

Understanding the Sacrament of Communion

“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Matthew 26:26-28

What is a Sacrament?

The word ‘sacred’ means something that is set aside for the worship of God or something worthy of reverence. It is related to the idea of ‘holiness’. Something that is ‘holy’ is something that is set aside (or set apart) for a special purpose. Holiness, in the sense of perfection, is only available to God, (Jesus told the rich young ruler, “There is no one good but God alone.” Mark 10:18b) but holiness in the sense of being ‘set aside’ for a special purpose, can be attributed to many things. This does not mean the things or ceremonies have an intrinsic value in and of themselves. The water used in baptism for example, is just regular H₂O. However, when it is used as part of the ‘sacrament of baptism’, it is set aside to a special use and purpose. The ‘blessing’, like all blessings, has to do with our relationship to the God who blesses us, not an inherent change in the things themselves.

This is important to understand, lest we think that ‘holy water’ has some kind of magical properties. God allows us to use ‘common things’ for ‘sacred purposes’. Trusting in God is not magic, but the real means by which we experience the blessings that come from the heart of God for us! This is the Good News of the Gospel. God loves us and chooses to act in our lives. Sacraments reflect that relationship; they do not operate “in-and-of themselves”.

Two Sacraments

Since the Reformation, Protestant churches have recognized only two ‘sacraments’ in the Scriptures. Those two are baptism, and communion. In both cases, it is important to understand the meaning of those sacraments—the ‘why’ of ‘why we do what we do’ in them.

Communion

The sacraments are things we have been instructed to do, not in order to obligate God (God cannot be manipulated, but He can always be trusted to keep His word), nor are they “binding spiritual transactions” as if anything we do could force God into a response. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone and the sacraments are a *response* to God’s grace, not a prerequisite to it—they are a ‘sign’ of grace, not a ‘means’ of grace.

Sign of Grace

What is the distinction here between a ‘sign’ and a ‘means’ of grace? During the Reformation,

the Protestants insisted that Scripture teaches that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). That means God saves us through his grace alone (grace being unmerited favor) and we receive, or appropriate, that grace through faith alone, not by any 'work' that we do. Communion is not a 'saving act', but instead a sign that we are trusting (having faith) in God's grace. Each person must come to that place where he/she decides for himself/herself to trust in the grace of God, but communion is the sign that God's love and forgiveness for us has come to us because of the cost that Jesus was willing to pay for our sins on our behalf. We believe the sacrament declares the faithfulness of God, not that it is something that is a means of grace (for we are saved by grace through faith alone) but as a sign of God's grace to us. We are invited to the Lord's table by Jesus himself, to remember, as he instructed, that he has paid that price for us with his own body and blood. We are invited to partake, not because we are worthy, but because we have been worth it to him. In the sacrament, we are reminded of the cost of his love, but our sin should not be the main focus. The focus should be on the love of God for us that He was willing to make that sacrifice—a sacrifice both necessary and sufficient. When we come to the table we are participating as a 'sign' of our faith in God's grace, not as a means of acquiring that grace.

This understanding of communion is crucial to understanding what Jesus said when he instituted communion. "This is my body, broken for you ... take and eat ... this is my blood, shed for you ... take and drink." The statements, 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood' have caused a good deal of disagreement in the Church over the centuries.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches the doctrine of "transubstantiation." The Catholic doctrine used Aristotle's description that all things are made up of "form" - what something looks like on the outside, and "substance" - the essential nature of the thing. A chair then, is a chair, not only because it has the outward form of a chair, but because it has the "substance" or better translated, essence, of chair. Chairs can therefore have many forms, and yet all be chairs.

Transubstantiation then means that the bread and wine do not cease to be bread and wine in form, but their essence (or substance) changes into that of the very body and blood of Christ.

The Lutheran view is somewhat different and is called "consubstantiation." The bread and wine remain bread and wine in form and substance (or essence), but also take on the essence of the body and blood of Christ. Ulrich Zwingli, another Reformer, argued that the whole idea was silly, and the bread and wine are only symbols, and do not change at all. (This would represent the "lowest" sacramental view.) Calvin suggested that in communion, Christ was both truly present, and truly absent.

Interestingly enough, while the debate has continued throughout the ages, there is no way to prove the point one way or another. The essential question of whether the sacraments are a means of grace or a sign of grace is still the significant difference. If they are a means of grace, then they can operate 'in and of themselves' i.e. binding spiritual transactions. However, if we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, then whatever else the sacraments may be, they are

not a means of grace. In the Presbyterian Church, we accept the doctrine of “Faith Alone” because we affirm the Bible’s contention that God “measures the heart” and counts faith as if it were righteousness. Only God can measure the heart (only He can know when we do something if we really mean it) and faith is not a work of any kind, but a response to that grace, which has no merit in and of itself, but only matters because God chooses to count it so.

The ‘bread and wine’ are symbols (which therefore means they do not have to be unleavened bread or fermented wine) used by Jesus because he instituted his “Lord’s supper” while the apostles were sharing the Passover meal. The wine became a symbol used within that celebration as it had developed from the original celebration of Passover recorded in Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 16 (which was originally blood from the Passover lamb put over the door frame of the household so the angel of death would ‘pass over’ that house). The unleavened bread was used to symbolize the haste with which they had to leave Egypt (couldn’t wait for the bread to rise—bake it and go).

