

The Lord's Supper (Communion)

(Read: Matthew 26:17-29; Luke 22:13-20; 1Corinthians 11:23-32.)

The Eucharist (Greek: gratitude, joy) focuses on Christ, on what he did on the cross, on his suffering, death, burial and resurrection. We regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper; otherwise, we are prone to forget what the innocent Christ experienced for our sakes, for our sins, for our salvation. The Lord's Supper is a constant reminder.

What it is *not*

At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and said, "...*this is my body.*' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, '*Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood...*'" (Matthew 26:26-27). Notice that he does not say, "This wine will now change into blood." He is holding the cup of *wine* and says, "*This [wine] is my blood.*" He is breaking the bread, but he does not say, "This bread is now becoming my flesh." He says, "*This [bread] is my body.*" And all this was said and done *before* he bled and died. "...*a will [covenant] is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living*" (Hebrews 9:17).

Not only that, but after they all ate the bread and drank the wine, he said that the next time he drinks "...*this fruit of the vine...*" along with them, it will be "...*in my Father's kingdom*" (Matthew 26:29). Did his blood turn back into wine once again? Rather than understand his choice of words as being literal, it seems to me that it's best to think of the bread and wine as *symbols* of his body and blood.

I believe that just as the terms *building*, *temple* and *body* are figures of speech for "the church," so Communion and Baptism are also *symbolic* ordinances. Jesus is not really a door or a gate. And we are not sheep literally. Jesus is not really a vine; we are not real branches. Christ is not really a cornerstone, nor are we real building stones. He is not real bread, water and wine. In order to clarify spiritual concepts to our material minds, Scripture uses endless allegories, parables and similes.

Even fellowship with Christ is no longer on a human, physical level; it is now purely spiritual. "*Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more*" (1 Corinthians 5:16 AV). "*But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit*" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

"Is not the cup of thanksgiving [Greek: eulogy, praise] for which we give thanks a participation [communion] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in [communion of] the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). "Literally, verse 17 reads: '*Since it is one bread, we the many are one body; for we are all partakers of one bread.*' We are not said to be one bread; but we are one body because we partake of one bread." (Hodge) Do you see the metaphors? Cup...loaf of bread...body. Do you see the spiritual analogies?

"He who with faith partakes of the cup and the bread, partakes really but spiritually of the blood and body of Christ (Ephesians 5:30,32), and of the benefits of His sacrifice on the cross (compare 1 Corinthians 10:18). ALFORD explains, 'The cup . . . is the [joint] participation (that is, that whereby the act of participation takes place) of the blood,' &c. It is

the seal of our living union with, and a means of our partaking of, Christ as our Saviour (John 6:53-57). It is not said, 'The cup . . . is *the blood*,' or 'the bread . . . is *the body*,' but 'is the *communion* [joint-participation] of the blood . . . body.' If the bread be changed into the literal body of Christ, where is the sign of the sacrament? To drink literal *blood* would have been an abomination to Jews, which the first Christians were (Leviticus 17:11,12). *Breaking the bread* was part of the act of consecrating it, for thus was represented the crucifixion of Christ's body" (1 Corinthians 11:24). (Jamieson Fuassset and Brown Commentary)

"*They [the Israelis in the wilderness] all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ*" (1 Corinthians 10:3-4).

"*Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty (Will never go hungry and never be thirsty how: physically or spiritually?)...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever [If an atheist or a Christ-rejecter eats "this bread," will s/he have Christ's eternal life in her/him?]*

"*I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him...Does this offend you? The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:35,51,53-56,61,63. Emphasis added).*

In any event, it is forbidden in Scripture to eat or drink blood of any kind. "... *the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said..., 'You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood...'*" (Leviticus 17:14). (cf. Genesis 9:4.)

"...*The flesh counts for nothing.*" There is no material or physical advantage or purpose. So, since the meaning and the benefit are spiritual, there is no need for actual bread-to-flesh, wine-to-blood transformation, and vice versa. But the analogy is clearly there: Christ is to us spiritually what blood is to a body.

