we want to suggest that there are three things that we need to leave at the door of this church when we practice the Lord's Supper next Sunday, if we want to be united as one.

[3 : 33] First of all, leave your preferences at the door. Leave your preferences at the door. Secondly, leave your works at the door.

Leave your works at the door, verses 23 through 26. And thirdly, in verse 27 through 34, just leave yourself at the door. Leave yourself at the door, or your ego.

First of all then, verses 17 through 22, leave your preferences at the door. Paul's beginning in verse 17 is chilling.

In the following instructions, I do not commend you, because when you come together, it is not for the better, but for the worse. If we should ignore apostolic warnings and engage in the kind of behavior the Corinthian Christians were, the Lord's Supper will do us far more harm than good.

So it should be of primary interest to us, surely, to heed very carefully these warnings from the Bible. After all, as we come together next week for our communion, we want good, not evil, to come

to us.

[4 : 52] We want the best. We don't want the worst. Well, in the following verses, Paul describes a situation which on first inspection seems like a million miles away from ourselves, but on second reading bears uncanny similarities.

Nearly a third of the people in ancient Rome were slaves. So at least a third of the members of the Corinthian church were slaves.

They were at the beck and call of their masters. They didn't have the luxury of being able to take a break when they wanted, or take a couple of hours off to go to church on a Sunday. At least a third, if not more, of the membership of the church in Corinth were in that category.

By contrast, the other members of the church in Corinth were free to meet whenever they liked. So those Corinthian Christians who were not slaves could meet whenever they wanted on a Sunday, whereas those Corinthian Christians who were slaves could only make church after they'd done their duties and their masters had given them permission to go.

So it meant that those Christians who were slaves were often late for worship. Not because their timekeeping was bad, but simply because their masters had forced them to work late.

[6 : 20] Well, I'm pretty sure you can get where Paul's going. Those Corinthian Christians who were not slaves and were free to meet whenever they wanted would gather together for worship.

But when they arrived, they had to wait for so long for the Corinthian Christians who were slaves to arrive, they would eat a meal together.

They'd eat a meal together. You can imagine the scene. They'd have a potluck dinner every Sunday in church. All the ladies took different dishes. All the men took different kinds of wine. And over the course of that evening, the Christians who were free weren't slaves, would eat their way through the whole buffet and drink their way through the whole bar.

With the result, they would gorge themselves on food and lose control. This is the origin, I would suggest, of many of the immoral practices of the Corinthian church.

[7 : 22] Long drinking sessions led to drunkenness, which, as you know from watching what goes on in our world, it's not rocket science.

It leads to many other things. So on the one hand, you have a large percentage of the church steaming drunk and absolutely stuffed with food.

And at that stage, the Christian slaves begin to arrive after their day's duties and their masters have given them permission to come to church. And there was nothing left for them to drink.

And nothing left for them to eat. Even the wine which was to be used to dispense the sacrament had been drunk, along with all the bread.

You can imagine how it made these poor Christian slaves feel. Oh, the free Christians in Corinth, they were happy with their preferences.

[8 : 17] What better on a Lord's Day than to have fellowship with other Christians over a nice meal and a few drinks? This is the way things are done in Corinth, don't you know?

It didn't matter that the Christians who were slaves were being heavily disadvantaged, getting a raw deal, or that biblical principles were being trodden underfoot, as long as the preferences of the majority were being met, then it's okay.

Right? Wrong. Paul calls it, verse 18, divisions. Paul calls it, verse 19, factions.

In 22, he's even more direct. What? Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. By insisting upon their preferences in meeting together, these free Christians were forming themselves into a faction, and they were causing division.

[9 : 34] They were despising the church of God, and they were humiliating those Christians who were slaves among them. But of course they'd say, it's what I'm used to.

It makes me feel good. This is how I like to do church. We have to be so careful to leave our preferences at the door of the church, especially when we're thinking about the Lord's Supper. What I like, you may not like. What suits me may not suit you. What I prefer may in fact prohibit you from engaging in the Lord's Supper completely.

So for example, I prefer the common cup that we all drink from one silver cup.

That's my preference. I like that. I'm used to that. But I know that there are several among us for whom that would be highly problematic and may stop them from participating.

[10 : 54] So rather than cause divisions or factions, I'm not going to insist upon my preferences. Here's a task for all of you this evening, because I know this is a very controversial subject.

Can you think of things which are preferences for you, but may prohibit other Christians from worshipping with you, and in particular, from engaging with the communion?

