

## 1 CORINTHIANS 11:26

### UNTIL HE COMES

“As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”<sup>1</sup>

**F**or almost two thousand years, followers of Christ, the Risen Son of God, have gathered in assembly to instruct one another in righteousness, to build one another in the Faith, and to worship the Lord Jesus as the Living Saviour of all who believe. Some gathered in secret, their very lives at risk because they worshipped Jesus the Lord. Some gathered openly, rejoicing in the freedom God had given. Some conducted stately rituals scripted centuries before, while others shared in forums that emphasised spontaneity. All alike united as enclaves of Heaven, communities of faith where Christ is remembered and where His Word is taught so that members of the congregation may be instructed in righteousness. All have looked forward to His return, just as He promised.

Across cultural divides, whenever Christians unite, a regular act of worship is the observance of the Lord’s Table. This is the communal meal that was instituted by the Lord Jesus Himself. Looking back to a conflict within the Church of God at Corinth, we witness a meal that had degenerated into a personal observance. Because it had ceased to be a communal meal, Paul was forced to confront the attitude of the Corinthian Christians. Addressing their self-centred error, he seized the opportunity to remind them of what the Meal was to represent. Of course, we are enriched through their error since we now have this fuller teaching of God’s intention.

As we focus on worshipping the Living Son of God today, I invite you to contemplate the words that the Apostle wrote to the Corinthian Christians which are found in **1 CORINTHIANS 11:26**. “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

**THE MEAL IS DESIGNED TO BE AN ONGOING OBSERVANCE** — “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” You know very well that the Meal is to be observed on a continuing basis, but it is good to explore precisely what it means for us to observe the Meal on a continuing basis and to explore as well some of the ramifications that are associated with that truth.

The churches of our Lord Jesus Christ have been entrusted with two ordinances—ordinances and not sacraments. It is necessary that we distinguish between the two concepts because considerable confusion persists among the professed people of God. To speak of a sacrament connotes to many people that participating in the act confers grace to the participant. Tacitly, the concept of a sacrament imputes powers to the act itself. So, in the sacramental view, the participant is bettered, or at least benefited, through participating in the act.

In contradistinction to this is the concept of an ordinance, which implicitly denies conferring grace through participation in the act. An ordinance is a tradition that pictures divine truth. Whatever benefit may be conferred is the result of the participants attitude and approach to the act and not the result of participating in the act *per se*. It is for this reason that the Apostle will conclude his instruction on the Lord’s Table with the admonition for those participating to examine themselves and to judge themselves [**1 CORINTHIANS 11:28, 31**].

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Christ gave to the churches two ordinances—one that is to be observed initially by all who wish to follow Christ as Lord and one that is to be observed in assembly on a regular basis. The first ordinance is, of course, baptism. Baptism is the act of identification with Jesus, as the one confessing the Faith pictures the truths concerning Christ's death, burial and resurrection. This is the import of the Apostle's words to the Roman Christians.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God" [ROMANS 6:3-10].

The Apostle is appealing to believers to live as though what they professed were real. What did we profess when we were baptised? We identified with Jesus, stating through our own burial in water and resurrection out of the same water, that we believe the Good News that Jesus died and was buried, and that He rose from the dead. We identified with Him, saying that we counted our old nature to have been dead before God, though now buried. However, just as the Saviour was raised to newness of life, so when we are raised from the water we are confessing that we have been raised through faith in Him to new life. Implicit in Paul's explanation is the statement of hope that marks the life of each one who is baptised, for they testify that they believe with a perfect faith that even should they die before Christ's return they know that they will be raised imperishable. The one baptised confesses that he shall be raised from the dead.

Do you have faith in Jesus the Son of God? Why do you delay obeying His command? The Master Himself has said that we are responsible to baptise those who are discipled, and that this baptism is to be into the Name of the Triune God [MATTHEW 28:19]. Those who repent are to be baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ [ACTS 2:38]. "Why do you wait?" This question, asked of Saul of Tarsus must be asked of all who say they believe the Gospel of Christ.

