

What Should You Think When You Hear The Word...Communion?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 June 2023

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back together for a short time to the chapter that Murdo read for us in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. Over the past couple of Sunday evenings, we've started with a question, which has revolved something along the lines of what should you think of when you hear the word, and then we've looked at different words. So the first word we looked at, I think it was three weeks ago, we said, what should you think of when you hear the word church? What should you hear of when you think the word church? And we looked at that together, our suggested answer was based on the words of the Nicene Creed written 1800 years ago, 1700 years ago, one holy Catholic apostolic family. Last week, we did something maybe even more different. We asked the question, what should you think of when you hear the word minister?

And we said that there's seven words that can come to mind. A minister is a believer, a servant, a sinner, an elder, a preacher, a pastor teacher, and a brother. This week, we've got another question.

I want us to ask, what should you think of when you hear the word communion? We're sharing the Lord's supper together tonight, and that's such a wonderful thing for us to do as a congregation. But as we do that, what should we be thinking of? What's communion all about? Who should be taking communion? Why is it important? Why is it good for us? Why is it such a wonderful thing to do? And I think it's a really important and helpful thing for us to think about, because if you look back over the history of the church, you'll see that actually many of the big controversies that have taken place in the history of the church have been connected to communion, and particularly at the times of the Reformation, that was one of the big, big issues at the Reformation.

The difference in understanding between how the Roman Catholic Church viewed communion and how the Reformed Church viewed it. And we'll see a wee bit more about that later on. But it's not just in the history of the church going back centuries, also in day-to-day life, we can have confusion and uncertainty about this whole question of communion.

[2 : 34] I think it's interesting that if you look at mainstream Protestantism across the UK, so just the general Protestant Church across the UK over the last few decades, I think it's probably the case that you have had many, many people taking communion who probably shouldn't. And that's because in a lot of settings in the UK today, Protestantism for many people is just really a kind of nominal connection to church. So you go to church and you're kind of connected to church, but it's just a very, very small part of your life. It's just maybe something that you've been brought up to do.

And in some settings, it may be even the case that in some of those churches, the Bible doesn't have a very prominent place at all. And in some, you may not hear the Gospel being preached in the way that we feel it should be done. And so widely in Britain, that's an issue.

You'd get people who maybe just have a very nominal connection to Christianity, not really a personal faith in Jesus at all, and taking communion is just something that they do, and probably not, probably it's probably not something that they should be doing.

Here in Lewis, we've got the opposite problem. And we've seen just so many times over so many years, people who don't take communion when they really, really should. And within that island issue that we have here, I think there's two categories that I've come across several times. There's people who are believers, but they don't profess faith. And everybody can see that they're believers. When Jesus says, by your fruits, you will know them, it's so clear that the fruits are there in that person's life. And it's so clear that that person has a desire to please Jesus and to honor him, but yet at the same time is held back because they just feel like they are not quite what they should be. And in so many cases, that humility just confirms that they're believers rather than questions it.

But it is the case that we do have many people who are believers who don't profess faith. So that's one category of those who don't take communion who should. The other category is people who are members of the church, but people who feel like they're doing so badly in their faith at the moment that they should stay away from the table. And that's again something that we come across frequently, people who've maybe taken communion in the past, maybe taken communion many times, but they've reached a point in their life where they may be struggling or uncertain. And they think, oh, I can't tell them in a better way.

[5 : 24] And that's something that we come across frequently. I think a big reason why these kind of issues arise is because we don't always have a clear or accurate understanding of communion.

And that's why our question is important. What should you be thinking of when you hear the word communion? Well, I want to give another seven words that we will go through one by one. They are that Nehardian Thanksgiving, remembrance, covenant, fellowship, proclamation, supper.

That's our seven words. We'll go through them one by one. So first of all, Nehardian. Now, what's that mean? That's a Gaelic for literally the ordinances. And that's the word that we often use in our islands to describe our communion weekends. And these communion weekends have been a big and very, very rich and helpful part of our island tradition. And the thing we have to recognize though is that communion weekends are such, although they're a wonderful thing, they are actually a tradition rather than an explicitly biblical pattern that we need to follow. If you go to the Bible, you won't find a communion weekend in the same way that we've seen them in our recent history over the past couple of hundred years. But they've still been a really good thing.

