

## BASIC CHRISTIAN FAITH AND PRACTICE 17

## COMMUNION ("THE LORD'S SUPPER")

Introduction: Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is one of two sacraments give to the Church by Jesus Christ. (On the sacraments in general, see the lesson on Baptism.) The other is Baptism. In a sense, Communion is the more prominent sacrament, because Baptism is only undergone once whereas Communion is to be repeated regularly. It occupies a special place in our continuing worship of God. This lesson covers the meaning and practice of this crucial part of our worship of the Lord.

## 1. Definition

- Communion is a ritual meal that serves as a covenant renewal ceremony and as a sign and seal of New Covenant membership/salvation for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Communion vividly symbolizes the death of Christ for our sins and the believer's faith in it. Celebrating Communion formally and publicly reaffirms the believer's faith, testifies to the believer's New Covenant membership and the blessings of the covenant that flow to the believer from the death of Christ, and is a fundamental, formal, public, and continuing act of obedience arising from faith.
- Fundamental passage: Matthew 26:17-30 (parallels: Mark 14:12-26; 22:7-23)
  - What is the basic symbolism? → the death of Christ; broken bread symbolizes his broken body and wine symbolizes his shed blood

## 2. Disagreement over Communion

## A. The Efficacy of the Rite

- Ties in to the issue of the efficacy of the Sacraments we talked about last time. Applied to Communion, does it (1) inherently and effectively convey special grace to anyone who participates in it no matter what their attitude is or (2) only convey special grace to the participant when practiced in sincerity and faith or (3) constitute merely symbolic action that does not convey any special grace beyond the natural spiritual benefit of memorializing Christ's death for us.
- Our view: Communion does convey special grace to the participant, but only when practiced in sincerity and faith. There is something spiritual and intangible that really takes place in the sincere, faith-filled celebration of the Lord's Supper, a communing with Christ that conveys special blessing and strengthening to the soul. In our practice, if you are a Christian, then you are welcome at the table, no matter what theological view you hold.

## B. The Presence of Christ – How to understand Jesus' words: "Take and eat, this is my body . . . Drink, this is my blood of the new covenant."

1. Transubstantiation – the bread and wine (or juice) *are* the physical body and blood of Christ (Catholic)
2. Consubstantiation – the bread and wine (or juice) *contain* the physical body and blood of Christ (Lutheran)
3. Reformed view – the bread and wine (or juice) contain the body and blood of Christ *spiritually*
4. Zwinglian view – the bread and wine (or juice) *represent* the body and blood of Christ

5. Our view: Not an essential issue, but we take the Zwinglian view in a modified form, holding that Christ (not his body and blood) is specially present in the *celebration* of Communion. “This is my body/blood” is obviously metaphorical.

### 3. OT Background:

- Passover (Exodus 12:24-27)
  - Jesus instituted the Supper at Passover; it was a Passover meal.
    - ❖ Why would he do that? → The meaning of the Passover elucidates the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and provides a sort of pattern for its celebration
  - How does its Passover background shed light on Communion?
    - ❖ Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover. He is the final Passover Lamb.
    - ❖ Atonement – just as the blood of the sacrificed Passover lamb brought God to pass over the death sentence on the firstborn of those to whom it was applied, so the blood of Christ brings God to pass over the sentence of ultimate death on sinners to whom it is applied by faith (Matthew 26:26-28).
    - ❖ Need for sacrifice
    - ❖ Moving - from slavery and death to freedom and life; the great Old Testament picture of salvation. Communion commemorates our movement from spiritual slavery and death to freedom and life in Christ and the New Covenant. It commemorates our salvation by the death of Christ on our behalf.
    - ❖ Repetition/commemoration/memorial - to remember God's gracious deeds, specifically Christ’s sacrifice for us and the salvation he obtained for us as a result.
      - Why is this important? What does it accomplish?
    - ❖ A festive celebration → Communion is not just to be a solemn occasion of remembering and confessing our sin and what it cost Jesus to take it away. It is also a celebration of the salvation and union we have with Christ as a result of his sacrifice for us. It is to be a time of joyous *communion*/fellowship with him.
      - Communion was a full-fledged meal in the early Church.
- Covenantal Fellowship Meal
  - In Old Testament times, meals often served as covenant oath-signs, putting a covenant into effect (or renewing it) and functioning as a sign and seal of it (see e.g., Exodus 24:1-11).
    - ❖ Communion is a covenant renewal ceremony. Taking Communion testifies reaffirms the believer’s faith/commitment to Christ/the New Covenant and testifies to the believer’s New Covenant membership and the blessings of the covenant for the believer, i.e., God’s covenantal commitments to members of the New Covenant. It is like renewing wedding vows.
  - Covenants made unrelated people family, and eating together symbolized their relationship and peace.
  - The Old Covenant sacrificial system involved fellowship meals for fellowship or peace offerings. The meal symbolized the worshipper’s fellowship/peace with God.

