

The Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26)

By Jacob Gerber

In 1 Corinthians 11:2, Paul commended the Corinthians because “you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions [παράδοσεις; *paradoseis*] even as I delivered [παρέδωκα; *paredōka*—from the same root as “traditions”] them to you.” Paul has already expressed twice that he does not *commend* them in their practices at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17, 22), and he now goes so far as to restate the exact tradition of the Lord's Supper, according to its words of institution.¹ The word for “received” (παρέλαβον; *parelabon*) and “delivered” (παρέδωκα; *paredōka*) are, respectively, the specific terms for receiving and passing on *traditions*, words that Paul will use again in 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3 regarding the gospel that the Corinthians “received” from him (1 Cor. 15:1), which he “delivered” to them” (1 Cor. 15:3).² In our culture, “tradition” is not always looked upon as a positive thing; however, Paul uses the language of tradition positively. Jaroslav Pelikan's famous quotation is helpful in this regard: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.”³

The Tradition Delivered to Us (1 Cor. 11:23a)

When Paul says, “For I received from the Lord...,” there is some debate about whether Paul is referring to a direct, personal revelation that he received from the Lord Jesus, or whether he simply means that he received the tradition that ultimately traces back to the Lord Jesus' words at the Last Supper. Elsewhere, Paul insists that he did not “receive” (παρέλαβον; *parelabon*) his gospel from any man, but by a revelation from the Lord Jesus (Gal. 1:12). On this basis, some argue that Paul must have also “received” these words of institution directly from the Lord Jesus.⁴ Others, however, point out that Paul refers in Galatians to the *meaning* and *message* of the cross (public events that could only be understood by revelation after the fact), while Jesus' *words* of institution for the Lord's Supper were received by his original apostles, and subsequently handed down as a tradition to the entire church.⁵ In my judgment, Paul's words are better interpreted by the latter meaning, so that Paul has received *this* tradition from others (especially the original disciples present at the Last Supper), very differently from how he received the gospel by direct revelation from Christ (Gal. 1:11–12). The

¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 604.

² Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 157.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

⁴ E.g., Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 221.

⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 606–07.

important point, however, is that these words were instituted by Christ, and not upon the authority of any other person(s).⁶

Of all the details recorded for us about the Last Supper, when Jesus originally instituted the Lord's Supper, Paul only delivers a small subset. Thus, as Charles Hodge writes, the tradition of the Lord's Supper does not require us to eat “at night, after a meal, and at a table covered with provisions, etc. Protestants...do not hold that the church in all ages is bound to do whatever Christ and the apostles did, but only what they designed should be afterwards done.”⁷ In these words of institution, Paul reminds the Corinthians of certain aspects of the original Lord's Supper (i.e., “on the night when he was betrayed...”), and we are to repeat these words, not to re-enact them. Just as the original Passover meal had unique features that were not observed in later Passover feasts, so the original Lord's Supper had unique features that we do not observe today as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. With the final word on the right administration of the Lord's Supper, the Church has only received what Paul delivers to us here.

More than this, we should recognize that the word for “delivered” (or, “given/handed over”) is the word translated as “betrayed” [παρεδίδετο; *paredideto*] later in v. 23. Judas “betrayed” Jesus in the sense of “handing over” his master to the Jewish authorities. It is worth noting that the Latin language has words with the same flexibility, so that our English words “tradition” and “traitor” both derive from the same Latin root word, meaning “to hand over.” Now, it is true that this word is used to describe Judas's betrayal of Jesus: “And as they were eating, [Jesus] said, ‘Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray [παραδώσει; *paradōsei*] me’” (Matt. 26:21). Richard Hays, however, points out that Paul elsewhere uses this word not to describe *Judas's* “handing over” (i.e., *betrayal*) of Jesus, but *God's* delivering up of Jesus: “...who was *delivered up* [παρεδόθη; *paredothē*] for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25), and “He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him up* [παρέδωκεν; *paredōken*] for us all...” (Rom. 8:32). In turn, those passages seem to echo the Septuagint's Greek translation of two passages in Isaiah: “and the Lord *gave him up* [παρέδωκεν; *paredōken*] for our sins” (Isa. 53:6), and “And he bore the sins of many, and on account of their iniquities he *was handed over* [παρεδόθη; *paredothē*]” (Isa. 53:12b). Thus, when Paul writes, “on the night when he was betrayed,” Hays argues that Paul did not have the action of Judas in mind, but of God's gracious handing over of his Son for our salvation.⁸ Or, we might simply note that Christ's being handed over/delivered up happened *both* by Judas's betrayal *and* according to the Lord's definite plan and foreknowledge (cf. Acts 2:23).⁹ Even more, we might also note that this word appears in an active sense, to describe Jesus' own, loving, willing “giving-over” of himself as a sacrifice for us: “...And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and *gave himself* [παραδόντος; *paradontos*] for me” (Gal. 2:20; cf. Eph. 5:2, 25). What Judas meant

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 373. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 223.