What I want to highlight though is that this word, ordinances, they do emphasize something so important. It highlights the fact that communion is ordained and instituted by Jesus. It's something that Jesus has ordained. And Paul makes that very clear in the passage that we read verse 23. When he starts talking about communion, he says, I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. And in these verses, Paul simply recounts what Jesus did at the last supper. And the point that's been made is that the Lord's supper is not man's invention. It's not the church's idea. It's something that was established by Jesus himself.

It was ordained by Jesus. It's an ordinance. It's the ordinance. And that reinforces a point that we've made several times over recent months, but which is really important to come back to in terms of thinking about what we do as a church. In our worship of God at church, we only do what God has commanded us to do. So all the stuff that we do in our church services, we're always trying to come back to what God has commanded us to do. That's known as the regulative principle.

[8 : 25] And it's just a principle that basically says everything that we do is regulated by God's word. And so that's why we preach because God commands us to preach in his word. That's why we pray and read the Bible because God commands it in his word. That's why we sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs because God commands it in his word. That's why we use musical instruments because God commands it in his word. And we baptize because God commands it in his word. And we have communion because God commands it in his word. Now there's two very important things to notice about this.

The first is that the fact that the communion is an ordinance is teaching us that coming to the Lord's table is a duty, a commandment that we must obey. And if God gives a commandment, it's all with the intention that we keep it, that we obey and we do what God wants us to do.

And that's such an important thing to remember that when you come to sit at the Lord's table, you might feel like you want to do that. And I'm sure everybody feels like they want to do that.

And I think that that's true of people who sit at the Lord's table and often of those who aren't sitting at the Lord's table. There's the desire to do it within us. What we need to emphasize just as much and even more is it's not just you who wants it. It's God who wants it.

God wants you to do this. As you sit at the Lord's table, you're doing what God wants.

[10 : 19] That means you are pleasing Him. That means you are making Him smile. It's so important that we remember that. But the second thing that's amazing in this verse is that that everything that was received from the Lord, everything that was delivered to Paul, everything about the institution of the Lord's supper took place on the night when Jesus was betrayed. And this is something that I read, I think I read from Donald MacLeod that he highlighted so powerfully and I don't think I've ever noticed it had he not shown it.

That on the night when Jesus was just under extraordinary turmoil, on the night when one of his closest friends, one of his disciples handed him over to soldiers, on the night when he was

abandoned and beaten, and on the night when his eye had come and everything that he wished would pass from him was actually going to become a reality, it was on that night that he did it. And that tells us something so important that in the midst of all that grief and turmoil and suffering, Jesus was still concerned to give his church this precious instruction that's going to benefit us for years to come. In other words, in his moment of greatest need, Jesus was still just thinking about what you and I need. And he instituted this in the midst of his betrayal, all for our benefit. So the Lord's supper, it's an ordinance, an audience, just a great word to use. This is from the Lord, God ordained it, God desires it, God designed it, God expected the Lord's supper. Word number two is thanksgiving. You see that in verse 24, for I received from the Lord what I also deliver to you that the Lord Jesus on the night that he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body with this for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Greek word for thanksgiving is the word eukarestias, eukarestias, sorry, I forgot an esthia, which we recognize that word, say it away, don't we? The eukarest, that's the word that's often used to describe the Lord's supper. It means thanksgiving. The Lord's supper is an act of thanksgiving. And that's just such an incredibly important thing to remember that as we come to share in the Lord's supper, we're doing that to say thank you. But what I want you to notice is that that thanksgiving can only ever be done in a response to a prior act. That just makes sense. It's not complicated that somebody does something for you and you say thank you. And so whenever we say thank you, we're making reference to a prior act and somebody today made some cakes that got delivered to my house, which was wonderful. And I said thank you because they've made these cakes for us. And all of that seems very obvious and simple, but it's highlighting such an important point that when we talk about the thanksgiving aspect of the Lord's supper, it's immediately pointing us back to something that

