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Proclaim the Lord's Death Until He Comes

by Elmer Prout

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26)¹

Proclaim

The Apostle Paul could not have chosen a more positive word to express the intention for Christians at the Lord’s table.

Proclaim has the feel of good news straining to be announced. There is a happy urgency in Paul’s word of choice. “Do not hide this message. Do not be ashamed to declare it. Publish it without hesitation. Affirm it with no embarrassment. Speak in joyful confidence.”²

Christian people, raise your song,
Chase away all grieving;
sing your joy and be made strong,
our Lord’s life receiving;
nature’s gifts of wheat and vine
now are set before us:
as we offer bread and wine
Christ comes to restore us.

(Colin P. Thompson)

Proclaim

Paul’s word is fresh and invigorating. Believers are invited to join the divine chorus! What

could be more satisfying? Surely all Christians will be eager to make the proclamation of which the Apostle speaks.

So it would seem. Unfortunately, the reality of Christian practice does not always match the Apostle’s communion ideal. The gap between what a communion service is meant to be and what it sometimes becomes is seen in Paul’s rebuke to the church in Corinth.

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. . . . When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (1 Corinthians 11:17, 20-22)

What was proclaimed at the Lord’s table in Corinth? “. . . each of you goes ahead with *your own supper* . . .” The Lord’s Supper had become an exercise in division and isolation. Believers who had become one body in Christ (1 Cor 12:13) nevertheless ate in separation behind walls of class distinctions. It

was not the Lord's death but human pride which was proclaimed Sunday by Sunday in Corinth.

The Corinthian's abuse of the Lord's Supper should alert us to the fact that our observance of the communion will always proclaim something. We may not be clear about the content of our proclamation but a message will go out in any case. Consider these illustrations.

A believer stood at the communion table in nation X. With a serious face he looked around the assembly. "We cannot take the Lord's Supper properly at this moment. We will gather later when correct preparations have been completed. You are dismissed." When asked to explain the believer said, "Our respected and beloved teacher taught us that the Lord's table must always have two tablecloths—one under the trays and one over them. We have only one."

That person proclaimed a message. But it was not the Lord's death. He proclaimed his loyalty to a human teacher and a regional custom.

A church leader stepped forward to make a few comments before the bread and cup were passed to the congregation. He said, "We want everyone to understand clearly that this weekly observance is one of the marks of a true church. You can be sure that this is a biblical congregation. Our practice of having the Lord's Supper every Lord's day is one of the proofs that this is a genuine New Testament church."

That leader did indeed proclaim a message. But he did not proclaim the Lord's death. His proclamation centered on human deeds and declared this trust in human obedience. He substituted an affirmation of what human hands and minds could do for the biblical proclamation of the Lord's death.

John was at odds with everyone in the local church which he attended. He refused all efforts for reconciliation. But he was present for the Lord's Supper every Sunday. When he was asked how he could take communion among people with whom he was too angry to speak John replied, "The communion is between God and me! It is a personal matter. It has nothing to do with anyone else in this church!!"

John made a proclamation every Sunday. But it was not the Lord's death. John proclaimed his human pride and self-centered isolation. His actions also affirmed his feeling that he could use the Lord's Supper for his own private purposes.

Those incidents serve to remind us that no one, including ourselves, can proclaim the Lord's death if we are caught up in thoughts of ourselves. Karl Barth has stated,

Thanksgiving, Eucharist, is used on the

one hand to describe the attitude and action of a person who has been encountered by God's grace. He acknowledges grace for what it truly is and thereby receives it in the way it may and must be received: not as a treasure sought and finally found, coveted and finally won, let alone conquered and then appropriated as a trophy, but as an unexpected and undeserved gift freely offered.³

It is that unfortunate view of the Lord's Supper as a trophy to be "conquered and then appropriated" that often clouds our thinking. In one way or another we are tempted to see ourselves as in control of the communion. We are prone to use the communion service as an act which points to us and, naturally, puts us in a positive light. But, in fact, the supper is not intended by God to say anything about our individual or congregational accomplishments. It points away from us to the Lord.

