

Communion from a Presbyterian Perspective

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Communion, also called the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament, and Holy Communion, is grounded in the "last supper," the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his arrest and crucifixion. The consecration of bread and juice (or wine) within this sacrament recall Jesus at the last supper giving his disciples bread and wine, saying, "This is my body broken for you" and "This is my blood poured out for you," and also, "Do this in remembrance of me.

Different churches and Christian traditions in the world today understand the meaning and significance of Communion and the elements of bread and wine/juice in slightly different ways. But, in general, all Christians believe that 1) this is a meal Jesus called and calls his disciples to eat, and that 2) God does something important within us and for us when we eat this meal together in this way. All Christians understand Communion to be a gift from God for us people – old and young.

When a person is hungry, that person finds something to eat and feels satisfied. The food makes the person strong and healthy. People also get hungry in a different way, not in one's stomach but in one's spirit – the thinking, feeling part of a person deep inside. The good news is that Jesus fills our spiritual hunger. Communion is coming to Jesus' table to be fed in our spirit. We come with family and friends who believe in Him. At his table we eat and drink as his disciples did on the night before Jesus died for us on the cross, and we are satisfied.

Sacraments

The church understands baptism to be a sacrament. The word "sacrament" comes from the Latin sacramentum, which means "mystery." The Greek word for mystery – *mysterion* – is found in the New Testament (particularly in Ephesians and Colossians) and refers there to Jesus, to the things of Jesus, to the gospel, to the good plan of God, etc. We refer to the sacraments (baptism and the Communion) as sacraments because they are holy mysteries that we do not and can not fully understand but through which we believe God's invisible grace becomes visible to us.

The great early church theologian Augustine (354-430) was the first to describe sacraments as "outward, visible signs of inward, spiritual grace." The Roman Catholic Church has understood the sacraments to actually convey justifying (i.e. saving) and sanctifying grace. Protestant churches (among whom are Presbyterians), however, have generally understood the sacraments to be important means of grace, as they are received by faith. Protestants believe that sacraments are outward signs done by people to represent or symbolize the inward grace enacted independently and freely by God. Thus, the sacraments are not necessary for salvation; nor are they "magic" of any sort. Such understandings of or connections with baptism (i.e. that they have power in and of themselves or that through them God can be manipulated) are erroneous.

The Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments. Protestant Christians, however, only recognize two sacraments – baptism and Communion (also known as the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist). Protestants long ago settled on only these two sacraments 1) because Jesus told people to engage in these two activities, and 2) because these two activities are for all people and not just for certain people.

Communion in scripture and the early church

In his letter we call 1 Corinthians (c 54-55), the apostle Paul gives the earliest recorded description of Jesus' Last Supper: "The Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'."

The synoptic gospels, first Mark, and then Matthew and Luke, depict Jesus as presiding over the Last Supper. References to Jesus' body and blood foreshadow his crucifixion, and he identifies them as a new covenant. In the gospel of John, the account of the Last Supper has no mention of Jesus taking bread and wine and speaking of them as his body and blood; instead it recounts his humble act of washing the disciples' feet, the prophecy of the betrayal, which set in motion the events that would lead to the cross, and his long discourse in response to some questions posed by his followers, in which he went on to speak of the importance of the unity of the disciples with him and each other.

The expression The Lord's Supper, derived from Paul's usage in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, may have originally referred to the Agape feast, the shared communal meal with which Communion was originally associated. The Agape feast is mentioned in Jude 12. But Communion is now commonly used in reference to a celebration involving no food other than the sacramental bread and wine.

Significance of Communion

When we participate in Communion, we affirm the following:

- That apart from God's gift to us of Jesus Christ, we have no hope;
- That we are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ and also his resurrection (i.e. we re-affirm of our baptism);
- That we repent of our sin and sinfulness and cling to God's grace;
- That we belong to God, not because we are worthy but because God has offered us the gift of salvation
- That we belong to God's covenant community (i.e. the church) and that God's intention for us is to live in community with those people;
- That we will seek to live faithfully as followers of Jesus and members of God's covenant community.

How does baptism relate to Communion?