God has done in the first place. The Lord's supper is a response. We're doing it. We are doing something because He has done something for us. And that thanksgiving also expresses a relationship between two parties. You can't say thank you to somebody you have no contact with or no connection with. You can't say thank you to somebody who's not done anything for you. I can't thank someone for a cake that they never made. And in the same way, it's only because of what Jesus has done for us that we come and say thank you at the Lord's supper. And that's why in the Lord's supper, we do make a division between those who can say yes, Jesus is my Savior and those that's who's to come to the Lord's table. But for those who would say, well, no, I don't know if I am a believer or not. I don't think I am a believer. Then you're not at the point yet when you can come and sit at the Lord's table because you can't say thank you. And when you're not yet saved. All of this is teaching us about what our attitude should be when we sit at the Lord's table. We should be thankful. And that's a really good test for anyone who's maybe here or watching at home who's not maybe sure about whether they should sit at the Lord's table or not.

[15 : 39] You might not be able to give a really eloquent description of your testimony. You might not be able to identify a moment when you became a Christian. You might not have what other people have in terms of really clear, powerful experiences. But ask yourself this question.

Could you sit and say, could Jesus, thank you? Could you actually just say, Lord Jesus, thank you because I actually know that I've got nothing with I can. And if you can say that, then you absolutely should be at the table. And for all of us, we are here to say thank you to Jesus.

And that genuine thanksgiving is just an act of overflowing love and appreciation and joy. Just realizing he's just done something so amazing for us and we want to thank him. And I think it's incredibly important to remember that that we don't come to the Lord's table so that God can thank us for being such good people. It's not so that at the end of term, God can say, oh yes, you've had a very good spell and thank you for being such a good Christian. That is not it at all. You know that's not it. We come to the Lord's table with empty hands, empty hands.

But we come so thankful that he has actually filled our hearts with his love and grace. Sometimes in life, when people do something for us, that's incredibly kind. When we're on the recipient, when we're on the receiving end of overwhelming generosity, often it can leave you speechless. You just don't you just don't know what to say because somebody has just been so kind to you. I think the greatest example of that is the gospel. When you think of how much Jesus has done for us, we think of how much God has given for us. And you think of all the amazing promises that God is keeping for us. You just think, I don't know what to say to God. And one of the amazing things about the Lord's Supper is that it gives us a really simple action. Eating bread, drinking wine, and by doing

those things, we have a simple and sincere way of just saying thank you to our amazing God. It's an act of thanksgiving. It's also an act of remembrance. You see that in verses 24 and 25 regarding the bread, he says, this is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me in the same way he took the cup after supper, saying this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you think it in remembrance of me. Remembering is a very, very important principle in the Bible. We're told to remember the Sabbath day because it reminds us of what God did in creating the world. We're told in the Old Testament,

God's people are told to remember the Passover so that they do not forget that God delivered them out of Egypt. Again and again and again, you see the fact that God does not want things to be forgotten. And all of those acts of remembrance you see in the Old Testament are examples of the ultimate act of remembrance that God wants us to engage in. This, the Lord's supper, remembering what Jesus has done on the cross, remembering the great culmination of all of God's promises. And in doing so, we're being reminded that our salvation depends on a unique one off event that took place 2000 years ago. Hebrews speaks of that very, very powerfully, the fact that everything culminates in this great one off event. Comparing the Old Testament sacrificial system to the cross, the writing to the Hebrews says, every Old Testament priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins.

