

The Sacred Table: Symbols, Substance and the Savio

Multiple

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Application

Announcements

Introduction:

Throughout my years of pastoring, I've shared numerous brief devotional snippets about communion, typically during the 2-3 minutes preceding our time of partaking together, but I've never delivered a comprehensive sermon on the subject of communion. Recently, through multiple conversations and personal reflection, I was reminded of how important this sacrament is, and how essential it is for those partaking of the Lord's Table to understand what's happening, and what's not, in order to experience the proper depth and reality of what sharing the Lord's supper is.

Illustration

Once a little boy took part in his first communion. As he looked at the tiny wafer and tiny cup he asked his dad to explain what it meant. Dad whispered, "Son, this was Jesus' last supper." The little guy was puzzled. He said, "They sure didn't give Him much, did they?"

What about the small wafer and grape juice cups? Or the cup of wine and loaf of bread? Why has this expression become a staple in the Christian church, and do we practice this expression with a full understanding of what's taking place? In the early church, communion was hallowed ground, a place of incredible grace and healing, as well as potential discipline and even judgment.

Remembering the sacrificial offering of Christ's body and blood by ingesting elements that have spiritual significance opens up the doors for many things to happen in our hearts and minds, according to Scripture, not because of the physical elements themselves, but because of the faith with which we approach Christ and His sacrifice. The more I study it, the more I'm amazed and can see why Jesus chose this sacrament, or practice, to memorialize His sacrifice and meet us in a profound way through our engagement in the process. I think I could do a three-week series on communion, but for the sake of time, we are going to collect multiple passages and summarize them into several points of what communion is (and is not).

Main Point

Point 1

Communion is a Mental Reminder

Food uniquely links us to memories in ways that many things can't. There are reasons we have sayings about "Grandma's Apple Pie." When we discuss moments and events, there aren't many times that we forget to mention the food!

For the first Jewish believers, food was intrinsically linked to the promise of God's deliverance and the bringing forth of His covenant. The Passover meal, which Jesus and his disciples would regularly partake in together, was full of symbolism designed by God to engage the mind. For generations, people who were not part of the Exodus could place themselves right at the moment of the event. They would imagine the blood of the lamb over their doorpost, the unleavened bread would excite the mind about the readiness involved in the moment of deliverance, where there wasn't time for the bread to rise because God's deliverance was going to be immediate. During the time of Jesus, the passover had four cups that would be received throughout the meal, each representing a promise from the book of Exodus. Cup of Sanctification – "I will bring you out..." Cup of Deliverance – "I will deliver you from slavery..." Cup of Redemption – "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm..." Cup of Praise (or Restoration) – "I will take you to be my people..." Those partaking would be reminded of events that brought them back to the faithfulness and deliverance of God.

The New Covenant:

This is why Jesus chose this meal to bring the true meaning of God's eternal plan of Salvation, bringing substance to the shadow.

The unleavened bread would now be the reminder of the swiftness of God's salvation through the broken body of Jesus. Jesus was unleavened, in that he was without sin or contamination. He was broken so that His wholeness could be distributed to everyone who trusts in Him for their deliverance. The cups would now be a picture of every promise of God in Christ Jesus being yes and amen. That redemption and salvation from the spiritual bondage of sin and shame would be covered by the spilled, sacrificial blood of the perfect lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

While we, as Gentiles, don't practice or observe a traditional passover Seder, the symbolism should have the same effect on us, to create a vivid depiction in our minds, that even though we weren't physically there at the cross where Jesus died, we transport our thoughts and mental engagement to that moment and soak in the gravity of what took place there.

Scripture

Luke 22:19 (NKJV) [19] And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

Scripture

[1 Corinthians 11:23-25] (NKJV) [23] For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; [24] and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." [25] In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

Illustration

Over the years, the Roman Catholic Church has contrived a heresy known as transubstantiation - that the bread instantly, and magically changes into the literal flesh of our Lord. Tragically, this means Jesus is crucified every time the Mass and the Eucharist are observed. He's sacrificed again and again. And if the sacrifice is repeated over and over, implied is that it's insufficient... God forbid! This is why three times in the book of Hebrews the writer says Jesus was sacrificed "once for all" for the sins of the world! As Charles Spurgeon wisely noted, "The sacrifice of Christ would be no sacrifice at all if it were to be repeated." The Scriptures affirm in Hebrews 10:10, "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." According to Catholic dogma, when the priest repeats the words of Jesus - in Latin it's "hoc est corpus meum" or "This is my body" - at that moment, the magic occurs. But that's obviously not what Jesus meant. How could it be? The bread couldn't be His body, if His body was standing there holding the bread in its hands. Over the years, the detractors of transubstantiation took the priest's incantation "hoc est corpus" and contracted it and turned it into a derogatory phrase, "hocus pocus" - a magical formula. Anything fanciful or not grounded in reality is just a lot of hocus pocus.