There is a point that needs to be made in order to move beyond this truth. Those who are not baptised are not invited to partake of the Lord's Table. It is a mystery to me why anyone would want to confess fellowship with the people of God while refusing identification with the Head of the church? We are told that those who believed Peter's message at Pentecost, participated in the "breaking of bread and the prayers" [ACTS 2:42] only after they were baptised. I cannot find a single instance of unbaptised people participating at, or even invited to, the Lord's Table in the accounts of the New Testament.

Lest you think this stated position overly harsh, I invite you to consider the position held among the early churches. Among the writings of the earliest Christians that have been gathered is a work known as the Didache, or "The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations." This particular work is thought to date to no later than A.D. 120, or shortly after the death of the last of the Apostles. In that work, the question of who should partake of the Eucharist is raised. This is what the early Christians were taught in this work.

“But let no one eat or drink of your Thanksgiving (Eucharist), but they who have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord hath said, ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs.’”<sup>2</sup>

Not only were unbaptised people excluded from the Eucharist, but justification for excluding those who were unbaptised was citation of the strong words the Master spoke concerning the impropriety of sharing holy things with unholy people. Contemporary Christians have become quite timid in speaking the truth in our day. Perhaps it is because we do not truly love the Saviour as much as we love the praise of men.

Baptism is the initiatory ordinance entrusted to the churches. It is to be administered to all who profess Christ, and it is to be performed once. As an aside, it is to be performed because the candidate has become a Christian and not in order to make the candidate a Christian. Moreover, it is to picture the truths of the Gospel as related to Christ and concerning the transformation the candidate is professing. Having been baptised, the believer may partake at the Lord’s Table, confessing faith in the sacrifice of the Saviour, confessing fellowship with the assembly wherein he or she partake of the Meal, and confessing anticipation of the Lord’s return.

In the verse that serves as our text today, Paul indicates that the Meal is to be observed repeatedly. In other words, there is one baptism, but the Lord’s Table is an ongoing observance. What is apparent is that no schedule is given in the words Paul wrote. The church in which Lynda and I came to faith observed the Lord’s Table once each year—at the evening service on Easter Sunday. The rationale was that it was an evening Meal and not a breakfast according to the language of the New Testament; and it was the opening act in the drama of the Master’s passion. Hence, the congregation observed the Meal in the evening and on Easter Sunday.

Later, I came to realise that many churches observe the Communion Meal each week. The basis usually given to support this practise is that the early churches broke bread day-by-day. There is strong evidence that the custom of the early churches was to observe the Meal as the Body assembled each Lord’s Day. Thus, it is an integral part of the worship for these churches.

Many churches in the United States observe the Meal on a quarterly basis. Often this is pragmatically justified by contending that an annual observance is too infrequent and a weekly observance may lead to disregarding the importance of the worship associated with the Meal.

There is a pragmatic streak among evangelical Christians, especially in Canada. There is a fear that weekly observance may be too frequent leading to undue familiarity with the Meal, and so the churches often adopt a monthly schedule of observance. My own observation of the practise of a monthly Meal is that it is no guarantee against treating the rite in a casual manner.

None of the aforementioned views is wrong, and perhaps each appeals to different segments among the churches. However, there is no standard that is mandated in Scripture and we must be careful not to elevate our preferences to the level of convictions. Paul’s instruction to the Romans fits here, “each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” [**ROMANS 14:5**].

What is important to note is that nowhere are we given a command to observe the ordinance on a particular schedule. Whether a church observes the Meal annually, quarterly, monthly or weekly—or even according to some other intermittent schedule—is immaterial. What is vital is to remember that the Lord’s Supper is an act of worship in which redeemed people in assembly remember the sacrifice of the Saviour, rejoice in the fellowship of the Body, and renew hope in the promised return of the Master.

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<sup>2</sup> **Didache 9:5**, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, **The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VII: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, Logos Electronic Edition, 1997)

To iterate, history indicates a transition generally took place in the regularity of observance of the Lord's Table among the churches as the birth of the Faith receded into the past. "The Lord's Supper was not only a part of the worship, but a cardinal point in it. The observance of this feast was also by the command of Christ, who said, 'This do in remembrance of me.' His body was broken for us; His blood was shed for the remission of our sins...