[20 : 07] But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. So when we remember what Jesus has done, we are remembering a unique one off sacrifice made by God in the giving of his Son. Now here is where I want to just spend two minutes talking about the difference in view of this between the Reformed Church's position and the Roman Catholic Church's position. Now in doing that, I'm not in any way trying to hammer Roman Catholics at all. It's so important that we remember that there is so much we agree on, but it is also important to know the points where we disagree and communion is definitely a place where we would disagree with the historic position and the continuing position of the Roman Catholic Church regarding communion. Communion in the

Roman Catholic Church is centered on mass and on something called transubstantiation. And transubstantiation is something that emerged in the Middle Ages and has become a key part of Catholicism whereby it's believed that in the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine, although they're actual physical properties of the bread and wine remain the same, that in terms of the actual reality of what they are, they become the body and blood of Jesus. And so the bread and the wine really is the substance as the way they would say it is that the substance is actually the body of Jesus and the blood of Jesus. And as such, the mass is seen as a representing of the offering of Christ in that sacrifice. And so instead of just looking back in remembrance at a one-off event, there's a sense in which there is a re-re-representing of Christ's sacrifice in the bread and wine that's now become the body and blood of Jesus. I think it's always important whenever you're looking at a different viewpoint that you just take word for word from what they say and how they describe it.

So this is just two paragraphs from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which I just want to read so that you know I'm not misrepresenting anyone. This is just what their own Catechism says. Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is manifested in the very words of institution. This is my body which is given for you and this cup which is poured out for you as the new covenant in my blood. In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross and the very blood which he poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. So that's the implications of transubstantiation, really is the body, really is the blood. And in the next paragraph the Eucharist is thus a sacrifice because it represents, makes present the sacrifice of the cross because it's memorial, it is its memorial and because it applies its fruit. Now all of that is beyond where we are willing to go and we struggle, well we don't, more than struggle, we just don't agree with that idea of transubstantiation or of representing Christ's sacrifice or any of that. And we don't do that because our argument would be Christ's body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father and Christ's sacrifice was that unique once for all one-off event. And for that reason our position is that the Lord's Supper is not re-enacting or re-presenting a repeatable event, it is looking back to a one-off event, Christ's definitive act for our redemption, the Lord's Supper is making sure that we remember

that. So I just wanted to say that for a moment, just if anyone has any questions or wants to talk about it more that's absolutely fine. The other thing I want to think about though when we talk about remembrance is the fact that our identity is tied to our memory.

And I think that's such an important thing to remember that who we are as people is tied to stuff that we remember. So my name's Thomas, I'm married to Yuna, I grew up in Stornoway, I now live in Carlaway, used to be an engineer, I'm now a minister, I like skiing. All of these things depend on my memory. If I lost my memory I would lose those things, I would lose my sense of identity and I would no longer know what makes me me. And so it's reminding us that who we are, who I am depends on remembering. Remembering is so incredibly important. And that's why at the Lord's Supper we're not just remembering what Jesus has done, as Christians we are also remembering who we really are. We're remembering that we are His. We're remembering that we're totally dependent on what He has done. And we are remembering that in Jesus' eye you are worth dying for.

[26 : 17] And I tell you that's something that you've got to remember because you'll find a thousand reasons every day you forget it. We're remembering as we share in communion together.

Next keyword is covenant. In the Lord's Supper a connection, a very clear and strong connection is made with covenant. You see that here particularly in relation to the cup. Jesus says this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Now covenant is a big topic. Covenant is really the big topic of the Bible. It's the thread that connects the very beginning to the very end and holds the whole thing together. So we're only just going to say a tiny bit about it tonight because it's such a big topic. When you see that word covenant what you need to think of is a relationship that is grounded on the deepest commitment. A relationship grounded on the deepest commitment. In fact it's a life or death commitment and that's why the Bible makes such a strong connection between covenant and blood. God enters into a covenant with His people because He is totally, totally committed to them. Now in the Old Testament there's various examples of God entering into a covenant with people and when He did that His, the establishment of that covenant was it was accompanied by a sign. So with Noah you had the sign of the rainbow, with Abraham you had the sign of circumcision, with Moses you had the sign of the Passover and these are all types, examples, shadows pointing towards the full reality in the New Testament where God's covenant promises are fulfilled in Jesus and we have two covenant signs given to us. One is baptism, the other is the Lord's supper and these function as signs and seals of God's covenant with us, the covenant of grace as theologians call it. Now what does that mean? Well it means first of all that the Lord's supper is telling you that you have a wonderful relationship with God.

