

Brothers and Sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Like so many people who have never had Lord's Supper, and probably like a lot of children, before I first had the Lord's Supper I had a lot of wrong ideas about it. Reading an article on the Lord's Supper reminded me that I was disappointed the first time I had the Lord's Supper. I expected some kind of "spiritual experience." A buzz of some kind, a spiritual jolt perhaps that would propel me noticeably forward in my faith and my walk with God. Well, it didn't happen.

I was talking about this in the office to Jen VanSteenbergen this week. Jen grew up in the Salvation Army Church. One of the features of the Salvation Army is that they do not practice any sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church has seven sacraments. We have two—baptism and the Lord's Supper—but the Salvation Army doesn't offer any sacraments. So when Jen was older and got a job at the Alliance Church in Children's Ministry, she first of all got baptized. And then when the Lord's Supper came along, she was eager to participate in it. Not knowing really what to expect, she told me that she took the bread and began wondering if it might taste like flesh, having been somehow supernaturally transformed into the body of Christ. And, surprise, it didn't! It tasted like bread.

But the problem was not the Lord's Supper. The problem was me. I didn't understand what was happening in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I wasn't the only one. Lots of people misunderstand it.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, which means it is a holy thing. It is holy because it comes from God. Sometimes I hear people call it "holy supper" and that's what it is. It's not regular supper which strengthens our bodies. Indeed, that little morsel of bread would scarcely feed a mouse. It is holy food. Food that is given by God to accomplish something very spiritual.

But how? That's the question we want to answer in this sermon. And I'm not sure I can satisfy every angle of that question, but I'll try.

Like a few weeks ago, let's go for an imaginary walk down the street and find a few different people with different views on the Lord's Supper. You listen and try to figure out which person speaks about the Lord's Supper closest to the way you understand it. Here we go:

Excuse me sir? Could you tell me how the Lord's Supper nourishes you?

Well, I sure can. I don't get too worked up about it. Lots of people at the time of the Reformation had big fights about the Lord's Supper. The Roman

Catholic guys talked about transubstantiation and the Lutherans believed in consubstantiation. But what I believe is very simple. The Lord's Supper is a memorial. That's all! Jesus said, "Whenever you eat this meal, remember me." And that's what I do. Nothing happens to me at the Lord's Supper. When I take the bread and wine my mind just goes back to Calvary where the Bible says Jesus flesh was broken and his blood spilled for my sins. So when I eat and drink, I just remember that Jesus died for my sins. And that strengthens me.

Thanks. Stick around if you would. I'm going to ask this other guy here. Sir, I know you didn't catch our whole conversation but I see you are interested in our discussion. I'm wondering if you might be able to share with us what you believe happens when you take the Lord's Supper.

Sure! But first of all. I don't think so much of taking it. I understand that receive it. It is a gift of God that gives me grace. It all began when I was baptized many years ago as a baby. That was an act of God's grace to me. That's when He put His sign and seal on my head and welcomed me into His covenant family. When I was older, I came to really believe what I was taught all of my life, Jesus Christ became my Saviour and I made a public profession of my faith. Now I partake of the Lord's Supper in our church and in it God gives me strength to live for Him.

But how does He strengthen you?

Well, in the Lord's Supper, Jesus nourishes my soul. I believe that Jesus comes to dine with me not physically but spiritually. He is the host of the meal and I am invited by faith to eat His body and to drink His blood. After all, Jesus said, Whoever feed on me will live because I live. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feed on this bread will live forever. (Jn.6:57-9). So each time I gather with Him around His table in church, He strengthens or nourishes my soul for everlasting life.

Thank you. And now let me ask your friend here what He thinks about the Lord's Supper.

Well, I guess I see it differently than those guys do. I don't really know anything about Jesus being spiritually present at the Lord's Supper. I've always been taught that He is physically present in the bread and wine and that God imparts grace to everyone who eats as long as the minister blesses the bread. In fact, in our church we believe that sacraments are just as good as the preaching. They can stand alone. That's why I sometimes just go for the sacrament. I do listen to sermons but to me the sacrament works fine without it too. It's kind of like filling the car up with gas once a week. But this is spiritual gas that helps me get to heaven. So that's how it nourishes me.

Well, congregation, which one of those three people sounds most like what you believe? I'll let you think more about that while we turn our attention to what our confessions say. Between the teachings of the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and, of course, the Bible, we need to recognize three things about the Lord's Supper and how Christ is present in it.

First of all, we need to understand that this is spiritual food.