The Apostle Paul does not say only "proclaim." He quickly adds:

Proclaim the Lord's Death

Paul knew that the Lord's death on a cross was a "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). He recognized that the Lord's death had the appearance of shameful weakness (1 Cor 1:25-27; see also Heb 12:2, 3). Paul had arrived in Corinth "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3). Nevertheless he "decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). The Apostle was determined "never [to] boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:4). The Lord's death in its full gospel implications dominated Paul's evangelism. Equally, the Lord's death was the focus of his attention as he joined other believers at the table of the Lord.

What shall we say as we "proclaim the Lord's death"? Where shall our hearts turn?

We turn to the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We think of love. But we do not look toward a vague, sentimental, universal principle of love. We remember that only God's personal Son could reveal God's personal love to humankind (1 John 4:9, 10). We confess that the Lord whom we proclaim is that specific person of whom it is said "the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . [he] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness . . . he . . . became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (John 1:14; Phil 2:7, 9).

In an increasingly pluralistic culture we are not ashamed to affirm the exclusive Lord Jesus

Speechless wonder in the presence of the divine sacrifice on a cross is a positive blessing.

Christ. Without embarrassment we proclaim that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The Lord's Supper stirs within each of us all manner of thoughts and emotions—love, hope, sorrow, remorse, awe, a willingness to sacrifice, gratitude, a desire for self-denial, a longing for purity, a resolution to forgive, humility, dependence, a sense of spiritual poverty, contrition, and a sense of the divine mystery. The ebb and flow cries out for expression yet defies all our efforts while words "break under the weight of glory."

What language shall I borrow
To thank Thee, dearest friend:
For this Thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to Thee.

(Bernard of Clairvaux)

Speechless wonder in the presence of the divine sacrifice on a cross is a positive blessing. However, as the floodtide of feelings rises, it is vital that we consciously remember that it is *the Lord's death* which we proclaim in the supper. The communion proclamation does not center in our feelings about the Lord's death. The Lord's Supper is to be a moment when awareness of the death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is given priority over all other considerations.

To proclaim the Lord's death is to affirm that in Jesus Christ of Nazareth God's holy love and our desperate human plight meet redemptively. When we proclaim the Lord's death we gladly acknowledge that neither our emotions nor our morals can stand

in their own power. But in that same proclamation we confidently affirm that God has provided the place where we can stand—"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11).

There was a moment when first century religious leaders said, "The Nazarene is dead." That day appeared to be a victory for prejudice and hatred. Those leaders were sure they were finished with Jesus Christ forever. On this side of his resurrection we believe he is alive and with us forever.

We proclaim the Lord's suffering and death, but our proclamation does not center on those bare facts. "A church rests not on sacred sorrow but on a holy redemption. Christianity is not the worship of sorrow (which may be but poetic and aesthetic) but of grace."⁴ We proclaim the Lord's death, not as a tragedy, but as the Lord's conquest in his pursuit of redemption for humankind. Our emphasis is not to fall on the physical pain, but on the divine suffering of love rejected. "The Cross is common, it is Christ that is unique."⁵

We proclaim but we do not presume to explain. "The Christian religion is the revelation of the mystery and, mark this well, the more the mystery is known, the more it is mystery. . . . The more you proclaim the mystery, as St. Paul did, the more you will lead men to wonder at the greatness of God."⁶

On the cross we see the body of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. As we look we remember that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19 *New Jerusalem Bible*). The Lord Jesus did not die alone. In a way that moves beyond our desire for neat definition into the pathos of the divine heart, God the Father was with his Son before Calvary, on Calvary and beyond as well. The Lord's death which we proclaim was not offered by a loving Christ to satisfy a vengeful father. "Proclaiming the Cross [is] an unforgettable showing of the character of the God whom we adore."⁷ We proclaim, not the lonely death of a defeated carpenter, but the mystery of Father and Son together in their reconciling work. G. A. Studdert-Kennedy draws us deeper into the mystery.

