

Martin White. Sunday, 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2008. 1 Corinthians 11:17-33.

## **Community and Communion**

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions. (1 Corinthians 11:17-33)

Communion is a hugely important thing for all Christians.

It is one of two 'ceremonies' Jesus told us to do – the other being baptism, and it is celebrated in almost all churches and denominations around the world (the only exception I can think of is the Salvation Army, who don't have communion because historically were reaching so many alcoholics that they didn't want the wine to be a stumbling block)

- It was offered to prisoners before their executions
- It is part of the Coronation Ceremony
- It is open to rich people in the wealthiest cathedrals and it is celebrated in the smallest churches among the poorest people
- And it was the first food ever to be eaten on the moon – by Buzz Aldrin

It is called lots of different things:

Communion = literally "Com" – together "Union" - One

Eucharist = "Thanksgiving"

Mass = from "Missa" – Latin for "sent."

The Lord's Supper

Breaking Bread

And for the simplest of ceremonies; sharing some bread and wine together; it is full of meaning.

1. It comes from, and borrows the idea of Passover – where God judged the Egyptians and rescued His People; where they had to kill a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts so that when God's judgement came, it 'passed over' the houses marked with the blood of the lamb.
2. It reminds us that as the bread is broken, so Jesus – the Bread of Life was broken for us –

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

3. It points to the New Covenant:

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:20)

4. This points back to the Old Covenant – where animals (sheep and goats) would be killed; and also to the cost of the New Covenant – the Blood of Jesus. And it reminds us of this agreement and unbreakable Promise of God to deal with our guilt and shame and sin and to bring us as adopted children, back to peace with God.

5. It is to do with remembering what Jesus has done for us:

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:25)

6. And it is to do with looking forward:

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

One day we will share this meal with Him – not as an act of remembrance, but as a wedding feast – when we will never need to take communion again because it is obsolete – the remembrance being replaced with seeing Him face to face, knowing Him fully – even as we are fully known.

It will be as unnecessary as a photograph of your loved one when you finally meet them at the airport.

7. And it is a time of remembering God's Provision for us and for confessing our need for Jesus:

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

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. (John 6:32-35)

Jesus said to them, "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. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." (John 6:53-58)

All of this celebrates our communion with God – Once we were separated and under judgment – now we have been brought near, forgiven and reconciled.

And that is a main part of communion.

But I think that there is another part. As well as remembering our communion with God; we are also celebrating and remembering and acting out our communion with each other as Christians - all brought together and made one under the Lordship of Jesus.

Technically speaking, the word for what communion is, is a ‘sacrament.’

It’s more than just an empty ritual; it is an acting out of a bigger spiritual truth.

So baptism is an acting out of how we have been washed clean by Jesus; how we are dead to our old lives – then buried (in the water) and then ‘resurrected’ to a new life in Christ. It is a symbol pointing to an end of one life, and the beginning of a new life.

As we always say; baptism doesn’t save us, but it points to the fact that we have been saved.

But because of what it points to – and because it is done in obedience to God’s command and with faith, it carries God’s grace and blessing with it.

Communion too is a sacrament. It points to our “oneness” with God and it points to our “oneness” with each other.

It doesn’t in itself save us or bring us into communion with God – it points to and reminds us of a work God has already done.

8. And it doesn’t mysteriously make us all united, but it reminds us of what God has already done in making us one:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.  
(Ephesians 4:3)

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.  
(Ephesians 2:14-16)

And communion points directly to this:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in 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)

In other words, because we are all sharing a meal together (even if it's just bread and wine) we are equal and united.

I spoke before about how another name for communion is "The Lord's Supper" or "The Lord's Table"

9. As we share communion we are to remember that we are His guests, by His grace, and He is the Head of the table. And according to hospitality customs, we are required to be united under His Headship. It's not okay to bring disunity to the table.

The passage I started off with from 1 Corinthians 11 talks in depth about communion. In it, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for what they are doing wrong, and gives instruction about how communion should be taken.

