

The Good Tradition

1Corinthians 11: 23-32

Holy Thursday, March 29, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

There are divine traditions and there are human traditions.

It is important to understand this distinction because in Western Protestantism we have gotten into the habit of assuming that if something is a tradition, it must be a human tradition.

Human traditions are dismissible. You may keep them. You may dispense with them. If they enhance the Gospel, you keep them. If they detract from the Gospel, you get rid of them. When it comes to human traditions the same practice can go from being an advance of the Gospel to being a detriment of the Gospel and vice versa. It depends.

Divine traditions are not dismissible. Divine traditions come from God. They are established by God. One cannot dispense with them. If a Divine tradition comes into conflict with the preaching of the Gospel, then there is something wrong with the way that you are preaching the Gospel. One must adjust one's preaching to the Divine Tradition because the Divine Tradition comes from God.

The Sacrament of the Altar is a Divine Tradition. It is a Divine Tradition because Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians and tells them, I myself received from the Lord what I also passed on to you. A passing on of anything previously received from someone else is a tradition. Saint Paul passes on to us from the Lord the tradition of the Sacrament of the Altar. Since the tradition of the Sacrament of the Altar comes from the Lord it is not a human tradition as we usually think of them. It is rather a Divine Tradition. Therefore one cannot nor would not dispense with the Sacrament of the Altar. It cannot be treated as a matter of opinion or as a matter of something that can be kept or dispensed with as long as it advanced the Gospel.

Since the Sacrament of the Altar is a Divine Tradition Saint Paul tells us along with the Corinthian congregation what its contents are. The contents of the tradition are simple. On the night when our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed, He took bread. When He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciple and said, "This is My body which is on behalf of you. Do this in remembrance of Me." The other apostles hand down to us the tradition that our Lord commanded us to eat it. Saint Paul assumes that we know that because later he talks about eating and drinking the bread and the cup. Furthermore after supper, He took the cup and when He had given thanks He gave it to them saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do in remembrance of Me." Once again the traditional command from the Lord that we should drink it is passed down to us by the other apostles. Saint Paul assumes that we are drinking it because He has spoken about eating the bread and drinking the wine already in chapter 10 and then later here in chapter 11.

This is the Divine Tradition. We are not allowed to debate whether or not such tradition enhances the Gospel or hinders it. In fact as soon as the Lord says that His body is on your behalf the Sacrament of the Altar is the Gospel. That is why it cannot be dispensed with.

In Matthew's Gospel the same thing is said in another way. The blood is shed for the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is the Gospel. Therefore the Sacrament of the Altar is the Gospel. The only way to hinder the Gospel in regards to the Sacrament of the Altar is not to celebrate it. To dispense with the Sacrament of the Altar is to dispense with the Gospel. The Gospel and the Sacrament of the Altar are one and the same. Or at the very least since there is another sacrament the Sacrament of the Altar is an indispensable facet of the Gospel.

That is why as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

The Lord's death is His death on the cross. The Lord's death is the atoning sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. The atoning death of Jesus is the culminating fulfillment of the atoning sacrifices that had gone before Him. The atoning sacrifices that had gone before Him are the burnt offering, the guilt offering, the sin offering and the offering of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. While this is not true of all of these sacrifices, it is true of most of them: the priest eats the sacrifice. The priest eats the flesh of the sacrifice. Some of the meat is set aside for the priest to eat. The rest is burned on the altar to God. The nature of sin offerings is that the priests of God eat them.

If our Lord is genuinely a sin offering that takes away the world's sins, then He must be eaten. If the blood that He sheds is what the Lord has given to make atonement for us and release us from our sins, then it must be drunk.

The Sacrament of the Altar then provides the priests of God the supernatural way in which such eating and drinking is to be done. Jesus makes the sacrifice which is necessary if His body and His blood are to be drunk. One cannot eat of a sacrifice when the sacrifice is not made. In order for this sacrifice to be made, the sacrificial victim must die. Jesus dies. By doing so He makes available His body for consumption and His blood for drinking.