"This service was of a much more private character than the public one of worship [see **1 CORINTHIANS 1:17-34**] and restricted to baptized Christians. There seems to have been at first a daily administration of this ordinance [**ACTS 2:46**], but later it seems to have been observed every first day of the week [**ACTS 20:7**]. At first also it was held in the evening at the close of a meal eaten in common, following the example of Christ and His disciples. The meal was called the Agape—or love feast—and was [only] afterwards separated from the Eucharist. The Lord's Supper being held in the early morning while the common meal was eaten in the evening. Now the celebration of the Lord's Supper is by itself a result foreshadowed in Paul's advice to the Corinthian Christians when he saw the abuses which grew out of the meal eaten in common. The significance of this ordinance was deepened and intensified in the minds and hearts of the Christians as its great spiritual meaning was more and more clearly perceived. This was the central point of worship in the apostolic age."<sup>3</sup>

**THE SIMPLICITY OF THE MEAL POINTS TO THE SIMPLICITY OF THE GOSPEL** — "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Meal that is regularly set before the faithful is not a banquet, though it was apparently associated with the Love Feast among the churches. It appears likely that the Lord's Table was observed at the conclusion of the Agape Meal at which the church assembled from time-to-time. Perhaps it was a weekly occurrence, in part out of consideration for those who had little to contribute. Nevertheless, the Love Feast does appear to have been a common activity among the early churches, and the Communion Meal appears to have been featured at these potluck meals.

An account of the Love Feast is provided by James Stalker. His observations on worship merit repeating as we approach the Lord's Table. "Each believer received, generally at his baptism, when the hands of the baptizer were laid on him, his special gift, which, if he remained faithful to it, he continued to exercise. It was the Holy Spirit, poured forth without stint, that entered into the spirits of men and distributed these gifts among them severally as He willed; and each member had to make use of his gift for the benefit of the whole body.

"After [worship], the members sat down together to a love feast, which was wound up with the breaking of bread in the Lord's Supper; and then, after a fraternal kiss, they parted to their homes. It was a memorable scene, radiant with brotherly love and alive with outbreathing spiritual power. As the Christians wended their way homeward through the careless groups of the heathen city they were conscious of having experienced that which eye had not seen nor ear heard."<sup>4</sup>

What could be more ordinary, more pedestrian than a potluck meal served at church? What could be more mundane than eating bread and drinking juice together as a congregation? The ordinance itself, though affording a time for solemn reflection, is simple in design. I want to focus on this simplicity for a brief moment since we tend to obscure the simplicity of the message of life through our own fumbling attempts to make it palatable.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Thorne Sell, **Studies in Early Church History** (Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, Willow Grove, PA 1998, 1906)

<sup>4</sup> James Stalker, **The Life of Saint Paul** (American Tract Society, New York, NY 1888) 127

Throughout Christendom there is generally a perception that scapulars and albs, amices and cinctures, birettas and mitres are required in order for one to serve the Communion Meal. Celebrants must adhere to precise liturgy—the words pronounced are incredibly important. Even the elements must be precisely prepared with only certain elements permitted to be served lest the Meal be rendered inferior at best or ineffectual at worst.

Even among evangelical Christians the Gospel is often obscured by an innate desire to dress the worship in solemnity that appeals to the fertile imagination of worshippers. So many cannot worship unless the building in which they meet has a formal altar, has a spire pointing upward, or has stained glass windows to flood the interior with coloured light. The Meal is choreographed so that those serving move in precise steps while familiar words are recited in solemn tones. The prayers must be precisely as written and uttered in measured cadence.

Tragically, worshippers often focus more on the steps of worship than on the One worshipped.