What it is

- The bread *represents* Christ's incarnation (his body).
- The wine *represents* Christ's death. (Life is in the blood: Leviticus 17:11.)
- The purpose of the ordinance is to remember and to proclaim the laying down of his life for us, to show what a great price he paid for our redemption. (See 1 Corinthians 11:24.) We also recall and celebrate his whole life and all he did for us. That might be why Apostle Paul calls it "...*the cup of thanksgiving...*"

The elements and the cup

The *symbolism* of the Lord's Supper allows for the use of alternative elements.

I have taken part in Christian communion services in many countries, in all sorts of cultures and conditions. In some situations, wine and grape juices are not available. (Many converted alcoholics will not touch wine, even if it is available.) Christians have substituted whatever fruit juices are available. In some countries and situations milk is used.

And there is no end to the assortment of breads that are used throughout the world, even though unleavened bread may be preferable (See Luke 22:7-8). There are many interesting and important parallels between the events of the Passover and the events of the crucifixion. But, celebrating the Lord's Supper should not be canceled or put off for lack of unleavened bread. It is, after all, symbolic.

What kind and how many communion cups should be used? You would be amazed, if not dismayed, if you knew how much discussion, dissension and division this humble, innocent container creates. But it, too, is a symbol and, as such, its shape, size and composition is of no consequence.

There was nothing special about the cup Jesus passed around. Since we do not use the cup Christ used, and since the New Testament does not give cup specifications, we use whatever is available. There is nothing special or sacred about material things. We must try to focus our attention not on the *means* but on the *meaning* of communion. "*The Spirit gives life; the flesh (the physical, the material) counts for nothing*" (John 6:63).

How should we participate?

We must partake in a worthy *manner* (1 Corinthians 11:27-28). Apostle Paul is not saying we can or should be worthy. (Who of us is worthy?) He refers to the *way* in which we participate. In the previous chapter and in the first half of chapter eleven, Apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for participating in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. Some did not understand the spiritual significance of the occasion. Some were even getting drunk during the love feasts immediately preceding the Communion service. The Eucharist is not to be treated lightly, superficially, thoughtlessly. It is a profound celebration.

God expects us to always take part, and do it with an appropriate attitude and demeanor. When we partake worthily, we experience Life; when we do it unworthily, we experience death. Needless to say, worthiness also means having a right relationship with the Lord and with people. How can you have fellowship at the table of the Lord, if you are out of fellowship with him and his Body?

True children of God – those who have been born of the Spirit – *should* take part whenever communion is served. I say "should" because we have no right to abstain. What does the Bible say? "*Let a man examine himself, and having done that, let him eat the bread and drink from the cup*" (1Corinthians 11:28 – Weymouth. Emphasis added). So, Apostle Paul urges self-examination before participation; nowhere does he permit abstinence.

Abstinence only postpones our getting right with God and man. Abstention only adds sin to sin. This is not right; this is not scriptural. To delay getting right with God and man, to delay partaking in the Lord's Supper, is to open the door to the devil. He is the only one who benefits from your broken fellowship with the Lord and with people. To break fellowship with the head of the church and body of Christ is to invite the influence of Satan. Spiritual leaders have no Scriptural grounds to recommend *refraining* from participation in the

Lord's Supper – for *any* reason. On the contrary, they must encourage *taking part*, having first expressed the proper concerns and precautions. That, after all, is the purpose of the event – *to participate*. Furthermore, the New Testament gives no *biological* reasons for abstaining. Physical “uncleanness” has nothing to do with participation. It's purely a spiritual event.

Getting right with God means confession and repentance for sins of commission and omission. Getting right with man means making things right with the person against whom you have a grievance, or vice versa. (Matthew 5:23-24; Mark 11:25-26; I Peter 3:7.) I say, “*making* things right,” because *ignoring* the problem is not a scriptural solution. And the strained or broken relationship needs to be repaired quickly, so that you can participate in Communion in a worthy manner.

Don't wait until just before the Lord's Supper to settle your differences with God and man. Make things right before today's sun goes down. If you don't get reconciled with your “brother” or “sister,” God will not accept your “gifts” of prayer, worship, service or resources at his “altar.” We have to be at peace with each other, as much as it depends on us. We must treat each other properly – with forgiveness, consideration and respect. It's far better to judge ourselves, than to wait for God's judgment. (See 1Corinthians 11:31.) ◇◇