

A Channel of Grace
1 Corinthians 10:14-17; 11:23-26
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We're looking at the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, today. Christians understand the meaning of this practice in various ways. Someone asked what United Methodists believe about Communion and one pastor said, "More than Baptists and not as much as Catholics."

This experience of eating bread and drinking wine has several names that describe the richness of what it means.

It's a *Sacrament*, a sign of all that Jesus did for us and of his presence with us. The word sacrament could also mean a pledge. So Communion shows our commitment and loyalty to God in response to his commitment and loyalty to us.

Some call it *Eucharist*, which means thanksgiving. Whenever we share in the Lord's Supper we need to thank the One who died for us. It's also a way to thank God for all he does for us, all his gifts to us, all the ways we know God's love.

Some emphasize that it's a *Memorial*. It's a way to remember and commemorate Jesus' last supper with his disciples as well as his cross and resurrection.

We call it the *Lord's Table* and the *Lord's Supper* because we need to remember that Jesus gave us this meal and he is the Host.

The Lord's Supper re-tells the gospel story. It re-presents to us the Lord who gave himself for us.

This meal is a foretaste of God's great heavenly banquet, when all of God's people will finally be gathered together.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called the sacraments "means of grace." The Lord's Supper is a means or a channel of God's grace to us, a way that God conveys grace to us.

Sometimes I illustrate means of grace by talking about playing with the "seek" button on the car radio. Or "channel surfing" with the TV remote. The point is, we can tune in a number of channels or, nowadays, access a

variety of apps. God has given us ways to be tuned in to the various channels of his grace, to log on and access ways that grace comes.

Another good illustration might be to call the means of grace *icons of grace*. An icon is a picture or representation of something. In computer terms, icons are the little pictures on your screen that you click in order to open a program. Icons of grace are things we do that help us see and access God's grace. They put us in a position to receive grace and they help us open ourselves to God.

Wesley defined Means of Grace this way: outward signs, words or actions which God ordained and appointed to be the ordinary channels for conveying to people prevenient, justifying or sanctifying grace. Grace is God's favor toward us. It's God doing for us what we can't do on our own. Grace can be a way to talk about the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's work in our lives.

The Lord's Supper, Communion, was one of the means of grace that Wesley emphasized. God promises to meet us in this moment when we come with faith, or seeking faith. We trust God to be true to his promise.

God intends to help us experience his presence more in these sacred moments. The Means of Grace help us to focus on God and God's presence with us. The power and grace we experience are God's. The bread and the cup don't contain grace. Even the action of receiving the bread and cup doesn't give us grace by itself. The action of obeying God and receiving through faith as we do something physical like eat and drink is a channel, or icon, that God uses. God's free to work however he pleases. But we believe God has decided and committed himself to work generally and regularly through certain means. Grace isn't just spiritual. It's related to the concrete, physical character of our lives (Billy Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* 130). God created both physical and spiritual reality. And they work together, they belong together. God uses physical, material reality to communicate the spiritual. Notice how such common, ordinary things as water, bread, and grapes are used in means of grace. We also see the means of grace at work in our real life relationships.

Something as simple as a meal becomes a way to experience God's grace. Mealtimes are special. When I was growing up, we had big family

dinners at Thanksgiving and Christmas. I have some great memories of those times. Even then I heard the older folks reminiscing about earlier times. Something about the sights and smells of a meal like that unlocks memories—old family stories or the last time we were together or someone who's no longer at the table with us. Eating together helps us feel close to each other.

It was at a meal, celebrating God's delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, that Jesus gave his disciples this sign of the New Covenant (Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 22:7-23). The meal the risen Jesus shared with the two disciples at Emmaus reflected this New Covenant meal. The Risen Lord was revealed in the breaking of bread (Lk 24:13-35). The early church made a practice of eating together and sharing communion frequently (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:20-24).

As the apostle Paul writes to the Jesus followers in Corinth, he's trying to convince them that idolatry is very serious and they ought not participate in it. He contrasts the Lord's Supper with some other sacred meals to make the point. When the people of Israel sacrificed animals and ate a portion of them, they participated in the altar, in the worship of God. When pagans sacrificed to their gods and ate in their temples, they participated or communed in worship of an idol. Paul says that to worship an idol is to worship a "no-god" and actually to participate or commune with demons. Then he says that it's impossible to share in the Lord's Table and the table of demons. You can't serve two masters. You have to be fully committed to one.

What these examples tell us about Christian communion is that we do share together in worshiping our Lord in this meal. And for the early Christians the Lord's Supper was part of a fellowship meal the church ate together. For us, it's more a symbolic meal. We eat a piece of bread or a wafer or cracker and we drink a sip of juice, which is a symbol of the wine that was part of the original meal. Some churches use real wine. For a long time, Methodists have used grape juice. Methodists were part of the temperance movement and have been aware of the dangers of abusing alcohol for decades. Also, a Methodist layman named Welch developed a process for preserving unfermented grape juice.

