

The Symbolism of Communion – 1 Cor 11:23-25

In light of the fact that we're going to celebrate Communion together, we thought it would be great to worship at the *end* of our service this weekend, instead of the beginning
So I trust you'll look forward to that, and that your desire to do so will grow as we open up the Word together; Starting with 1 Cor 11:23-25

While you're turning there, let me add my Happy Anniversary; We have much to be thankful for, and much to *do* in the years to come

That said, I want to talk about The Symbolism of Communion; The basis for which is the reason we even *have* a church
But I want to take a closer look at it to clarify what's going on, and what isn't
I don't want to *assume* you know, and I don't want *you* to assume you know; Especially with so many divergent views about it

➤ So let's start with 1 Cor 11, and we'll go from there
[23] For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24] 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."
[25] In the same way also he took 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."

I want to focus on two phrases – one in v24, and the other in v25
This is my body which is for you (24); And *this cup is the new covenant in my blood* (25)
Those two phrases comprise the core of what Jesus was saying, but their meaning is a bit nebulous at first glance; Which is why they've divided the church so much
Often times endowed with *more* meaning than what's intended, and sometimes less

So I want to take each of them in turn, and see if we can understand their *biblical* meaning
Starting with the bread, that symbolizes the death of Jesus on our behalf

The bread symbolizes the death of Jesus on our behalf (John 6:48-51)

His death, so that we might live; His death, so that we wouldn't die – spiritually speaking
That's the idea of his first statement in v24 – *This is my body which is for you*.
Or as Matthew says it (**Mt 26:26**) – *Take, eat; this is my body*.
Or Mark (**Mk 14:22**) – *Take; this is my body*.
Or Luke (**Lk 22:19**) – *This is my body, which is given for you*.

All essentially saying the same thing – that the piece of bread he was holding symbolized his death, *for us*
Especially so, since he said those words the night before he died on the cross, sealing the connection between them and his death, for all time*****

➤ And then there's **Jn 6:48-51**, where Jesus makes the connection between the bread and his death for us, even more explicit
I am the bread of life . . . the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. Referring to his death – the death of his body, his flesh
That's what he *gave*, that's what he *did*, for us, so that we wouldn't have to; So that we wouldn't *have* to die and suffer for all eternity; He did it for us*****

• And make no mistake, it was a **death of suffering (Is 53)**
Is 53 says that Jesus was despised and rejected, acquainted with grief, smitten by God, pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, oppressed, and afflicted
That's a death of suffering; And the NT confirms it, over and over again
From a crown of thorns and the nails to go with it, to the emotional suffering of being falsely accused and irreverently abused; He suffered – physically *and* emotionally

But that couldn't have come close to the *spiritual* suffering
The suffering of being dirtied with our sin; Of actually *becoming* our sin the Bible says
Of bearing our sin in his body on the tree, when he didn't deserve it and we did
And worse yet, the suffering of being forsaken by his Father in heaven
Infinitely separated for a time, b/c God's holiness and our sinfulness don't mix
It was a death of suffering

Forget that, and you make Communion into something it's not; Into a nice, clean, mindless ritual – when the suffering it represents is anything *but* nice and clean
And anything but mindless, where all you do is go through the motions
That's the first part of the symbolism here; It was a death of suffering

2nd, it was . . .

• For our sins (1 Cor 5:7)

The Bible says in **1 Cor 5:7**, that – *Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed*
IOW the Lord's Supper, communion as we know it, is based on the Passover meal of old, where a lamb was killed and then eaten . . .
To remember and commemorate the *actual* Passover in Egypt, when the Israelites were instructed by God to kill a lamb without spot or blemish . . .
And then apply its blood to the doorposts of their houses, so that when the angel of death approached, he would *pass-over* their home, and spare the life of their firstborn