Can you think of things which are preferences for you, but which may prohibit another Christian from participating in worship, and in particular, from the communion?

Thankfully, in our tradition, the elders think carefully through the order and structure of our communion services, to avoid the excesses of Corinth. And yet, whether it's on Communion Sunday or any other Sunday, if our preferences lead to other Christians feeling left out, then we are falling into the Corinthian sin.

When I take my preferences, what I'm used to, what I'm comfortable with, what makes me feel good, into the church, and makes them the standards others must observe, then I'm in danger of falling into the sin of the Corinthians.

[12 : 27] So again, can I ask the question of young folk, old folk, all folk, can you think of things which are preferences for you, but may prohibit other Christians from participating in Christian worship?

Begin to treat these things for what they are. They are preferences. They are not principles. These are things not necessary.

express your Christ-like love for the whole fellowship, but if using to insist upon your right to have what you like, what you prefer, what you're used to.

Rather, leave these preferences at the door when you come to church, especially to the sacrament of Communion. Leave your preferences at the door.

Second, verses 23 through 26. Leave your works at the door. Leave your works at the door. You know, having been here for so many years, sometimes I feel as if I'm just scratching the surface of everything in God's word I want to share with you.

[13 : 45] And that's definitely true from these verses in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 and Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper. I think I preach from this passage five or six times, but I'm not even scratching the surface of all that's here.

This teaching is so very precious to all of us, detailing as it does the very words and the very actions of our Lord, words and actions which are entirely focused toward us and away from himself.

Himself he gave for us, signified and sealed by the bread and the wine of the Holy Communion. And he says, this is my body which is for you.

This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This passage is central to the spiritual life of every Christian because it tells us that our salvation is entirely from Christ, that we played no part in earning the forgiveness of our sins, the righteousness of God, or the gift of eternal life.

High or low, titled or poor, 1 Corinthians 11, 23 through 26 proclaims to us that if we are ever going to be Christians, we must renounce any effort to save ourselves by our good works and our religious observance and relying entirely upon what Jesus has done for us by shedding his blood and giving his body on the cross for us.

[15 : 34] In many Scottish churches like the Church of Scotland in my own home village, my own home village, the landed gentry would have their own section of the sanctuary where they would sit for worship.

So the Duke of Sutherland had the most prominent position right about where Marina and Joseph and we Marina are sitting up there. Right in front of, you are the Duke of Sutherland tonight, Joseph.

Right in front of and overlooking the pulpit. And the section of that church is marked out by heraldic tapestries and the Sutherland tartan.

It resembles somewhat a box in a theatre privileged people might pay extra to see the show from. I've often found the practice very archaic and definitely very classist but then you must remember that I'm not from that part of the village.

I'm from the other part of the village of Gosby and I had as my forefathers the fisher folk who though they were fiercely loyal to the Duke of Sutherland were common people who more readily attended the free church of Scotland where everyone was the same.

[16 : 51] Because the truth is there is no space in any kind of church for any segregation based upon class, colour, achievement or status.

There was never meant to be. And especially not at the table of a Lord who earned salvation for us and made all of us equal before him.

Hundreds of years ago in a small church in the Scottish borders Anwath which he turned into an embassy of heaven the great Samuel Rutherford after whom our own Samuel is named preached a sermon on the Song of Solomon chapter 2 and verse 14 where he spoke about the difference between the pride of the world and the humility of the Christian.

Rutherford as you know was operating in a very different Scotland from the one in which we live well perhaps not so much when you think of the Scotland in which we live where the king the supreme leader wanted to be treated as very special.

Someone who is a cut above the average and who must be obeyed at every turn. Rutherford whose works influenced the democratic ideal behind the American revolution wanted to insist upon the equality of all people before God.

[18 : 26] And in that sermon he wrote these words and they're in Scots he said begging poor sinners begging poor sinners are our Lord's scholars. The lintel stone of our Lord's school door is a low stone.

You must stoop low and lout he says. You'll be on your knees afore you can win in he said. You must be very humble else that stone will take your head and ding you back and you'll not win in. Imagine Simon trying to get under the door of a low lintel stone. He has to bow low. Entry into the kingdom of God requires stooping low before him in humility recognizing that it's by grace and not works that a man is saved.

If we should try and get into the kingdom of heaven with our heads held high with our status and achievements and works the lintel stone of the Lord's door will ding us back.

If the sacrament of the Lord's supper is for us a picture of heaven and not a highway to hell it requires your humility. Leave your works at the door of the church.