⁸ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 198.

⁹ The Apostle Peter captures this idea in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:23, although he uses the word ἑκδοτος (*ekdotos*; lit., “given out”) rather than παραδίδωμι (*paradidōmi*; lit., “given over”): “...this Jesus, *delivered up* according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

for evil, the Father planned—and the Son endured—for good, out of his love and mercy toward us.

Christ Delivered Up for Us (1 Col. 11:23b–26)

In the second half of v. 23, Paul states the tradition itself. First, Paul reminds them of the context of when the Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper: "...on the night when he was betrayed..." Second, Paul addresses the bread, the first element of the Lord's Supper: "...took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor. 11:23b–24). We give thanks in a prayer of consecration for the same reason that the Lord Jesus originally gave thanks, for the mercy of God demonstrated through his love to offer up Christ for the salvation of his people.¹⁰ While there has been considerable debate as to whether this bread should be leavened or unleavened, or whether the bread must contain gluten or may be gluten-free, the Scriptures give no precise recipe for the bread. While a Greek word for "unleavened bread" exists (cf. 1 Cor. 5:8), the word both here in 1 Corinthians 11:24 and earlier, in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, is simply, "bread," referring either to leavened or unleavened bread. Whereas the Old Testament offered precise recipes to foreshadow Christ with accuracy (e.g., Ex. 30:22–25), now that Christ has come, we no longer need the outward glory of the ceremonial law. Instead, the elements we use in the New Testament worship (especially in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper) may be simpler, more common, and plain, since by them Christ himself is held forth with "more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy."¹¹

Specifically, this common, ordinary bread holds forth Christ to us as it is *broken*. For this reason, the early church often called the Lord's Supper the "breaking of bread" (cf. Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11). This does not mean that Christ's body was entirely broken, since we know that not one of his bones were broken (John 19:31–36). Instead, the breaking of the bread bears witness to Christ's body being *sacrificed* "for" us.¹² Thus, we break, take, and eat the bread "in remembrance" of Christ—that is, in remembrance of his person and his work for us for our salvation. Charles Hodge carefully notes that this *remembrance* is more than a mere calling to mind of Christ's person and work, but something much more far-reaching: "that we profess faith in him as the sacrifice for our sins; that we receive him as such; that we acknowledge the obligations which rest upon us as those who have been redeemed by his blood; and that we recognize ourselves as constituent members of his church and all believers as our brethren."¹³ By this sacrament, Christ really and truly makes himself present to us, not physically (since his body remains in heaven), but spiritually.¹⁴

In the same way, Christ took the cup, after supper, giving similar words of institution as with the bread (1 Cor. 11:25a). Undoubtedly, this cup would have contained wine with alcohol at the Last

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 374. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

¹¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.6.

¹² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 381. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

¹³ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 226.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 382. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

Supper, since they had no way of preserving the non-alcoholic “new wine” of freshly squeezed grapes very long before it fermented. Nevertheless, just as with the bread, the Scriptures give us no instructions on the alcohol content of the wine we should use in the Lord's Supper, only so long as we utilize the juice of grapes, as the “fruit of the vine” (Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). In our own tradition, Presbyterians have historically recognized the rights of individual Sessions to decide for their own congregations what constitutes “wine.”¹⁵ Again, the emphasis is not on the ceremonial, outward features of the wine, but on its significance: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:25b). This language echoes the ratification of God's covenant with his people at Mount Sinai, which was sealed with the blood of animal sacrifices: “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Ex. 24:8).¹⁶ When the Lord Jesus institutes a “new” covenant, he uses the word *καινή* (*kainē*), meaning “renewed,” rather than *νέα* (*nea*), referring to something that did not previously exist.¹⁷ By the blood of Jesus' sacrifice, the *new* covenant secures everything that the *old* covenant promised by the blood of animal sacrifices. As with the bread, we drink the cup, however often we drink it, in remembrance of Christ (1 Cor. 11:25c).

The Tradition Delivered through Us (1 Cor. 11:26)

Paul summarizes the significance of this sacrament, then, in v. 26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” In part, this refers to the proclamation of the Lord's death proclaimed as the presiding minister announces the words of institution. More than that, however, every communicant proclaims the Lord's death by eating the bread and drinking the cup as a profession of faith.¹⁸ It is for this reason that many churches confess creeds or confessions about what they believe before receiving the Lord's Supper together, so that the words of our confession may match with our actions of eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper. Unbelievers in the service come to hear clearly the gospel that we hold by faith, and fencing the Table on the basis of that belief draws a clear distinction to underscore the importance for them to repent from their sins and believe in Christ for their salvation.