Secondly, it involves a spiritual operation or working. And

Thirdly, you need a spiritual mouth.

When we say that the Lord's Supper is spiritual food we mean it is intended to do something for the spiritual well-being of believers. Since the Lord intends to nourish us with this meal, it is fitting that He uses the symbols of bread and wine. Naturally speaking, when we are born our life is supported by our mother's breast. When we are born again, we are nursed again but this time by a spiritual mother. That's why Calvin called the church a mother to give us birth but also to nourish us at her breast. New life is begun with the preaching of the gospel and it is sustained and strengthened by the life-support of Jesus' gifts to us which include both preaching and the sacraments as official acts of the church.

So just as the physical body depends on a source of food outside of itself, so our inner, spiritual well-being requires food from the Lord above. The Lord's Supper works for us spiritually like milk works physically for an infant. It strengthens us. And as spiritual food, it strengthens our faith. Just as the body needs to be nourished and sustained, so the spiritual life of the believer must be sustained and grow and develop into greater holiness. And Christ has assigned this duty to His Bride and our mother, the Church. In a sense, He is the provider and she is the one who prepares and serves the spiritual meal--the preaching and the sacraments.

Secondly, the Lord's Supper involves a spiritual operation or working. Our bodies can't live on spiritual nourishment. And our spiritual life can't survive on physical food. The person who is born again needs something that comes from outside of himself. He needs righteousness, holiness, wisdom, light and knowledge. In a word, he needs grace. But if we look for such grace in ourselves we will look in vain. We will only find it in Christ. That's why Jesus said I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that come down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. (Jn.6:28-50).

But how does this happen? How does the grace of Christ come to us in the LS? Well, not by simple bread and wine alone. But with the "living bread." Jesus also said I am the living bread that came down from heaven (v.51). Unless Christ somehow comes to us in the bread and wine to spiritually nourish us, we are only getting a little physical food. That is why the operation or working of God's grace in the Lord's Supper is somewhat of a mystery. Christ is actually present in the broken bread and poured out wine but only spiritually present. That's right, Jesus

is spiritually present as the host of the Lord's Supper. It is, you might say, His party and He invites us to come. That's why the Lord's Supper is sometimes fittingly called communion since in it Christ has communion with us and we with Him. While He remains the King of kings enthroned in heaven, he stoops to us in our weakness and ministers to our soul through this sacrament. And so this spiritual visit by Christ, along with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, gives us grace so that we grow in righteousness and holiness.

So hopefully that helps you understand how the Lord's Supper involves a spiritual operation or working. It's not just a mechanical or physical thing we do. Something spiritual happens because Jesus comes into our midst through the bread and wine. Or in the words of the Belgic Confession, This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. (Art.35, 8th par.)

Thirdly, then, as we partake of the Lord's Supper, we need to recognize that we will not find Christ here and so we will not receive grace unless we have a spiritual mouth. In other words, the sacraments yield their treasure of grace to us only "by faith." So when unbelievers eat and drink, they do not receive grace. Instead, they are more likely to eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Some people say that whether we believe in Jesus or not, we receive the grace that God gives in the sacrament whenever we partake. They say that when we take in the bread and wine, God miraculously changes them into Christ's flesh and blood and at that moment the Holy Spirit infuses spiritual grace into us.

Reformed Christians say that the way in which we eat the body and drink the blood of Christ is by the Holy Spirit through faith. The Christian eats and drinks Christ with the spiritual mouth of faith. So, if you don't believe in Jesus as your Saviour, the sacrament does you no good. But when you are a Christian, you need to feed your soul just as you feed your body. After eating something physically, your body digests the food and breaks it down to give you strength or energy for your work and play. Similarly, when we ingest the body and blood of the Lord by faith, the sacraments strengthens our soul or our spiritual life for the work of the Lord.

It is helpful not to make the Lord's Supper too confusing. I don't know if I helped out in that regard. But just try to take Jesus at His word. He is the living bread. He said He is different than manna which just filled the stomachs of the Israelites.

In the Lord's Supper, Jesus fills us spiritually like normal food fills us physically. Only a biologist or one who studies human anatomy can tell you all the ins and outs of how the body turns food into energy. And ultimately, we must confess to a certain amount of mystery when we consider how Christ through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper comes to us and strengthens our faith. We are

not spiritual biologist--only God really is--and therefore we may not fully understand how Christ and His grace come to us through the LS. We celebrate it in obedience and just trust that Christ does work grace in our lives through this sacrament just as surely as physical nourishment strengthens our bodies.