The necessity of Calvary was the necessity that has been binding on God since the beginning of time . . . God's age-long Calvary There has always been a voice crying in the heart of God, and appealing to His Fatherhood, "Forgive them for they know not what they do" . . . the Creator and Redeemer are One God. Redemption is not an afterthought of the Creator—it is an eternal aspect of His

work. The Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world. There has always been a Calvary in God's heart . . . it is not the Cross you are called upon to worship, but the Christ, who is the Life of the World . . . We must not confuse the Christ with the Cross. Look upon that broken, battered, bleeding body and you see what sin is, it is as ugly and as shameful as that; look upon the Majesty of the Christ Spirit, revealed in His words and conduct on the Cross, and you see that which conquers and destroys sin—in Him you see the Will of God.⁸

We dare not sanitize the Lord's death. Our proclamation must be informed by the fact that "they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left" (Luke 23:33). We proclaim that Jesus died with sinners as well as for sinners. To declare the Lord's death is to confess that we are among the sinners with whom he died.

Which is more amazing, to find Jesus in such bad company, or to find the criminals in such good company? As a matter of fact, both are true! . . . "They crucified him with the criminals." Do you know what this implies? Don't be too surprised if I tell you that this was the first Christian fellowship, the first certain, indissoluble and indestructible Christian community. Christian community is manifest wherever there is a group of people close to Jesus who are with him in such a way that they are directly and unambiguously affected by his promise and assurance. . . . Consider the fact: Jesus died precisely for these two criminals who were crucified on his right and on his left and went to their death with him. He did not die for the sake of a good world, he died for the sake of an evil world, nor for the pious, but for the godless, not for the just, but for the unjust, for the deliverance, the victory and the joy of all, that they might have life.⁹

. . . Until He Comes

In the Lord's Supper we look back to the death of Jesus Christ on a cross. We hear Jesus say, "Do this in remembrance of me." We do remember but we do not stand in the shadow of broken dreams. The Lord who died "was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Rom 6:4). The Lord whose death we proclaim is the Lord who "tasted death for everyone" . . . "so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:8, 14, 15).

The Lord's death. The Lord's resurrection.

We "stand amazed" by the meaning and power of this message. But there is more! The risen Christ is the returning Christ. From ancient times to modern days believers join their voices in this triumphant communion proclamation.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Dying, you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory.

When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, until you come in glory.

Lord, by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free.

You are the Savior of the world."
(Eucharistic Prayer, Western Rite)

"This is the threefold truth on which our faith depends; and with this joyful cry worship begins and ends:

Christ has died!

Christ is risen!

Christ will come again!"

(Fred Pratt Green)

"Proclaim . . . Until He Comes"

There is a limit on the time of proclamation. It is not a limit imposed by discouragement in which faith grows faint and drains away. It is the limit set at the glowing edge of consummation. We remember the Lord's death but we do not idolize it. We are moved along quickly toward the final stage of the Lord's victory. The hope which we have in the Lord is vivid and alive. We eat the bread and drink the cup in confident expectation of the Lord's return.

We celebrate Eucharist by remembering forward [to use John McCoys' expression] . . . The world says "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The church says, "Eat, drink, and remember, for tomorrow we live." It is this "tomorrow we live" that brings in the other side of the Eucharistic experience, for you and I remember *forward*. Remembering forward means living on the foundation of God's past with our eyes set on the glory of God's future.¹⁰

George Rawson and A. H. D. Troyte have given us words and music which bring our Lord's Supper thoughts and feelings into a clear spiritual focus.

By Christ redeemed, in Christ restored,
We keep the memory adored,

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And show the death of our dear Lord,
 Until He come!

His body, given in our stead,
 Is seen in this memorial bread;
And so our feeble love is fed,
 Until He come!

His fearful unknown agony,
 His life-blood shed for us we see;
The wine shall tell the mystery,
 Until He come!

And thus that dark betrayal night,
With the last advent we unite,

By one bright chain of loving rite,
Until He come!¹¹

Until the trumpet sound be heard,
 until the ancient graves be stirred,
and with the great commanding word
the Lord shall come.

O blessed hope! In faith we wait,
 hearing his footsteps at the gate
while we his triumph celebrate
until he come.

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