The letters to the Corinthians address a lot of problems in the church, but many of the problems, I believe, are symptoms of what is going on there as many different cultures and classes of people are being 'crunched' together into one church. The church in Corinth is where all the theory is being put into practice – and Paul is teaching about many of the issues that are coming up (teaching about dealing with food sacrificed to idols, holy days, using spiritual gifts to exert power & influence, divisions, lawsuits, orderly worship and being part of the Body)

What is happening specifically with Communion is that different classes of people are getting it wrong.

The rich people in the church, who have time on their hands, are arriving nice and early for communion and eating all the food and drinking far too much of the wine – and getting drunk before the poor people in the church (many of who would be slaves – 1/3 of the population) have finished all their chores and duties and have been free to come along.

So the communion service – which should be a tool for building unity in the church, has become a point of even more division.

I think that lots of people find communion a little bit ‘scary’ because of this warning that Paul gives to the Corinthians, which is basically “some of you are sick and some of you have died because you didn’t take communion right!”

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 11:27-30)

As a young Christian, I was secretly really bothered by this, and used to desperately try to think the right thoughts and be ‘good enough’ to take communion.

➔ “Taking it in an unworthy manner” ➔ I feel unworthy!

➔ “Examine yourself” ➔ well, if I look closely, I definitely don’t deserve it!

And I guess that this is part of the reason why communion can be a ‘religious’ part of the meeting – where there has been free, un-self-conscious worship, And then someone says it’s time for communion, and people go quiet and a bit awkward.

Quiet and reflective isn’t bad, but if we get “religious” and start trying to please God by thinking more holy thoughts and hope it’s enough so God won’t notice the bad week we’ve just had, then that’s missing the point completely and ends up just being futile human effort.

Remember that the Israelites weren't saved because they were better than the Egyptians – they were saved from judgement by the lamb's blood on the doorposts!

If there's anything to remind us that it doesn't depend on us, then surely communion is the thing!

So what does it mean to examine ourselves and take communion in a worthy manner?

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the **body and blood** of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the **body** of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

Some people have commented on this that the "Body and blood" we must not sin against means that we remember what Jesus has done for us;

But the second reference is "the Body" (and doesn't mention the Blood)

This means Jesus' Body – the Church.

In other words, because of what Jesus has done for us, we better get our attitudes right towards His Body.

This is what the Corinthians were getting wrong – this is what Paul's rebuke (and the rest of the letter) is addressing. He doesn't mention once what thoughts they are secretly thinking.

Remember the story of the unmerciful servant that Jesus told; One man – a servant, was let off a huge, unpayable debt he owed to the king, and then went out and met a man that owed him a little bit, and threatened the man and demanded the money.

When the king found out that his servant was so unmerciful, he had him thrown into prison "to be tormented by the jailers until he repaid his debt in full."

This is one of the strongest parables Jesus told and it basically says that in the light of just how much we have been forgiven by God, it's not okay for us to hold anything against anyone else – especially our Christian brothers and sisters.

Communion holds us to account on that

If we are holding unforgiveness then we're stuck – because Jesus told us to share communion... but the Bible also says “be reconciled first” (Matthew 5:23-24). We're trapped – and I believe that that is exactly what God intended!

The same God we pray to, to give us our daily bread and forgive us our sins, also requires that we forgive those who sin against us.

Over the years different churches have got very strict about who can take communion and about sharing communion in an ‘orderly way’

Most, (rightly) have said you need to be a Christian to take communion  
Some churches have said that you need to be baptized before you do; others that you need to be confirmed; others that you are a member of that church.

This is an issue that has split churches and caused different denominations to form – exactly the opposite to Jesus' intention.

Orderly worship in Corinth had a lot more to do with unity than serving the bread and wine in a polite way.

It's not got anything to do with being quiet or ‘religious’; it's to do with enjoying the relationships Jesus has saved us into – with our Father in Heaven and with all of His Children.