As he instructs the Corinthians, Paul goes on to talk about what the Christian meal means. It involves remembering, realizing and being ready.

Egypt's Pharaohs built great pyramids so they could be remembered. Other rulers through history left palaces, castles, and other buildings as their memorials. Jesus left a loaf of bread and cup of wine and said, "Remember me." In the Lord's Supper we *remember* Jesus and all he did for us in his life and ministry, death and resurrection. This sacrament is a way to re-present the Gospel. It retells the story with signs and actions as well as words.

We have terrible memories. Jesus gave us this sacrament because we need to be reminded of him almost constantly. In Holy Communion we remember Jesus. We remember what he taught about God's kingdom, love, forgiveness, faithfulness. We remember what he did in his miracles, in healing, his compassion. We remember how he gave his life and that God raised him from the dead. We remember that Jesus is our Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend, that he's with us, and that he calls for our obedience and love.

Eating the bread and drinking the cup calls to mind all that Jesus was and did, all that he does and all that he means to us. Do you remember what Jesus means to you? How he's touched your life and all he's done for you? What do you think of when you think of Jesus? Do the most special moments in your life include him?

We not only remember, we also *realize* that Christ is present with us in the Holy Spirit. The Lord's Supper isn't just a memorial. We need more than memories of Jesus. He's more than a historical figure; he's a present reality in our lives. Each time we receive Communion is a chance to renew our faith and experience God's grace in a fresh way. Christ himself is the Host of this meal. It's as if we're in that upper room with him on the night of his betrayal. Or as if the table in that upper room extends down the centuries and around the world so we can sit there with Christ and with all the people of God.

Jesus is really present here—serving us this meal. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is always with us. But in Communion we become aware of his presence in a special way. Heaven isn't far from us in terms of distance. It's

like another dimension. Heaven is all around us. Our problem is we can't perceive it. That's why we need faith. Jesus is never far from us. It's as if Jesus is just on the other side of the table, or of the Communion rail—giving us the bread and wine, reminding us that he died and rose for us, letting us know that he's with us. The Holy Spirit enables us to have fellowship with Jesus and the Father.

As a sacrament, Communion physically represents a spiritual reality. It represents Jesus' body given for us and his blood poured out for us. It signifies our receiving the benefits of his death. We're forgiven, reconciled with God, restored to right relationship with God and renewed in God's image.

In the Lord's Supper we participate in Christ's blood and body. We commune with him and take part in his sacrifice for us. We give ourselves to him in response to his giving himself for us.

In Communion you can renew your faith in Jesus, you can experience his presence and grace in a fresh way. You might even meet him for the first time and come to know him through this Sacrament. John Wesley said that Communion is a "converting Sacrament." God can use Communion as a way to draw us to himself. We can put our faith in Jesus and receive forgiveness when we participate in Communion. God can meet us here and help us experience his power and love to continue transforming our lives.

When Bob Stamps was chaplain at ORU, he had a secretary who wasn't yet a Christian. Bob and others witnessed to her, but she hadn't made a commitment to Christ. One day she attended church with Bob at a Lutheran Church in Tulsa. Bob had arranged with the pastor to receive communion. (In many Lutheran churches, you have to register for communion and normally only members of the congregation can receive the sacrament.) Because the pastor knew Bob, he allowed him to receive. But when Bob asked if his secretary could receive communion even though she wasn't baptized and confirmed, the pastor said no. Still, when it came time for the Lord's Supper, Bob told his secretary to come along and kneel at the rail. She did. The pastor came by, serving the people. He served Bob, then passed by the secretary. Bob says his prayers stopped that pastor in his tracks. He turned back and served the bread and wine to the secretary.

And she was converted. She put her faith and trust in Jesus as she received the signs of Jesus' body and blood.

Wesley said, "Is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means, whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us?" (*The Means of Grace*—Sermon 16).

So we remember Jesus. We realize that's he's present in the Spirit. And in Communion *we anticipate Christ's return*. We proclaim his death until he comes again (1 Cor 11:26). This meal is a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet when all God's people will be gathered around God's table. Sharing this sacrament is something we do in the time between Jesus' first coming and his return. It's part of being ready for his return.

Jesus told his disciples that he wouldn't eat this meal or drink the fruit of the vine until in the kingdom of God (Lk 22:15-18). One of the images of our fellowship with God in the New Creation is the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). The Jewish people associated a great feast with the Messiah's coming kingdom. The Lord's Supper is a foretaste of that heavenly feast. It helps us anticipate the full and intimate fellowship with God we'll have when Jesus returns and then into eternity.

In Communion there are outward and visible signs like bread and wine (or grape juice), breaking and pouring, giving and receiving. These are outward signs of inward and spiritual grace. They show us that God offers us a relationship and we can accept it.

At some of the most meaningful times of receiving Communion I've experienced, I've been reminded of Paul's words in Philippians: "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (3:10-11).