Such tendencies are not unlike those of Ahaz, King of Judah, who thought to improve on worship of the Lord God through copying the altar that Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria, had built in Damascus [2 KINGS 16:10-15]. However, his actions dishonoured God and only led to ever-greater effort to improve on worship and ever-greater departure from true worship.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is simple. A child can grasp the essence of what has been provided; and that child can respond appropriately. This message is so simple that the wise stumble over it. This was the point Paul addressed in 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

Man’s tendency is to obscure the simplicity of this message of grace through clumsy attempts to philosophise or to make the message more stately or solemn. There is an inclination to attempt to awe listeners with exaggerated formality. Thus, rather than the power of the Gospel to transform lives, we interject our rhetoric or our suppositions in order to awe worshippers. However, the Gospel of Christ is sufficiently profound that neither a mere mortal—nor all the combined efforts of mankind—shall ever exhaust the depths of wisdom found therein. And yet, the Gospel is simple enough that anyone looking to Christ can receive life.

Have you heard this Good News? Have you discovered the truth of this Good News? Each of us is sinful by birth and by choice. Because we are born in sin, we are born dying. The Word declares, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam” [ROMANS 5:12-14].

Because we are sinful, we are condemned before God. As sinners, we can neither be holy nor enter into the presence of the True and Living God. Yet, God in mercy has provided a way for sinful people to be forgiven all sin and to be accepted into His Family, called by His Name and admitted access into His presence, standing in the righteousness of the Son of God.

God did this through “sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” [ROMANS 8:3]. Jesus, the Son of God received the punishment we deserved, taking upon Himself all our sin and giving His life as a sacrifice for sin. This is the reason for the declaration that “for our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21]. Indeed, Jesus, “taste[d] death for everyone” [HEBREWS 2:9]. Though the Good News of salvation begins with the death of the Saviour, it is good because He conquered death and rose from the dead.

Therefore, the Word of God invites all who are willing to receive this glorious message, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10]. Salvation is God’s free gift given to all who willingly receive Jesus as Master of life. There is no need to continue under condemnation since freedom from guilt and freedom from divine condemnation are now offered to all alike.

Whenever we participate in this Meal, the very simplicity of the elements and the simplicity of the message conveyed remind us that we have a message of life and hope for all mankind. If we will but present this truth that gives liberty, carefully maintaining the free offer of grace to all mankind, some will believe. The only qualification for others to be saved is that we must tell them. We who have discovered the freedom and the life that is offered in Christ the Lord are obligated to tell others, and we are reminded of our obligation at this Meal.

**THE MEAL FOCUSES FORWARD FOR GOD’S PEOPLE OF HOPE** — “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” In the verse before us, Paul has pointed to the continuing nature of the ordinance of the Lord’s Table and his words suggest the simplicity of the Gospel. However, the focus I want you to leave in your minds is the hope that we now possess as result of our faith in the Risen Lord of Glory. This hope is revealed through the words, “Until He comes.” Christ the Lord is coming again. We will not always be compelled to struggle against sin and to long to be in His presence.

Because Christ Jesus lives, we Christians have hope in the midst of a hopeless world. Indeed, I could speak of the hope that tells us our labour will not be in vain [1 CORINTHIANS 15:58], or of hope that enables us to endure in the midst of a hostile environment. Hope is essential to the Christian life, and God supplies hope for His people, enabling each one to live life to the fullest. In our text, however, the Apostle is speaking of the hope of the resurrection, the hope of Christ’s return. As we participate in this Meal we adjust our vision forward to the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise. Preparing His disciples for His departure, Jesus promised that they would not be left as orphans [JOHN 14:18]; they would not be bereft of hope because He promised that He would send the Holy Spirit [JOHN 14:26; 16:13-15].

The Christian Faith is not a leap in the dark; it is rather a reasoned step into the light. Christ the Lord has conquered death and given as assurance His own resurrection from the grave and the presence of the Holy Spirit with each individual who believes in Him. The Tomb is empty. Had His enemies produced His body when the Apostles declared that He was alive, the nascent church would have died aborning. However, He not only defied death and rose from the grave, but He presented Himself to multiple individuals who knew Him and who would testify that He lived. This is the reference Paul makes to the Corinthian Christians.

“I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-8].

Therefore, we serve God knowing that our labour is not in vain [1 CORINTHIANS 15:18]. As Christians, we live in the hope of the resurrection, knowing that to be away from the body is to be present with the Lord [2 CORINTHIANS 5:8]. Whenever we participate in this Meal, we again lift our eyes from the transient to the transcendent. We look up, for “our citizenship is in Heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” [PHILIPPIANS 3:20].