And in the same way, Jesus is *our* Passover Lamb
Our perfect, spotless substitute – who shed his blood, and applied it to the doorposts of our *heart*, when we first believed . . .
So that we might be saved from death, and made alive in him*****

IOW just as the blood of the lamb applied to the doorposts protected *them* from *physical* death, due to the *plague* . . .
So too, the blood of Christ applied to our *lives*, protects us fr *spiritual* death, due to *sin*
And just as the blood of the lamb was *their* means to freedom from the bondage of *slavery* – the blood of Christ is *our* means to freedom from the bondage of *sin*

Which is why we focus no longer on the lamb small "l", but the Lamb, capital "L"
The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29)
The Lamb who's worthy to *receive honor and glory and blessing* (Rev 5:12-13)
The Lamb whose death for our sins, is symbolized by the bread at Communion

That's the bread; The cup meanwhile . . .

The cup symbolizes the blood of Jesus that secures our salvation (1 Cor 11:25)

Holding a cup of wine at the last supper, Jesus said in **Mt 26:28** – *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*.

Or as Mark records it (**Mk 14:24**) – *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.*

And Luke (**Lk 22:20**) – *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*

And Paul here in v25 – *This cup is the new covenant in my blood*

Once again, 4 ways, with slightly different nuances or emphases, to essentially say the same thing

That this cup and what it contains, is symbolic of God’s new promise of salvation – his new assurance of forgiveness and eternal life . . .

Offered and guaranteed by the shed blood of Jesus on our behalf *****

So when we eat and drink at Communion, we’re not only remembering the *death* of Jesus on our behalf, but the salvation he offers and guarantees b/c of it

That’s the symbolism of the bread and the cup

- But some religions teach otherwise – that they’re *not* symbolic; That Christ’s body and blood are actually *present* in the bread and cup
- For instance, Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy teach that the bread actually turns *into* the flesh of Jesus – while retaining the outward, visible characteristics of *bread*
- And the wine actually turns into the *blood* of Jesus, while retaining the outward characteristics of wine, like taste and appearance
- They call it *transubstantiation* – a big word that simply means physical change
- After all, Jesus said – *this is my body* and *this is my blood*

Meanwhile others, like Lutherans, say no, the elements don’t turn *into* Jesus, but his flesh and his blood are right there alongside of them

With the bread and wine; Or *in* the loaf and the cup

It’s what they call *consubstantiation* – referring to a physical co-existence

And both would turn to John 6:53 to support it; If they turn anywhere at all

B/c that’s where Jesus said – *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you* (53); Plain and simple they’d say

The problem is, Jesus goes on to say that his words were *spiritual*; Which is the first of . .

4 Reasons Communion Is Symbolic

1. Jesus was explicit that his words were spiritual, not literal (Jn 6:53-63)

And I want you to see if for yourself; John 6:53-63; Jesus says in v53 . . .

“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. 54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died [referring to the manna the Israelites ate in the desert, 1500 years earlier]. Whoever feeds on this bread [himself] will live forever.” 59 Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

6 times in 7 verses Jesus says feed on me – eat my flesh and drink my blood

And if you were to stop there, it could certainly lead you to believe in something like transubstantiation or consubstantiation

But notice the explanation that follows in v60-63

60 *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”* [B/c they took it literally; As if he were advocating cannibalism and the worst sort of heathenry; Who can tolerate such a teaching?] 61 *But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? [IOW would it help your unbelief and struggle, if you saw me go back to heaven?]*

And then, regardless of their answer, he explains his comment; Saying in v63 . . .

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.

IOW eating and drinking literal flesh and blood is moot; It’s no help at all when it comes to eternal life; It’s the *Spirit* who gives life; The Holy Spirit

Which not only rules out mindless ritualism and a sacrament-based approach, where the *act* of eating and drinking garners God’s grace . . .