At one point, Jesus' own disciples were confused by the language of Christ speaking about his flesh being food and his blood being drink. In a literal sense, cannibalism was strictly forbidden according to the law of Moses. When they were trying to figure it out, Jesus clarified to His disciples the nature of His words:

Scripture

John 6:61-63 (NKJV) [61] When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? [62] What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? [63] It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."

Do this in remembrance of me:

To remember Christ is key - Communion is the place where we actually take our minds and eyes and place them on Christ and His sacrifice. Remembering Jesus places Him back in the center of our lives and moves other, lesser things to the periphery. Communion is like a compass for our thoughts that points to the true magnetic north, that is, the cross of Jesus Christ.

Main Point

Point 2

Communion is a Spiritual Invitation

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul discusses the potential dangers of interacting with the demonic spiritual forces behind idol worship. Physical idols are nothing, and the meat sacrificed to them is nothing, but when one engages in the physical ceremony, the spiritual forces of evil come out to play, and those engaging in the sacrifices of meat are spiritually reaching out and connecting to demons.

Illustration

There is a 1993 painting by artist Danny Day, titled "Daddy's Girl." A widow and an orphan visit the Vietnam Memorial on the mall in Washington, DC. They're pointing at a name engraved in the polished granite. And there's a reflection in the stone. But it's not of the little girl and her mom. It's the husband and the father who's reaching out to his little girl and wife. This is how we should think of communion. As we reach out to touch the bread and cup, in the spiritual realm, our Savior is reaching back to us.

Likewise, to engage in the partaking of broken bread and the cup (be it wine or juice) may be physically engaging in a simple ceremony, but spiritually, there are things taking place as well. There is the Holy Spirit, the Heavenly Father, and the Savior, Jesus Christ, who are reaching back out in authentic fellowship to our spiritual being through partaking of the elements. This is why Paul writes:

Scripture

1 Corinthians 10:16 (NKJV) [16] The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

When we engage spiritually in this physical act, we are fellowshiping with the reality of the gospel. We are not receiving a new sacrifice, but we are allowing the crucified and risen King to examine us, sanctify us, impart grace to us, expose us, heal us, convict us, and restore us through the means of His once and for all sacrifice.

Main Point

Point 3

Communion is a Physical & Prophetic Proclamation

Scripture

1 Corinthians 11:26 (NKJV) [26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

Illustration

Proclaiming Victory in a World Still at War
In 1776, the American colonies declared their independence from Britain with soaring words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." Yet even as they proclaimed freedom, British troops still occupied their cities, and years of bloody conflict lay ahead. But they didn't wait for final victory to start living as a free people. Just days after signing the Declaration, they read it aloud in public squares. Bells rang, soldiers cheered, and copies were dispatched to be proclaimed from courthouse steps across the land. Each year on July 4, even while the war still raged, they held celebrations — not because peace had come, but because they believed it would. Their declarations became both a battle cry and a promise of victory to come.

Communion: Our Proclamation in a Ravaged World
So it is with us — only infinitely more. When we come to the Lord's Table, Paul says we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." We live in a world still ravaged by sin, still occupied by suffering and death. But here at this Table, we proclaim — to ourselves, to each other, and to the watching world — that Jesus has already accomplished everything we need. His cross has broken sin's power, His resurrection has shattered the grave, and His return will bring final, glorious victory. Communion is our holy declaration. It is both our battle cry in a world still at war and our victory chant of a triumph already secured. So today, with awe and gratitude, we lift the bread and the cup and proclaim together: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Scripture

Matthew 26:29 (NKJV) [29] "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

Quote

— *Pastor Josh*

Communion is a remembrance of the past, but it's also a proclamation about the future! Jesus is coming again!

Main Point

Point 4

Communication is a personal examination

Scripture

1 Corinthians 11:27-32 (NKJV) [27] Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. [28] But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. [30] For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. [31] For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. [32] But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

Ancient Love Feast:

Jude 12 and Second Peter 2 refer to what is called a "love feast". In our perverted, sexually overstimulated culture, that name probably wouldn't be the best title. But then, it simply took the form of a communal dinner (A highly communal society and culture), much like would have been experienced at the last supper with Jesus and His disciples.

This dinner would be served to the entire church in which every member, regardless of social status, wealth, or race, would partake together as ONE body, remembering their ONE savior, and ONE salvation.

Regarding ancient social dinners, one scholar observes:

Quote

“Clubs and associations in antiquity often had communal meals, sometimes paid for out of group funds. It was not uncommon for the food served to the diners to differ in quality and amount.”