I have always appreciated the encouragement found in John’s words in 1 JOHN 2:28-3:3. “Little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

Living in the hope of His return, we are purified. Our lives reflect the hope that is within and our confidence that He shall fulfil His promise to return compels us to walk in such a manner that we do not dishonour Him. We do not live for the moment, though we are busy doing the work Christ has assigned. We invite others to life and serve them through showing the love of God in Christ the Lord. Through our efforts, some come to faith and receive the life that is found in Jesus the Messiah. Through our witness, some find life and are forgiven their sin. Always, however, we live in the light of eternity.

I have often noted for those participating at the Lord’s Table that as we focus forward we are encouraged and energised because through looking to His return we are equipped to renew our labour. As we walk through this fallen world, it is easy to grow discouraged and to focus our gaze on those who oppose us. However, at the Lord’s Table we are compelled to look upward as we again recall His promise to return. Looking up, we draw fresh courage and renew our hope. This present world is dying, soon to be replaced by the new heavens and the new earth, which is even now being fitted for our reign with the Master.

Today, we again come to the Lord’s Table. Indeed, at the Table we confess our faith that Jesus suffered and died because of our sin. We see the broken bread and remember His broken body, given for us. We see the juice in the cup, and we recall His shed blood, spilled for us. All who partake of the Meal say with a perfect faith that they believe His love was demonstrated at the cross, and that we have accepted His sacrifice in our place.

At the Table of the Lord we confess our fellowship, stating through our participation that we are in fellowship with the Risen Lord of Glory; and just as we share in fellowship with Him, we also confess fellowship with one another. We confess that we have accepted the discipline of the congregation with which we share in the Meal.

The message today reminds us that at the Table of the Lord we also confess that we live in anticipation of His return. We do not live solely for this life, but we anticipate His momentary return to bring salvation for those who look for Him and also to bring judgement for all who have lived without regard for His offer of life. The child of God, coming to the Lord's Table, is enabled to lift his eyes from the dreary moment called now and again rejoice in the knowledge that He is coming soon.

As I said moments ago, it is easy to grow discouraged when we focus on the present. Wicked men seem to prevail, imposing their will on the people of God. Even among the churches, wicked individuals seem to assert their will over the humble. However, we are not living for the moment but for eternity. Children of God lift up your eyes and know that Christ is coming again. Know that whatever you will do you for the cause of Christ must be done now, while it is day. If you know that Christ is coming again, then you must seize the moment that He has given and tell others if you will honour Him and if you will face Him without shame at His coming. As part of the Meal this day, let this knowledge impel you to fulfil the calling that He has given. Commit yourself to tell another of His grace and mercy. Do it today. Do it now.

With us may well be some who have never believed this message. If I could make you waken you to your peril and make you uncomfortable, I would do so. When you witnessed this Meal today, you saw pictured the death of Christ the Lord because of your sin. He gave Himself in order that you might be free of condemnation. What is your response to the invitation to be born from above and into the Family of God? This is the plea of life that we present to you.

Christ the Lord died because of your sin and rose for your justification. You need but believe this message, looking to the Risen Son of God in order to have the forgiveness of sin and the life God offers. This is not a "guess so" salvation that we offer, but rather it is a "know so" salvation. The Word of God declares, as we have already seen, "If you come out in the open and say, 'Jesus is Lord,' and if you believe deep down in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved. For by one's heart one is activated into God's program, and by one's mouth one makes the public declaration into salvation. For the Scripture says: 'Everyone who follows the instructions for it won't be ground down.' There just isn't any distinction made between the WAP and the man in the street. God himself is Lord over *all* and leans over backward toward *all* who join his movement For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who takes upon himself the Lord's name shall be saved'" [ROMANS 10:9-13].<sup>5</sup>

May God give you grace to receive this truth. May He open your heart to repentance and life. May He be glorified as He delivers you from death and from sin. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Clarence Jordan, **The Cotton Patch Gospel** (Smyth & Helwys, Macon, GA 1968, 1969, 1970, 1973, 2004)