The Lord's supper is telling you that you have a wonderful relationship with God. Now it's not giving you that relationship, that's incredibly important, it's not that you have the Lord's supper therefore that makes you a Christian. No, it's because we are Christians we have this, it's telling you that you have this relationship with God and as it tells you that it's functioning as a sign and a seal of God's total commitment to you. Now a sign gives you information and so the bread and wine are telling you so powerfully about what Jesus did, his body was broken, his blood was shed. A seal gives you confirmation, the bread and the wine confirm that he did it for you.

He didn't just do it, he did it for you. And so as you sit at the Lord's table, God is saying to you, you are in a covenant relationship with me, that means I will never turn away from you.

I'll never abandon you, I'll never give up on you, I will never ever stop loving you.

[29 : 51] That's what he's saying every single time we sit at the Lord's table together. But another thing that's wonderful about the Lord's supper is that it's not just God speaking to us.

At the Lord's table, we are also in a smaller way expressing our own commitment to the Lord. At the Lord's table, we're reminded that God's committed to us, but we're also declaring our commitment to him. And I think that's such a wonderful thing that just in the simple taking of the bread and of the wine, we're making a statement, we are declaring our commitment. And I think that's so, so important because so often in our lives as Christians, so often our experience is one where we feel like we failed. If I was asked to you, you know, how do you feel you've been over the past few months as a Christian? I think that you're going to, I don't think there's anybody in here who's going to say fantastic. I think everybody's going to feel a sense of failure. But the Lord's supper is just so good because it's a chance to come and to say that despite my weaknesses and my feelings, Lord, I really, really want to live for you. And that's why the struggling Christian should never, ever stay away and should never think, oh, I have to wait till I'm doing better before I come to the Lord's table. No, if you're, if you're struggling in your faith, if you're doubting, if you've made stupid mistakes, if

you've let sins overtake you, if you've just wandered away from the Lord, the first place you could come is to the Lord's table. And just from that point, go on with the Lord together as you walk with him.

The Lord's supper is also all about fellowship. That's actually what the word communion means. It's just, that's just what it means. And it's, it's emphasizing the fact that as Christians, we have communion, we have so much in common together. And that's, that's such a wonderful thing, such a crucial thing to remember. We've got the same common savior, the same common hope, the same common mission. We've got the same common identity in Christ. And as his people, we love one another. And we're going to serve him together. And the Lord's supper is such a beautiful expression of that, because we just do it together. And that's why Paul is so critical of the Corinthians for the disunity and the division that's characterised their sharing of the Lord's supper. And Myrtle read that for us. He says, I don't commend you because when you come together, it's not for the better for the worse, because I hear that when you come together as a church, there's divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you must be recognised. So he's saying, well, at one level, yes, those who are truly believers should be, should be distinct from those who maybe aren't. But at the same time, it's not the Lord's supper that they're eating, because they're not doing it together. Some are rushing ahead, others are being left behind, one goes hungry, one gets drunk. And the whole thing has turned into a bit of a mess. Paul's hugely critical of that, because the Lord's supper should be characterised by a togetherness and a unity. Now, we read that and we think, well, absolutely Paul, and we're thankful that we're not like that. We're thankful that we're not like that.

But what if Paul was to write first Carl-Aughegens instead of first Corinthians? What would that letter say? Well, I think there will be a huge amount of encouragement in it.

[33 : 49] I think there will be a huge amount that's positive, but I also think he would write this. I hear that there are divisions among you. When you have the Lord's supper, some of you are in one building and some of you are in another. Shall I commend you for this?

No, I will not. I think Paul will do it. And that's because the Lord's supper should always be a demonstration of our fellowship. It's something that we should do together as one family. And it is always meant to be a great demonstration of the fact that there is one church with all united around one Savior.