It is our understanding that baptism is the means of grace and sacrament of *entrance* into God's covenant community and that Communion is the means of grace and the sacrament for *continuing* in God's covenant community. Baptism is about entrance or initiation. Communion is about nurture, fellowship, and growth. Therefore, baptism typically precedes Communion. To that end, all (i.e. adults and children) who have been baptized into Jesus Christ are encouraged after appropriate instruction and understanding of the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper to participate in the sacrament of Communion with the covenant community. It is a privilege and joy to do so.

Who is invited to participate in Communion?

"The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to [Communion] is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may

come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus." (PCUSA Book of Order, W-2.4011)

May children participate in Communion?

"Baptized children who are being nurtured and instructed in the significance of the invitation to the Table and the meaning of their response are invited to receive the Lord's Supper, recognizing that their understanding of participation will vary according to their maturity." (PCUSA Book of Order W-4.2002)

When is a child ready to receive Communion?

Since each child's development is different, the age of readiness will vary from child to child. The determination of this readiness is primarily the responsibility of the parents, but it is also the responsibility of the whole church to assist parents in fulfilling this responsibility of preparing their children for meaningful participation in Communion. Therefore, our church welcomes children to Communion when 1) their parent(s) feel the child is ready, and 2) after taking our sacraments class, which is typically held three or four times per year.

What is the relationship between Communion and salvation?

This is a good question, a point of confusion for some, and part of the mystery of Communion. We believe that God is at work in the act and event of Communion through His Holy Spirit. However, we also believe that God's gift of salvation comes to us by grace through faith, which itself is also a gift from God. (Ephesians 2:8-9) Thus, the answer to the above question is, No, a person does not become "saved" or receive salvation through Communion, though we believe and have experienced Communion to be a significant and important event in the life of a believer and of the covenant community.

How often is Communion celebrated?

Our Book of Order says, "It is appropriate to celebrate the Lord's Supper as often as each Lord's Day. It is to be celebrated regularly and frequently enough to be recognized as integral to the Service for the Lord's Day." In many Presbyterian churches, Communion is often celebrated once per month during Sunday morning worship.

In what context is Communion celebrated?

Presbyterians typically celebrate Communion in the context of the congregation's regular worship 1) because it is an act of worship, just as it is an act of communion with God and being fed by God, and 2) because Communion belongs to the covenant community and not to individuals. Therefore, except in cases where the elements of Communion are taken to homebound members by elders after the celebration of Communion in a worship service, Communion, we believe, belongs to the larger body of Christ and is not a private event.

What are the different ways in which Communion is understood by different Christians?

John Calvin, founder of our Reformed tradition, recognized that the Romanists (i.e. the church based in Rome) were correct when they said that in the Eucharist (i.e. Communion) we genuinely encounter Jesus, but mistaken when they said this happens because the elements of bread and wine are physically changed into Christ's body and blood. He noted that the Anabaptists, in turn, were right that no physical change takes place in the bread and wine, but incorrect in supposing that the absence of physical change means nothing is happening.

Perhaps we have a hard time getting this because ordinarily we suppose material reality – the stuff that is made out of atoms – is the only reality there is. When the ancients taught us to say in the Nicene Creed, "being of one substance with the Father," we may miss the nuanced way they said those words and suppose this means Jesus and the Father are made out of some physical stuff. The Creed explicitly rejects the materiality of God: "by whom all things were made" means that all the physical things are created, but God is not created. God is real, but God is not physical.

This, then, is the Presbyterian understanding of Communion: Is Jesus physically present in the elements of the Eucharist? Have the molecules of bread been changed into molecules of the body of Jesus? No.

Is Jesus spiritually present in the elements of the Eucharist, authentically present in the non-atom-based substance with which he is con-substantial with God – that is, is he genuinely there to be received by us, and not just in our memories? Yes.

But if the bread and wine remain bread and wine, what is the significance? The Anabaptist and Roman Catholic positions each offer us an insight. The Anabaptist position tells us to remember that Jesus died for us that our sins might be forgiven and our lives transformed so that we might live as the children of God. These elements, bread and wine, are symbolic of the elements of life – food and drink. Unless you eat and drink, you will die. And you take the food and drink into yourself, into your inmost being.

Receiving the Communion elements is taking the symbolic representation of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus into our inmost being, receiving the Jesus who died for our forgiveness and transformation. We depend on these elements for our very life.

The Roman Catholic position insists that the bread and wine are sacramental: they genuinely offer us the presence of Christ. Not merely a symbol or a remembrance, but the authentic presence of Christ to feed and sustain his people with his own life.