

THE SUPPER TELLS US WHAT THE CHURCH IS

A Brief Meditation on 1 Corinthians 11:26-29

This meditation is taken from and based on Herman Sasse's "The Holy Supper and the Future of Our Church: A Reformation Festival Address in a Newly Constructed Church" (1939), in The Lonely Way, vol. 1, p.489ff.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body [1 Corinthians 11:26-29].

According to St. Paul, the mistreatment and abuse of the Lord's Supper has consequences. Where the correct teaching and reception of Holy Communion is neglected it will eventually be abandoned and become extinct. Where the Supper has become ex-tinct the Divine Service will also become extinct, because no one will come. God's Word without the Sacrament becomes a head-trip. Remove the Sacrament from God's Word and superstition cannot be far away.

When men turn their backs on Baptism and the Lord's Supper, they are turning their backs to God Himself. They are rejecting Christ where He chooses to be known and received for their benefit. Where this happens sermon, liturgy, and catechesis limp along. Where this happens pastoral care is gutted. Where men turn their backs on the sacraments their churches are given over by God to die a slow, agonising death, choked out by the noxious poison of their own desires.

Is this to be the fate of our churches today? God willing, no! We will pray to God that He open our eyes to this deep distress of our church, that He opens our eyes to the glory of His gifts of grace, before it is too late.

One of the deepest understandings God had given Martin Luther, which he learned from the New Testament, is how closely the Lord's Supper and the Gospel are connected. You can't keep and preserve saving faith in Christ if you don't regularly come to the Lord's Table. At the Lord's Table He gives to you all the benefits of His bitter suffering and death: "Take and eat, this is My body which is given for you. Take, drink, all of it. This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Where this Supper is not celebrated, experience shows that Jesus' sacrifice is no longer understood. Where the Supper is no longer celebrated, there faith in the Son of God as the Lamb of God who bore all your sins dwindles. And where faith dwindles, that church dies. Then the church is made-over into a meeting place. A place for sombre ceremonies. A place, in other words, where the church is nothing other than a fellowship of like-minded people, religious people, spiritual people, who gather to have their needs satisfied. And if one or two discover there are other fellowships that can do this better, then they leave the church.

But the truth is the Church is something completely different. The Supper tells us what the Church is. It was in the Supper that St. Paul once learned to understand that the Church is the body of Christ. Because Jesus is both our High Priest and sacrificial Lamb, who gives His body and blood to you to eat and drink, you who were once grafted into Him by Baptism will be preserved and kept in fellowship with Him.

This is a miraculous eating and drinking! There is nothing on earth to which we might compare it. It is a miracle, like the eating of manna and the drinking of water from the rock in the Old Testament, to which St. Paul compares it [1 Corinthians 10-11]. It is a miracle like the feeding of the five thousand. It is a miracle because Christ is present for you now, not just spiritually, not just in remembrance, not just in hope, but He is really, truly, substantially present for you. It is the entire Christ who is present for you - true God, begotten from His Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, the crucified and risen One, who descended into hell and ascended into heaven. He is here, in

the midst of His Church. "Behold, there God's dwelling place is present among men," [Revelation 21:3]. What will be revealed to your eyes in heaven at the Last Day is already present here hidden. He who will one day come in glory is already present here hidden.

So, we must ask ourselves; ask our churches, in what sense is our church, are our Lutheran churches really and truly houses of God? In what sense are they places of the real and substantial presence of Christ? We can desire nothing more beautiful or greater for our houses of God than that they be places where the Holy Supper is celebrated according to the institution of Christ, and a believing congregation is gathered round the altar to receive the true body and the true blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Only then will the church of the Gospel, the church of the pure and true teaching of God's Word remain among us.

Only where men do not turn their backs on the true body and the true blood of Christ will the Gospel be preached true and pure, will the Church remain, "and the gates of hell will not overpower her," [Matthew 16:8].

Everywhere a congregation is gathered round her altar in the deep faith in the one who is her Lord and her Head because He is her Redeemer, where she sings the Kyrie and the Gloria and lifts her heart to heaven and with all angels, and archangels, and the entire company of heaven sings, "Holy, holy, holy," to the Triune God - there her Church will be a true house of God. A place of the real presence of Christ in the midst of a boisterous and unholy world. And this text will apply to her to the end of the world: "The LORD is in His temple! Let all the world be silent before Him!" [Habakkuk 2:20].