Traditionally, bread was seen as a symbol of sustenance (it was considered a staple of the Jewish diet) and the unleavened bread the symbol of haste in leaving Egypt but using bread to represent the body was not common usage. Wine was traditionally seen as representing blood, and since blood was not supposed to be ingested by Jews (when a sacrifice was made, the blood was poured out on the ground, because blood represented life, and life belonged to God), so the suggestion of eating Jesus’ body and drinking his blood would have been offensive to Jews. Yet, it reflects Jesus’ teaching when he refers to himself as the ‘bread of life’ in John’s Gospel. “So, Jesus 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 you. Whoever feeds on 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. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.’” (John 6:53-56)

The pagan idea of drinking the blood of an animal was to get its ‘strength and spirit’ into you. This was denied to Jews as a practice, but Jesus was saying precisely in communion that we are to take His life into ours, His Spirit to enter ours. All this is highly spiritual and metaphorical in nature. *Hence, our understanding of communion should reflect that nature.* To argue about the physical nature of the ‘bread and wine’ is to miss the message. Hence, in the Presbyterian Church, the bread used is frequently ‘leavened’ and the ‘wine’ is unfermented grape juice. They are symbols, not qualitatively different objects after someone has spoken some words over them. They are ‘holy’ in the sense of being set apart to a particular use, not ‘magically’ converted into something else. Communion is a faithful act of remembrance, not a magic trick.

Administering the Sacrament

Following the Biblical mandate to remember, the Sacrament of Communion is a community event. Therefore, there are no “private” communions. However, the idea that communion must be served only by clergy has no Biblical foundation. The Church went centuries without an

‘official clergy’ or ordination. And Passover was not celebrated in Synagogues or in the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, but in individual homes, with the head of the household being the one who lead the service. The practice of restricting the serving of communion by ‘clergy’ only came much later in church history. Making sure that the sacrament of communion is faithfully passed down without changing it (“Do this in remembrance of me”) is a worthy goal, but the idea that it should be restricted to only those ‘ordained’ (set aside) flies in the face of the Biblical mandate that, as Christians, we are all called to ministry and that as a people, we are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (I Peter 2:9; RSV). So, it is Biblically appropriate for the head of the household to be able to serve in this fashion. Just let them be well instructed in doing so!

There are four basic elements to the serving of communion.

The Invitation

The wording may vary, but communion begins with the following invitation. “This is the Lord’s table, and he invites those who would, to come and partake of it.”

In early America, the Presbyterian Church practiced communion only annually. In order to come to the table you had to be examined by elders of the church to make sure that you came “in a worthy manner”. This meant confessing and repenting of any sins of which you were aware. If the elders considered you were truly penitent and were ready to come with the proper attitude, you would receive a communion token. Without the token, you would not be served at the Lord’s table. This practice was called, “fencing the table” and was discontinued when it was argued that none of us is worthy to come to the table (ever), but that Jesus sacrificed himself, not for the worthy, but for the unworthy. It is his table, and he does the inviting, and he invited all who would respond to his grace, to come and receive the sacrament as a sign of his/her faith in his grace.

Prayer of Consecration

The elements are prayed over and God is asked to set them aside (make them ‘holy’) to a special and a sacred purpose. The following is an example, but the prayer should include asking God to ‘set them aside to a special and a sacred purpose’. This is called the ‘blessing’ of the elements.

“Lord, we thank you for your sacrifice that is represented in these elements, but we thank you even more for the love you have for us that made you willing to make this sacrifice. Set aside these common elements to a special and a sacred purpose, that even as we eat them and are nourished in body, that we would be filled again with the joy of your salvation. We pray these things in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Words of Institution

The ‘words of institution’ set forth the sacrament as offered by Jesus himself. “And now I deliver unto you, as has been faithfully delivered unto me, that on the night on which he was betrayed, after giving thanks, Jesus took the bread and broke it and gave it to them and said to his

disciples, ‘This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat.’ And in like manner, after giving thanks, Jesus took the cup and said, ‘This is the cup of the new covenant in my shed blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins. All of you drink of it.’ For as often as we eat this bread, and drink of this cup, we proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, until he comes again.”

While saying these words, the officiant breaks the bread and pours into the cup. From there, the bread and the cup can be distributed in any number of ways. Many times, when the bread is distributed, the person distributing the bread will say, “Christ’s body broken for you.” And in like manner, for the cup, “Christ’s blood shed for you.” But these are traditions. What is essential is the prayer (the blessing of the elements) and the words of institution that keep the sacrament being shared the same as what was faithfully delivered to us so many centuries ago.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

After the serving of the elements, the last part of communion is the prayer of thanksgiving. Most scholars believe that Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper with the 3rd of 4 cups of wine that were served at the Passover meal in the 1st Century. This was called the cup of Thanksgiving, and it is believed that Jesus would have prayed a prayer of thanksgiving after it. Hence, so do we. Again, the wording of the prayer may vary. The following is offered as an example.

“Lord Jesus, this is our prayer of thanksgiving. We thank you again for loving us and redeeming us. Bless us that we might go forth from your table to share the Good News of your love and grace to our hurting world. We pray these things in your name, Amen.”

That concludes the ‘service of communion’. It is an act of obedience, that we remember and come again to the Lord’s table to participate in what John Calvin called the Magnificent Exchange; we exchange our unworthiness for Christ’s worthiness, and go out to serve God and others as Jesus did!

The Good News

This is the Gospel we proclaim whenever we receive communion—the grace, justice, and love of God that has come to us through the work accomplished by Jesus Christ that we might bear his name out into the world as his faithful witnesses.

Soli Deo Gloria!