For instance, culturally, if a social group met for a meal, the president of the club, or the members of the highest rank, with greater social status or more wealth, would be served first and receive the heftiest and prime portions of food.

And while one might understand why Christ-less cultures might operate in such a way, it was a travesty of love that the church would adopt a system so contrary to the cross and heart of Christ. Well, apparently, instead of being a celebration of the savior and salvation, the Corinthians' love feasts became a platform for disunity among the classes and self-centered feasting.

Paul rebukes the Corinthians because when they came together to partake of the Lord's Supper, they were getting drunk on the wine, they were running over each other to see who could get the best and most food, and they were dishonoring the poor by pushing them to the back of the line. Let me ask you, do you think these things sound like a reflection of Christ?

Application

While our version of communion isn't ever going to get you drunk, and unless your truly starving to death, isn't going to offer you a good meal, is there any relevant application? Absolutely, because it was the heart issues that caused communion to be contaminated. Coming to church with a "Me-centered" mentality. The worship, the service, the atmosphere... It's all about what you can get. You're fighting with each other, hating one another, gossiping behind one another's backs. Showing preference to those who might get you ahead in life. The communion service may be different, but the heart issues are still the same.

EXAMINATION:

“But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” (1 Corinthians 11:28)

The word for examine means to scrutinize like testing metal — to see what it's really made of. One of the healthiest things a church can do is to regularly examine itself, starting with each individual heart.

What Paul is not saying:

He's not saying that if you sinned today, you shouldn't take communion. That would actually undercut the very point of the cross. The danger isn't having sin in your life — it's approaching the table without considering it, without humble repentance, as if your sin doesn't matter.

If you look at yourself and see failures and sin, then the cross is exactly where you need to run. But come to it humbly, grateful for what Jesus has done.

Three Questions for Self-Examination

1. Am I despising the church through self-centeredness?

Am I here to serve, or just to be served? Do I care only about what concerns me?

2. Am I dishonoring other believers because of prejudice or bitterness?

Is there unforgiveness or avoidance of people who've wronged me or who are simply different?

"If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift... first be reconciled to your brother." (Matthew 5:23-24)

3. Am I diminishing the cross by holding on to unconfessed sin?

Have I brought my sin openly before God, seeking His mercy?

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us..." (1 John 1:8-9)

Why This Matters: The Seriousness of the Table

Paul says if we don't examine ourselves, we risk eating and drinking judgment on ourselves.

"For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." (1 Corinthians 11:29-30)

Every bite and sip taken lightly — without reverence or repentance — risks God's loving discipline. Why? Because we're misrepresenting the very cross we claim to honor.

"If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged." Taking an honest look at our hearts and humbly bringing it all to the cross can spare us painful discipline. In fact, Paul says some believers were even getting sick or dying because they treated the Lord's Table so carelessly.

That doesn't mean all sickness is because of taking communion wrongly. But if you've been convicted by some of these things, maybe by coming back to the Lord honestly, you might also find healing and renewal.

A Loving Discipline

Finally, notice the purpose of God's judgment here.

"When we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world." (1 Corinthians 11:32)

God's discipline is never to destroy us — it's to refine us, so we don't fall under His final judgment. He would rather break us now in loving correction than see us eternally lost. Even His discipline is an act of grace.

Main Point

Point 5

Communion is a statement of identification

Scripture

[1 Corinthians 10:17] (NKJV) [17] For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

When bread is broken, it becomes many pieces, but in the Jewish mind, it's still one piece of bread that has now taken on many different forms, but still one essence. This is how we become integrated into the body of Christ.

Quote

— *Pastor Josh*

Communion is a reminder that we are one with each other, just as we are one with Christ.

Scripture

John 17:22 (NKJV) [22] And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

Application

When you and I take communion, we should do it with the reminder that none of us is to be an island unto ourselves. We need fellowship, we need accountability, and we need to serve, love, and live as though the spiritual health of the rest of the church depends on our own spiritual health.

Conclusion

As we approach communion today, let's keep these things in mind:

A mental reminder - pulling our memories and minds to the point of the cross. A Spiritual Invitation - In communion, we don't merely reach out to Jesus, but His Spirit reaches into us, causing us to have real-time fellowship with the object of our salvation, Jesus. A Physical and Prophetic Proclamation - it's a real-time declaration to ourselves and the world that Jesus has won the victory, and will win the war when he returns. A Personal Examination - The cross and the sacrifice of Christ is not something to be taken lightly, but to be approached by faith and humility, allowing the Spirit to examine and expose things in our heart that dishonor Christ and His sacrifice. A Statement of Identification - The body of Christ is one, and in partaking of Christ's sacrifice, you become one with him and each other. Don't isolate but rather engage the body of Christ.