But there's also another really important point that's emphasised in that this emphasises the whole idea of fellowship. Very often, I've said this before, but I'm going to say it again, because it's so, so important. Very often when we actually come to take the Lord's supper and the bread and the wine comes to us, what we very often see is a very, very, very personal thing happening, whereby we take the bread and we take the wine, we think of Jesus, we think of our sin, we thank him so, so much for what he's done for us. We pay and we say thank you. And now all of that is brilliant. And that's exactly what we should be doing. But at the same time, we need to remember that our taking of the Lord's supper is not just me and Jesus and no one else.

It's actually me and my Savior and my brothers and sisters. And so as we take the Lord's supper, we take the bread, we take the wine, we think of Jesus, but we also turn and look at those who are beside us. We thank God for the fact that we are part of this church family together. It would be wonderful, it would be wonderful if as we share the Lord's supper, our arms went round one another, or a hand was held or even just a smile given as we recognize that we are one family, that this is a beautiful act of fellowship. Two more very quickly. Proclamation, you know that's true. You see it there, verse 26. The Lord's supper is a visible action. It's seen. And as it's seen, it is making a proclamation. It's a wonderful means of making known the fact that Jesus has died to save us. And so it's really important to remember that, yes, there's an important personal element to the Lord's supper, but there's also an essential public element. And I know half the village do not have, the quarters of the village is not here. We wish they were here because we want this to be public. We want it to be seen. This is what we're doing, proclaiming the Lord's death.

And that's why it's something that we must do together. We don't do it in secret, but we make this proclamation. And I think that's such a helpful thing to remember as well, because maybe you feel like you're not very good at proclaiming the Lord's death. Maybe you don't feel like you're very good at sharing your faith. Well, coming to the Lord's table, sharing the Lord's supper is a brilliant statement to the world. You're saying, Jesus is my savior.

[37 : 29] I live because he died. And we make that proclamation with an eschatological awareness, aware that time is short. And that we have this opportunity to do this.

And we make this proclamation as we live through our short lives, as we remember that eternity is coming and that everyone needs to hear about what Jesus has done. So communion, audience, thanksgiving, remembrance, covenant, fellowship, proclamation, last of all, supper.

Now, you might think, well, that's very obvious. The Lord's supper is the supper. That tells you some amazing thing. It tells you that the Lord's supper is an opportunity to be fed. A supper feeds you. And that's so important to remember. Now, that doesn't mean that when you eat the bread and wine, there'll be some kind of weird, warm, fuzzy feeling. It doesn't mean that at all. It just means that you are being spiritually nourished as you remember what Jesus has done for you. It's an opportunity to be fed. But the incredibly important thing here is to ask the question, what's the qualification to have supper? The qualification to have supper is to be hungry, not to be full. That's why you don't come to the Lord's supper thinking, so full of being such a good fish didn't nobody get that. You come because you're hungry and you're empty and you need Jesus to feed you. So a supper is an opportunity to be fed. A supper is a place of nourishment. I got ahead of myself and started talking about this a moment ago, but just to emphasize that it is somewhere to be fed, to be encouraged, to be built up. The old fashioned description of this is to call it a means of grace, which just means a channel through which

God's gracious blessings are poured out upon us. We're nourished and built up. And so it's an opportunity to be fed. It's a place of nourishment. It also means that it's a feast to be really. And I think that that's so important to remember. The Lord's supper is actually not kind of really, it's not actually meant to be a kind of sad solemn occasion. It's meant to be just a feast to delight in because you are being reminded in the bread and the wine of what an amazing Savior you have. And we have been reminded together as a family of what a wonderful church we are part of. And we are reminded of the amazing promises that God has for us for our future. We're reminded of his incredible covenant commitment. It's not meant to be an ordeal. It's not meant to be awful. It's just fantastic because we have such a brilliant Savior. And as we take off something so simple and beautiful bread and wine, we're actually feasting in the presence of our Savior. And we're rejoicing in the reality of everything that He's done for us. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank You so, so much for everything that You have done for us. And we pray that as we come to share in the Lord's supper together that You would draw us closer to You and closer to one another. And we thank You with all our heart for the hope and the joy that we have through everything that You have done.