More and more united

Text: John 6:53-56

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 16:13-21; John 6:53-56

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 184, 378, ‘The Power of the Cross’, 264, 522

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD28)

**Theme:** The strengthening of the mystical union with Christ and His body the church through participation in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper.

**Proposition:** Come to the table in faith – be joined more closely to Christ!

**Introduction**

We are all familiar with joining, making a union between two surfaces using glue. There are different types of adhesives for different materials. Our topic this afternoon is spiritual union/joining. This is not like a physical tube of araldite/epoxy/PVA. We can’t see spiritual union with these eyes. Our focus is on the sacrament of Lord’s Supper in HCLD28 Q&A76: *“Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body*”.

How does participation in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper enable us to be more and more closely joined to Christ’s blessed body? Our text is from John 6:53-56: “*Jesus therefore said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.* *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him’”.* There are three different joinings to consider this afternoon:

1. The union of the physical with the spiritual
2. The union of Christ with the Christian
3. The union of the Christian and the church
4. **The union of the physical with the spiritual**

Jesus had said “*I am the bread of life*” (John 6:35). In John 6, the Jews are grumbling against Jesus because He has identified himself with the manna which God gave to His covenant people in the wilderness – read about this in Exodus 16. When Christ says that He is heavenly bread, Jesus is **not joining** together two physical entities: the white substance which covered the ground in the wilderness like fine frost on the ground (which the house of Israel called manna and which was white like coriander seed, tasting like wafers with honey) with his own physical flesh and blood.

However these two very different substances are linked/joined/united spiritually. Just as the manna came down as bread from heaven: a gift from God to His covenant people to sustain them day by day, so likewise Christ came down from heaven: a gift from God to His covenant people to sustain them forever so that they would not die. There is a spiritual connection here.

When Jesus said: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves”* (John 6:53), He was not asking the people to physically consume his body. Neither was he referring directly to Lord’s Supper – which he had not yet instituted at this stage in his ministry. He was using a metaphor. Examples of this figure of speech are: ‘a mighty fortress is our God’, ‘the wheels of justice turn slowly’; ‘the typical teenage boys room is a disaster area’; ‘I was lost in a sea of nameless faces.’

Jesus uses a metaphor to link/join the spiritual reality of believing in Him to the consuming of his physical body. He is graphically describing the reality of which He spoke plainly in verse 40: “*For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”* So we see a joining of the physical with the spiritual in the language Jesus uses.

Jesus speaks in a similar way when he institutes Lord’s Supper. Breaking the bread he says *“Take, eat; this is My body”.* Giving the cup he says, *“Drink from it all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant”.* He was not speaking aboutan actual consuming of His body and blood. Neither is this merely a symbolic gesture of remembrance, but an actual receiving of divine grace to strengthen faith. There is again a joining of the physical with the spiritual. This is termed a “sacramental union” whereby the Holy Spirit communicates divine grace which strengthens faith in the believer. The physical is united/joined with the spiritual in the sacrament.

The bond – the sacramental union – is not visible, but by faith we believe it occurs because Christ has said metaphorically that the bread of Lord’s Supper is his body, and the wine his blood. Then *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves”* (John 6:53)*.* To have spiritual life in Christ, we must be joined to Him, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The union of Christ with the Christian**

What did you have for lunch? I had sourdough bread with meat and salad – yum! Have you heard the expression ‘you are what you eat’. This is not completely true, but partly so. When you eat physical food, some of it becomes a part of you as it is assimilated into the cellular structures of your body. When physical food is being incorporated into our physical body we cannot see the gradual internal process, but we know that it most certainly occurs. Try going without food for a few weeks if you don’t believe me.

So it is when we come to Christ in faith, we receive Him spiritually into ourselves. The Apostle Paul describes it this way to the Galatians: “*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me”* (Gal 2:20). We are not saved until we have been made one with Christ through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. It is the presence of Christ within which gives spiritual life to the believer.

The believer is united to Christ by faith. The Lord Jesus speaks of this joining of Himself to the individual Christian:*“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him”* (John 6:56). This is a two-way bond between Christ and the believer. This joining of Christ and the Christian is sometimes termed the “mystical union” by theologians. John Calvin said, *“We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us…All that Christ possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him”.* This bond is eternal – from everlasting to everlasting.

The root of this union goes back before time to sovereign election. Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 28 Q&A76 asks what it means to “eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink His poured‑out blood”. The answer is then given: *“It means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ and by believing to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But it means more. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are* ***united more and more*** *to Christ's blessed body”.* There is a closer joining of the believer to Christ through partaking of Lord’s Supper.

As Christ dwells by the Holy Spirit within us, we become more like Him; We begin to have His mind; We come more and more to have his godly nature (2 Pet 1:4); We behave more and more like Him. The mystical faith union is strengthened through the sacrament. Greater spiritual vitality is gained through this sacramental union. As the Holy Spirit works in the heart of the believer the bond becomes stronger, tighter.

This points to the importance of attending Lord’s Supper for your own spiritual life. Plan to be here for this sacrament if you possibly can. This also points to the importance of preparation during week before, especially going early to bed night before. This further points to the importance of greatly desiring to eat the supper. This also points to the bond between the individual Christian and the local church, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The union of the Christian with the Church**

Let’s go back to the wilderness wanderings in Exodus. The manna came down for 40 years, 6 days per week. This occurred without fail until the sons of Israel came to the border of the promised land. Note that the manna only came to Israel. It was God’s covenant provision exclusively for His chosen covenant community.

Christ is the bread of God who gives life to the world. Not every single person, but all kinds of people, all who will “*eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood in faith*”. All who have come to Christ in repentance and faith and so are joined to Him (John 15:1-6). So all in Christ are joined to one another as a part of His body, the church. The New Testament describes the body of Christ both as a:

* **Universal body: “***I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it”* (Matt 16:18). *“For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body”* (Eph 5:23).
* AND as a **local body**: a geographically centred gathering of believers: “*To the church of God which is at Corinth”* (1 Cor 1:2)*.* *“To the churches of Galatia”* (Gal 1:2b)’ *“and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house”* (Phil 1:2)*.*

Lord’s Supper is celebrated as a local church sacrament. Different churches celebrate on different Lord’s Days. When we sit together, we are joined/united spiritually more closely with the physical local blessed body of Christ – the church. The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians about this: “*Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17).*

This union between the believer and the local church is reflected in the importance of having unity of belief round the table. This union between the believer and the local church is reflected in importance of being sure to resolve any inter-personal difficulties – any lack of peace – prior to coming to the table. This also points to the importance of attending Lord’s Supper for the spiritual life of the congregation. Try not to be away if you possibly can for the sake of others, as well as yourself. There is both an individual and a corporate aspect of the sacrament. The sacrament of Lord’s Supper strengthens the bond between the believer and the local body of believers to which he/she belongs. A spiritual strengthening of the joining of the Christian to the church.

In summary in the sacrament of Lord’s Supper we see three related unions present:

1. The physical and the spiritual
2. Christ and the Christian
3. The Christian and the Church

May the Lord grant us a deeper understanding of the significance and importance of the union which we have as believers with Christ. A union which is further strengthened through the sacrament of Lord’s Supper. Not a physical bond with physical glue, but a vital spiritual bond worked through the power of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.