But it’s also the first clue that he’s not speaking literally in v53-58; *The flesh* [the physical, the literal] *is no help at all*

- The 2nd clue, and even more explicit, is his next statement – *The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*

Spirit, small s, in that they’re not intended to be taken literally

They have *spiritual* meaning, not physical; He was simply using *physical* things, like his own body and blood – as metaphors

Metaphors, that convey truths, that if believed, if internalized – lead to life

So *far* from taking his words literally, and coming up with all *kinds* of strange explanations – Jesus himself tells us it’s just the opposite

That “eat my flesh” and “drink my blood” are meant to be taken as word pictures – intended to get our attention, express spiritual truths . . .

And convey the extent and depth to which we must believe and internalize all that he says, in order to have *life*

Just like we eat and internalize food and drink at Communion

The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

That’s the first reason Communion is symbolic – Jesus was *explicit* about it; *Explicit* that that his words were spiritual

And thank goodness; Otherwise Christianity would be little different than cannibalism

Second, and going back to 1 Cor 11 – Communion is symbolic, b/c . . .

2. It’s the most natural sense of the statements (1 Cor 11:24-25)

When Jesus first said, *this is my body which is for you*; And *this cup is the new covenant in my blood* . . .

He was holding and referring to the bread and the cup in his hand – two things that were distinct and separate from his physical body

So the most natural way to take his statement is symbolic

He didn’t hold out his arm to them, or cut off a piece of his flesh and say “this is my body;” Nor did he cut his finger and let it drip into a cup saying “this is my blood”

If that were the case, he *would* have spoken literally

It would be like me holding up a picture of myself, like the one on my license here, and saying, “This is me”
Do I mean that this picture is *literally* me? Not at all; That would be absurd
I mean that this picture *represents* me; It *symbolizes* me
That’s the most natural sense of *my* statement, and the most natural sense of the statements Jesus made

3. It’s the most consistent way to interpret the passage

When Jesus says – *this cup is the new covenant in my blood* . . .

Nobody believes that the *cup* itself – wood, brass, gold, or glass – is the actual new covenant; Once again, that would be absurd

The new covenant is God’s promise of salvation for those who believe; It’s not a cup
Rather, the cup, and what it contains, is symbolic of the blood of Christ, that offers and *secures* the new covenant; It’s not the covenant itself

And if the *cup* is symbolic, then most likely the bread is too
B/c the two statements are right next to each other, and spoken in the same context by the same person, in the same way
So a symbolic view is the most *consistent* way to interpret the passage

4. Jesus made similar statements that were symbolic

Like *I am the vine*, or *I am the true vine* from John 15

Does that mean that Jesus is an actual vine growing in a garden?
Or that everything else we call a vine isn’t really a vine, b/c he’s the *true* vine?
Of course not; B/c he’s speaking figuratively; Symbolically

Or how about, *Truly, Truly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep* from Jn 10

Does he intend for us to think that he’s an actual door?
Or that he’s *like* a door? A door through which we must enter to be saved?
It’s the latter, right?
In which case he was once again speaking figuratively and symbolically
Something he *often* did regarding himself, in order to make a point and convey a truth

So it’s not like his statements at the last supper were a rare occurrence (**List Summary**)
All of which makes Communion symbolic

➤ But that doesn’t in any way diminish its importance and significance
Especially so when you consider that it’s something Jesus commanded, something the apostles taught, and something the early church practiced . . .
In order to remember what Jesus did, express our faith, and celebrate our salvation

And while there’s no *automatic* benefit just b/c you participate, God does intend that your relationship or *communion* with him deepens

➤ Which is why we take it so seriously (**Summary**); Coming clean before the Lord, and participating in a way that matches the holiness and symbolism of it all
So let me encourage you to do that, and truly commune with the Lord

Prayer (Servers) – Lord, we’re so incredibly thankful that you gave your life so we wouldn’t have to that you shed your blood, innocent as you were, so we could be saved Amazing love; How can it be; That thou my God shouldn't die for me? We praise you, and remember you, and worship you