[19 : 50] Leave your status there. Leave all your achievements. Leave your titles there. I find it very uncomfortable. I always have to be called the reverent doctor and to be treated that way.

What does it really matter? Stoop low and lout Rutherford said lout is a Middle English word for bending your knees. Stoop low and lout be on your spiritual knees as you take that door lest the bread and the wine of the Lord's supper ding you back.

You're no scholar in the church of God. There is no such thing. You're just a begging sinner. We always have been and we always will be.

We'll never be anything other. And when we're bowing low before the grace and the love of a crucified and risen Christ our eyes are closed both to our own status and to that others.

And who cares whether sitting beside you at the communion table is a lord or a lady? Who cares if she's a homeless asylum seeker?

[21 : 02] Who cares if she's dirt poor or stinking rich? We've all had to bow low in humility before the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. We've all had to renounce our pride and works in favor of the faith in the sacrifice of Jesus.

There isn't one of us who dares sit on a padded cushion at the Lord's table. There isn't one of us who dares get special treatment unless we all get special treatment.

the alcoholic struggling with addiction and the mighty Duke of Sutherland sitting in his box. We're all the same before God.

We're all begging poor sinners whose only hope rests in the blood of Christ given for us and the blood of Christ shed for us.

if we leave our good works and our bad works at the door, our status and our achievements, our titles, the communion become to us a picture of heaven and not a highway to hell.

[22 : 20] More destructive than any minister's innovations or the pride we may take to the Lord's table with us. That sense of entitlement, not springing from Christ's work for us, but our work for Christ.

Leave your works at the door when you come in next Sunday morning. Maybe next Sunday morning as we walk in, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, I should take this here and place it right beside the door of the church to figuratively drop in your status and your achievements and your dignity and your works and leave them there.

And then lastly, from verse 27 to 34, leave yourself at the door. Or perhaps let me make it plainer, leave your ego at the door.

Leave your ego at the door. Traditionally, these verses from verse 27 onwards have struck terror into the hearts of every prospective member of the church. church, all this talk of eating and drinking unworthily, drinking and eating judgment upon yourself, it's rather unsettling, don't you think?

Make no mistake, the Lord's Supper is no place for anyone who wants to engage in mischief. The communion becomes a highway to hell for those who eat and drink without discerning the body, recognizing the body.

[23 : 49] But it should be of primary importance then to us, should it not, to know what eating and drinking in an unworthy manner is and is not.

And the definition rests on what Paul means by the body. In the first instance, the body could be referring to the body of Christ, eaten symbolically in the bread of the Lord's Supper, the body of Christ.

What does it mean to eat the body of Christ, that bread in an unworthy manner, not to discern the body of Christ? I believe it has little to do with our moral conduct and more to do with your attitude to what Jesus has done for you in the cross and in his resurrection from the dead.

To eat the bread in this unworthy manner is to come to the Lord's table convinced of your own worthiness. I deserve to be here.

I've been saved by works, my works, not by grace. That's what sets me apart from others. That's what gives me the right to sit at the Lord's table.

[25 : 09] Not what we have in common, but what sets me apart from others. in other words, the man or woman who sits at the Lord's table receiving the bread and the wine of the body of Christ and blood of Christ, who thinks that they deserve to be there, that they have earned the right to be there, that's the person who is eating and drinking unworthy.

it's by grace we've been saved. Nobody works. None of us can boast. It's all of Christ, none of ourselves.

Our warrant to eat and to drink is the invitation of Christ by faith to receive salvation. I hope you understand this because there may be some among us who say the reason I don't come to the Lord's table is because I'm not worthy.

Good, you've got exactly the right idea. No one's worthy to take the Lord's supper and if anyone thinks they are, they shouldn't be here. Pride is a greater barrier to eating and drinking at the Lord's table than any other sin.

If you should come viewing the Lord's supper as your reward or as your just wages or simply by virtue that you're landed gentry or you have a title or that you deserve to be here, then you are eating and drinking judgment upon yourself.

[26 : 39] To remind you of Rutherford saying, begging poor sinners are our Lord's scholars or to use Mary's wonderful words in the Magnificate, he has filled the hungry with good things but the rich he has sent empty away.

But in the second instance, Paul could be using the body imagery in verse 27 in the context of the church.

So in 1 Corinthians 12 27, referring to how individual members of the church work together and value each other, Paul writes, now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. to fail to discern the body of Christ in this context and therefore to eat and drink in an unworthy manner means to do the things the Corinthians were doing.

