

“As Often As”

By: David Burruss

There is a verse many of us have heard quoted in conversations about the Lord's Supper, and it tends to get pulled into the discussion as if it settles the question of frequency all by itself. The verse is 1 Corinthians 11:26, and it reads: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." The phrase that catches people's attention is "as often as," and the conclusion drawn from it is usually something like: the Lord's Supper can be taken at any frequency the congregation chooses. That sounds reasonable on the surface, but when you actually sit with the text and think it through carefully, the conclusion does not hold up.

The Greek phrase behind "as often as" is ὅσάκις ἔαν, which carries the sense of "whenever" or "every time that." Paul is making a statement about what the act of partaking means and what it proclaims. He is saying that every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until He returns. That is a statement about the significance of the observance, not a statement about how frequently it should occur. And that distinction, as quiet as it may seem, is actually everything.

Think about it this way. Suppose someone told you, "As often as you pay your electric bill, include the account number on the check." That sentence tells you absolutely nothing about how often to pay the bill. It only tells you what must accompany the payment when you do pay it. The sentence describes what happens whenever the act takes place, and it leaves the schedule of the act entirely to another source of information. 1 Corinthians 11:26 works the same way. Paul is telling the Corinthians what the Supper proclaims whenever they observe it, and that purpose alone is what verse 26 addresses.

What makes this even clearer is the context Paul is working in. He is not writing to establish a schedule for the Lord's Supper. He is writing to correct serious abuses happening in the Corinthian assembly, things like divisions among the members, people eating selfishly before others arrived, some drinking to excess, and a general failure to discern the Lord's body in what they were doing. His concern throughout the passage is not how often but how and with what understanding. So pressing verse 26 into service as a proof text for "any frequency you choose" is asking the verse to carry a burden it was never written to bear.

The New Testament's actual evidence for frequency comes from a different place entirely, and it is not ambiguous. Acts 20:7 tells us: "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them." The context makes plain that this breaking of bread refers to the Lord's Supper, and the detail about the first day of the week is not incidental. It reflects a consistent pattern in the early church of gathering on that day for that purpose. Every week brings a first day, and the church assembled on that recurring day and broke bread together. That is the pattern the New Testament gives us for frequency, and it is grounded in specific example rather than vague inference.

There is also a logical problem with the "as often as" argument that its proponents rarely follow to its end. If the phrase genuinely authorized any frequency the church might choose, then it would just as easily authorize observing the Supper once a year, once a decade, or at completely irregular intervals with no pattern at all. But most people making the argument would reject those options immediately, because they instinctively know that other passages and the practice of the apostolic church have to be factored in. And the moment you acknowledge that, you have already conceded the point: verse 26 alone does not establish frequency, and the broader context of the New Testament must be consulted. That is exactly what sound interpretation requires of us.

What the text says and what people infer from the text are not always the same thing, and this is a place where that gap matters enormously. The wording of 1 Corinthians 11:26 does not say daily, monthly, quarterly, or whenever the mood strikes. It says that whenever you partake, you are proclaiming the Lord's death. The verse explains the meaning of the Supper, and it leaves the question of schedule to be answered by the rest of what the New Testament shows us. When we let Acts 20:7 speak to the when and let 1 Corinthians 11:26 speak to the what, both texts do their proper work and neither one is stretched beyond what it was written to say.

There is something beautiful in this, really. The Lord's Supper is not a formality to be observed on whatever schedule feels convenient. It is a proclamation, a looking back at the cross and a looking forward to the return of Christ, and it belongs to the rhythm of the first day of the week just as surely as the resurrection belongs to that day. The church that gathers weekly to eat this bread and drink this cup is doing something deeply faithful, not because a single phrase in a corrective letter gave them permission to invent their own schedule, but because the whole witness of the New Testament points them there. That is a distinction worth understanding, and it is one worth holding onto.