Secondly, the priests of God cannot eat and drink the body and blood of Christ if the body and blood of Christ are moldering in a grave somewhere in Palestine. Therefore in order to make His body and His blood available to us to eat and drink, Jesus must rise from the dead. Only with His resurrection can He keep His body and blood out of the grave in order for us to eat and drink it.

Thirdly, the confession that Jesus is God must be firmly upheld. Only if Jesus is God is any of this possible. This is mumbo jumbo if Jesus is not God. This is a nice ceremony, if a really weird one, if Jesus is not God. Only if He is God can He cause His body to be present in multiple places all at once. After Jesus rose from the dead, He demonstrated that His body defied the ordinary limits of bodies by appearing in a locked room with His apostles after His resurrection.

Furthermore only if Jesus is God can one eat His body and He survive the experience for the next person at the rail to eat His body. Only if Jesus is God is there an inexhaustible supply of His blood for people to drink. Only if He is God can you consume His body and then at a subsequent celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar can you eat it again.

The humanity of Jesus at the altar is obvious. It is His body. It is His blood. Only if He is human can He offer us these things. And since these things are a result of His atoning death, every time you eat His body and drink His blood, you proclaim His death until He comes.

Therefore the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar is an essential part of preaching the Gospel. It is just as essential as a sermon. It is just as essential as any evangelism program that the congregation offers.

Every time you deem it important enough to come to this rail and eat the bread and drink out of the cup, you proclaim His death until He comes again in glory. You proclaim that His body did die in an atoning sacrifice that takes away sin. You proclaim that His blood is shed to take away sin. You proclaim that the body and blood were given and shed for you for your forgiveness. You proclaim that such body and such blood are available to all who would confess it. Furthermore you proclaim that you are priests of God for only the priests of God are permitted to eat of the sin offering. As priests of God you mediate God to the world. Such mediation necessarily involves proclaiming the grace of God to people. As the

Divine Tradition would have it that not only involves fulfilling your vocations, but also attending the Divine Tradition of the Sacrament of the Altar.

Therefore if anyone eats or drinks unworthily they will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

Well, we don't want to be in violation of Divine Tradition since the Divine Tradition brings us the Gospel. To be without the Gospel is to be without our salvation. Therefore if we eat or drink unworthily, we will eat and drink judgment upon ourselves.

How does one eat and drink unworthily that we may avoid it? Well, we shall examine ourselves. In fact the Greek is more specific. It is not simply that we examine ourselves, it is that we differentiate ourselves. In other words we recognize the difference between ourselves and others.

It furthermore involves differentiating the body of Christ. Here it is interesting to note that the Lord does not talk about the body and blood of Christ. Could He be using shorthand for both at this point? I suppose He could be. The Lord may do what He likes. However the question is never what the Lord can do, but rather what has the Lord done. We are not merely to differentiate ourselves, but we are also to differentiate the body of the Lord. The body of the Lord is not merely in the bread, it is also in the assembly. In other words the bread of the Sacrament of the Altar is the body of Christ. The assembly of believers is also the body of Christ. When we differentiate the body of Christ, we not only differentiate the bread in use at the Sacrament of the Altar which is differentiated from bread employed in ordinary use, we are also differentiating the assembly of the congregation as believers in Jesus. We recognize to use a translation's word the body of Christ which is the body of believers.

How is this done?

It cannot be done by looking at the heart of someone else. Faith is notoriously hidden such that we can see its fruit, but we cannot see it. Hypocrites who say they believe in Jesus, but really don't may fool us. Therefore we cannot use faith as the means by which we differentiate the body. If we did, we would never attend the Sacrament of the Altar for fear that there might be a hypocrite in the congregation.

We can only do it by whether or not they along with the whole body of Christ receive the Divine Tradition along with us. Anyone who does is to be differentiated as being part of the body of Christ. Doing thus makes for worthy preparation to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. Doing so makes for a clear proclamation of His death before He comes.

By clinging to this Divine Tradition along with all of its other facets, we cling to the Gospel itself. For what else would the Lord want passed down to us except the Gospel itself?

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.