What this means is that the church of Jesus Christ is indispensable for passing on the *tradition*—that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ—from generation to generation. This does not mean, as Roman Catholics argue, that the church has authority *over* the tradition, for the exact opposite is true. The Scriptures are the divine charter *for* the church, governing every aspect of her message and methods. Instead, what this means is that God himself has appointed the church as the vehicle for passing on the message of the Scriptures to each subsequent generation. He could have simply given a Bible to everyone individually, but instead, he called out a people for himself, with the intention that this

¹⁵ “Acts and Deliverances of Other Presbyterian Denominations on Fermented Wine,” from *The Historical Development of the Book of Church Order*. <<http://www.pcahistory.org/bco/dfw/58/wine.html>>. Accessed May 5, 2020.

¹⁶ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 227.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 471–72.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 384. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xviii.iii.html>>

people would build one another up in the gospel.

Particularly, this is important as we consider how the gospel is passed down among our covenant children. We baptize children as non-communing members, since they cannot do what Paul requires of those who would receive the Lord's Supper in the next section of this passage: to examine themselves (v. 28), to discern the body (v. 29), and to judge themselves before coming (v. 31). God promises to be God to our children after us (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39), but as our children see some part of our worship to which they do not have automatic access, they begin to ask questions. Just as children's questions prompted explanations of God's great works of redemption in the Old Testament (Ex. 12:26–27; Josh. 4:6–7), so our children's questions prompt us to tell them about God's great works of redemption in the New Testament. As they ask why we are going to the Table, we can tell them that Christ's body was broken, and his blood shed, for all those who believe in him. By this powerful witness, the tradition of the gospel is passed down to every generation of our children after us until the day when Christ finally comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

The Body and Blood of Christ

We will close with a brief word on the whether the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper is in any way transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. First, as many have pointed out, the primary dispute that Protestants have with Roman Catholics is not whether the bread and wine are connected with the body and blood of Christ, but as to whether the elements really remain bread and wine at all. Roman Catholics believe that, while the bread and the wine look, feel, smell, and taste like bread and wine, in fact, they are not bread and wine but Christ's body and blood. This understanding conflicts with Paul's plain words in v. 28: "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." As Leon Morris observes, "The bread remains bread at the moment of reception."¹⁹

This point does not force us into a strictly memorial view of the Lord's Supper, where we are merely calling to mind the memory of Christ's sacrifice for us. Indeed, we confess that we do receive Christ by faith through the Lord's Supper: "Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses."²⁰

While Roman Catholics and Lutherans insist that we must take literally Christ's statement, "This is my body," we should notice that Christ tells us how to interpret this language in reference to his blood: "This is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25; my translation).²¹ Matthew records this language as, "This is my blood of the covenant..." (Matt. 26:28), and Paul's language shows us the proper interpretation. This is not a crassly literal statement, as though the cup *were* the blood of Jesus; on the contrary, the cup shows forth, exhibits, and confers to us the blessings of the new covenant in

¹⁹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 160.

²⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.7.

²¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 157–58.

Christ's blood. The same kind of language appears in Genesis 17:10 regarding circumcision: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep..." Circumcision was a sign and seal of the *blessings* of the covenant—namely, that God will make his people righteous by faith (cf. Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:11). By eating the bread and drinking the cup, we genuinely participate in Christ's broken body and shed blood (1 Cor. 10:16), but we do so by faith.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about "tradition"? Where can tradition be good, helpful, and healthy? Where can tradition descend into traditionalism? How does this passage demonstrate the importance of a tradition that maintains continuity with the church who has gone before us? What role does Scripture have in shaping this tradition?
2. Do you know the objective facts of the gospel, that Christ was delivered up—betrayed by Judas, and given over by his Father to suffer and die for sinners? Do you know that Christ was delivered up as a sacrifice *for you* ? What does it mean for someone to lay hold of the gospel *personally* by faith? How is that different from mere intellectual knowledge? How does the Lord's Supper apply the objective knowledge of Christ's death to us in a personal way?
3. How does the celebration of the Lord's Supper function to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26)? How does fencing the Table declare the meaning and significance of the gospel to unbelievers who may be present in the congregation? How does fencing the Table declare the importance of personal faith to covenant children who were born into non-communing membership in the church? How does the Lord's Supper link our church *today* with the generations who will follow us?