

Communion: The Table of Covenant Renewal – 1 Cor 10:16-17, 11:23-26

“O ‘Twas a Joyful Sound” – The Way We Worship #8

Introduction – Our service of worship follows the order of the three main sacrifices of the Levitical orders: the sin-offering, the ascension offering, and the peace offering, confession, consecration, and communion. All of this is done with the overshadowing new covenant command by Paul to “*present your bodies a living sacrifice*” (Rom 12:1) as well as to “*continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name*” (Heb 13:15). Our service is full of praise and thanksgiving, culminating at a Table of Thanksgiving where we share a meal with our heavenly Father in perfect peace. There, He equips us by the Holy Spirit with Christ, knitting us together with Him, before sending us out on behalf of Him into the world. God’s purposes in this service is to make us more like Christ, fully at peace with God the Father, nurtured by His Holy Spirit with the faithfulness of Jesus, and sent as ambassadors of Jesus in our new humanity to live for Jesus in the strength of Jesus.

What’s it Called? – Paul refers to it in our text as “*communion*” – “*the communion of the blood of Christ*” and “*the communion of the body of Christ*” (10:16) and so we often refer to this as Communion. In 1 Cor 11:20 he refers to it as “*the Lord’s Supper*” and so we are to think of it as partaking in some respects like we partake at other meals. In fact, this meal should inform our other meal times as well. It is called “*the Lord’s table*” (10:21) which also points to ideas of a meal, of fellowship around a meal, of a time of rest and peace, and of feasting and celebration. In Acts, it is referred to as “*the breaking of bread*” (Acts 20:7), an activity that was occurring every Lord’s Day. Finally, when Jesus delivered His instructions to Paul, it was called “*the cup of the new covenant*” (1 Cor 11:25-26).

What Does this Mean? – Let’s make a couple of quick observations. First, it is the *Lord’s Supper* and not ours. He owns it and He summons whom He desires. If you are summoned, then you must come. Second, 10:16 says it is a cup of *blessing*, and so the activity should be one of receiving a blessing and not an act of shame or feeling bad about oneself. It is a means of grace, of blessing, and so we should come expectantly and full of faith. God’s grace is not limited to the Supper, but in this fellowship of the saints with the Lord, God has committed Himself to bestow a certain gracious blessing that does not happen anywhere else. Third, Jesus gave thanks as He instituted the practice while breaking the bread and pointing to His body broken for us – and this is why we call it a Eucharist, or a thanksgiving. It is a time of thankfulness.

Covenantal Partaking – When Jesus said, “*This is My body*” He meant something and He meant for it to affect the way we come to His Table. The Roman Catholic error has been to interpret these words in an overly literalistic manner and bestow a power of transubstantiation through the words of a priest. The good work of the Reformation included a rejection of this error and the idolatrous practices associated with it. Many modern evangelicals have grown up, however, in a simplistic memorialist view where the act of taking communion is simply an act of remembering Christ’s death; the bread and wine are illustrations to help us in that act, like a flannel graph Noah’s ark set. What they do not know is that this was not the view of the vast majority of the Reformers. What Calvin and others taught was a doctrine of covenantal partaking.

Our Service of Worship – This is connected to understanding what happens when the Lord summons us here for worship. Many, again, think of it as not much more than a lecture about Christ with some singing thrown in. But Eph 2:6 teaches us that we have been seated together with Christ in the heavenlies, and Heb 12:18-29 describes this gathering as an assembly in heaven with Christ. This occurs covenantally, by faith and through the power of the Holy Spirit – but that doesn’t mean that it does not really occur. In the same way, when we come to the Table by faith we covenantally partake of the body and blood of Christ spiritually, that is, by means of the Holy Spirit. We see the same idea in 1 Cor 10:24 where the Old Testament saints ate spiritual bread and drank spiritual drink and they were partaking of Christ.

The Communion of the Blood and Body (1 Cor 10:16) – This all helps give a deeper understanding of what Paul is saying in this verse. The *communion* (*koinonia*) is the *participation*, the *fellowship*, the mutual *partaking*, in the life of Jesus Christ because of His once for all sacrifice. When we partake of the wine, we are partaking of the blood of Christ, not because the wine is transformed, but because we are being transformed. We partake of the one loaf because we are the one loaf. “*We receive and eat the bread and, through the miraculous action of God’s spirit, we are as a community (re)formed as His Body. We drink from the cup and we are, through the blood of the covenant shed for our forgiveness, made into living sacrifices*” – Jeffrey Meyers.

Discerning the Lord's Body – This phrase (used in 1 Cor 11:27-29) has come to mean in some circles that the nuances of the Lord's Supper must be understood (and one must pass a test) before one can come to the Table. But that is wrenching this phrase out of context. Paul is not telling us that we must adore and worship the elements on the table (which is the Roman Catholic error), nor is he suggesting that we must look deep within our own hearts to find our hidden sins (which is the Protestant pietist error). He was telling the Corinthians that they must discern the Lord's body in one another, something that their schisms, cliques, and divisions were keeping them from doing. And so, the question for us all as we come to the Table is – do you discern Jesus all around you in your brothers and sisters? This means that taking communion is a communal act and not an individual act. Your baptism was your individual initiation into the covenant people of God. Communion is our ongoing participation in the benefits of being in Christ's body. And this is why it makes no sense at all, as an example, to withhold communion from little saints. Often, they get it far better than we do (Luke 18:15-17).

A Weekly, Communal, Altar Call – One tradition we do not practice is that of an altar call where individuals make a decision to follow Jesus or rededicate their life in repentance and faith as they come forward to the “anxious bench” as Finney called it. But we do all and altogether come to Christ in this entire service of worship. We do all come to the Father through Christ in this service. And we come, not with anxiousness, but in confident peace, to the Table of the Lord, not because of what we have committed to, but because of what the Father has committed and is giving to us, over and over again. We partake by faith (and not by feeling), and we partake communally, not individualistically – with Christ and with one another. This meal is a meal of reformation and revival. And Jesus says “*come*.”