- ❖ Communion symbolizes our fellowship/peace/communion with God/Christ and provides a palpable experience of it

- Note how many of Jesus' actions and parables involve food and meals.

- Communion is the initial fulfillment of the Old Covenant fellowship meals.

- Note further Matthew 26:29 and cf. Revelation 19:9, the marriage supper of the Lamb, which is the final fulfillment of the Old Covenant fellowship meal and of Communion itself.

- Any other reason God would use food and drink and meals to symbolize faith and relationship with him?

- ❖ They are a shadow of our spiritual hunger and thirst for God, and their satisfaction.

4. Four “Looks” – As the Jews celebrate Passover they consider four “looks”. The “four looks” in Passover are a good way for us to see the rich and layered meaning of Communion.

A. “Look Back”

- 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

- At Passover the Jews reflect on God's saving hand. At the Supper we should remember what God has done for us. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). By celebrating Communion, physically reenacting his death in the symbolism of his body (the bread) and blood (the wine), we proclaim His death (and resurrection) until he comes again, remind ourselves of his amazing grace, and make opportunity for strengthening our faith in his sacrifice/the gospel.

B. “Look Inward” - 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

- The Jews cleaned the house of any leaven (yeast) before the Passover.

- Why? What does leaven/yeast represent? → sin

- Vs. 28 - let a man examine himself) → We should clean to “clean house” before taking communion.

- ❖ Am I a believer? ~ Have I been baptized (confession and initiation)?

- ❖ Do I have any sin to repentant of? Is there anything I need to get right with God about?

- Taking Communion is serious!

C. “Look Around” - 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 27-32

- Strangers, travelers, or people without family were welcomed into the family’s celebration during Passover. The context of Paul's teaching is clearly corporate.

- What do you think it means to take Communion in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27)? → yes, while in sin; but note 11:29 → not recognizing the body of the Lord

- ❖ What do you think it means to recognize the body of the Lord? → Probably 2 aspects

- ➔ Recognize the death of Christ for us and honor that, which includes submission to him; so taking Communion while in sin would be a form of not recognizing the body of the Lord

- What is the body of the Lord? → the Church
  - ➔ Recognize and honor the church body, the fellow believers of the church (the body of Christ)
  - ➔ Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17
- ❖ A major way of eating and drinking “in an unworthy manner” (vs. 27) is by “not judging the body rightly” (vs. 29) in the sense of not treating brothers and sisters in the church as befits the body of Christ, with love and honor, not being right or at peace with them.
- ❖ Note that Paul emphasizes not coming to please self to the neglect of our brothers. He is coming against a self-centered, lone ranger mentality. It is fellowship with God and with God's people. The Lord's Supper is not a private celebration but a family one. Personally and corporately this is a fellowship meal and we're called to recognize the Body, to treat our brothers and sisters rightly/with honor and be in good/loving relationship with them. The context of the First Letter to the Corinthians is the church and dealing with factions. So he is calling us in part to judge the church (Body of Christ) rightly. We are to examine ourselves and reflect on whether our relationships within the Body are expressing the character of Jesus.
  - What does Matthew 5:23-24 suggest for our celebration of Communion?
    - ❖ Tells us to make peace with one another before coming into the Lord's presence.

#### D. “Look Forward” - 1 Corinthians 11:26

- The Jews set an extra place at the Passover table for Elijah who was to herald the Messiah. In Mark 14:24-25 Jesus instructs us to look forward to His coming again as we take part in the sacrament.
- In what ways can we look forward to Jesus' coming during Communion?

#### 4. Who should not take Communion?

- Fenced Table - this means that you need something to look back to. The Table is not open for everyone. Why should the following people not participate in Communion?
  - Unbelievers – Communion is for Jesus' disciples only. We are celebrating His atoning work and expressing faith in it. If someone has not accepted that work, then he has no place participating in it.
  - What about children?
    - ❖ Until the child can make a clear confession of faith (and perhaps is baptized).
    - ❖ Paul gives two criteria for approaching the Table:
      - “Examine yourself” (1 Corinthians 11:28) = an ability to honestly confess sin.
      - “Judge the body rightly” (1 Corinthians 11:29) = some understanding of the death of Christ, the Church, and an understanding that Communion is not snack time.
- A believer in sin and refusing to repent. (Matthew 5:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 11:27-28)

#### 5. Our Practice

- Examine yourself/recognize the Body - there is usually a time for quiet repentance and/or reflection. If you have a problem with someone, seek to make peace before the service (it can be awkward to do a minute before communion). If you are unable to make peace with them personally, do it in your heart before the Lord. Forgive them and ask forgiveness of God and resolve to seek them out and reconcile at the earliest possible time.

5. Conclusion:

- See the definition at the beginning
- When we celebrate the Lord's Supper together we:
  - Symbolize and proclaim the death of Christ and our faith in it/Him.
  - Declare and partake of the benefits of the New Covenant.
  - Symbolize and experience spiritual nourishment and refreshment.
  - Demonstrate the unity of believers.
- Praise God for this blessed sacrament!