Those who were free among them were treating their fellow Christians who were slaves with disdain. They weren't treating them as equal members of the church. they were looking down upon them as though they were second-class citizens in the church.

[27 : 58] Now those Christian slaves may well have been second-class citizens in the world, but in the church there is no such thing as a second-class citizen. We're all recipients of the grace of Christ, male or female, rich or poor, slave or free, titled or common.

To eat unworthily, listen to this, listen to this especially if you have a younger generation who kind of think that older people just don't get it.

To eat unworthily is to think too little of others and too much of self. It's to think too little of others and too much of self.

It's to glance across the table at other Christians and Christians, a Christian who perhaps is in a more challenging situation than we find ourselves, and to say of them, why are they here?

What gives them the right to be here? I know why I'm here. I've got a right to be here, not them. The ceiling of the Presbyterian Hall in Edinburgh was recently restored.

[29 : 15] Presbyterian Hall and the three church offices in Edinburgh. Restorers peeling back the dust and dirt of a hundred years neglect found a painted inscription on the coving which you can now read for yourself.

It reads, One is your master and all ye are brethren. One is your master and all ye are brethren. It is the Bible's reminder to all the ministers and elders of the Edinburgh Presbytery who meet in that hall that there is only one master in the church, Jesus Christ, and that the rest of us are all equal servants, sons and daughters, no one more important than the other.

No one has any more rights than the other. Everyone shares in the equal dignity of the fatherhood of God by faith in Christ Jesus. One is your master and all ye are brethren.

Are there ways other than moral where you look down on other Christians and consider them second class? Are there ways other than moral where you look down on other Christians and consider them second class?

Perhaps they don't sing the same songs we do. Perhaps they come from a different Christian tradition or heritage than we do. Perhaps their service structure looks different from that we have.

[30 : 51] Are there? Do we look down on other Christians on these bases? Examine yourself before next week.

Get rid of this pride and prejudice lest you eat and drink in an unworthy manner and the bread and wine ding you back. Leave your egos at the door when you come in.

Communion isn't about you. It's about him, Jesus Christ, and about us, the church. Even though in one of my comments to Stephen Strong and his preaching, I've advised him that you should never introduce any new material into your conclusion, the entire point is this, of everything I've said this evening.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the supreme demonstration of our unity in Christ Jesus. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the supreme demonstration of our unity in Christ Jesus.

You know the three things that get in the way of our unity in Christ Jesus? that for which Jesus died and rose again, the three things? Our preferences, our works, our egos.

[32 : 14] Our preferences, our works, our egos. You know, it's so challenging. I've been a minister for 18 years and a Christian for nearly double that, and as much as I'd like to say I've mastered these three vices, I'm nowhere near it.

I have my preferences and make judgments on them all the time. I daily need Christ's help in the gospel to overcome these three vices of preferences, works, and ego.

What is the solution then to make our communion next Lord's Day a picture of heaven and not a highway to hell? Well, it's not so much Donald MacLeod's preaching or conduct of worship, although I'm sure these will be exemplary.

At the most basic level, he'd tell you the same. It's our understanding, appreciation, and daily engagement with the gospel of Christ's grace.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we recognize that we all have preferences, and we turn these preferences in our minds into principles.

[33 : 40] We draw a line in the sand and say, well, this is a principle to me, and yet all the time it's just a preference. Lord, we thank you that your word lays down the principles for us, that we're on safe ground in your word, but if we should choose to make our preferences the standards by which others are judged, then we're on very shaky ground indeed.

Father, we're also keenly aware that we rather like our status, and that sometimes we even feel as though we have earned the right to be at the Lord's Supper.

And sometimes, Lord, you know we even perhaps maybe look at others and think, I've got more right to be here than they do. I've been a better Christian than they have. I've done more for you than they have.

I've been at more prayer meetings than they have. And then there are times as well, O Lord, when we're so full of self, and we're thinking to ourselves that, well, we've got it all together.

Others don't, but we do. And we're so proud, and we treat others with such disdain, as though they're not as important as us in your family. And Father, these aren't subtle sins.

[34 : 58] These are deadly sins, which led to many of the Corinthian Christians in that first-generation church, falling asleep, becoming very ill indeed. You rain judgment down upon them

for these inverted comma subtle sins.

Well, Father, as we come next week to your table, to the supreme demonstration of our unity in Christ Jesus, we pray that you would expel these sins from our hearts by the gospel of the grace of Christ Jesus, in which we all enter into the kingdom of God equally humble, stooping low before your door, lintel door, lest that door ding us back.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.