

*What in the World Does Communion Mean?*

**1 Corinthians 10:14-17**

John Breon

Today is World Communion Sunday when we emphasize the worldwide nature of the church and remember that people everywhere gather at the Table and share in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There are various ways of understanding the meaning of this practice. 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.

John Wesley 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.

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.

We could spend a lot of time on any one of these aspects of the Lord's Supper, but today I want to focus on the name that may be most

familiar to us. I want to talk about *Communion*. In our text, Paul says that the cup and the bread we share are participation or fellowship or communion in the blood and body of Christ. The word he uses here is *koinonia*. It means fellowship, to share together, to have something in common. Communion is another way to understand it.

First, Paul says, we have communion with Christ. We can have a genuine relationship with the Lord Jesus. And that's represented and signified in the Lord's Supper.

Paul's trying to convince the Corinthians 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.

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 that 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 is with us. The Holy Spirit enables us to have fellowship with Jesus and the Father.

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 communicate prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace through Holy Communion. 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 was not yet a Christian. Bob and others witnessed to her, but she had not yet 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 was allowing him to receive. But when Bob asked if his secretary could receive communion even though she was not 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 chancel 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.

So we have communion, fellowship, sharing, participation with Christ. Another aspect of Communion is that we have fellowship with each other. The Lord's Supper is a sign of our fellowship, our unity, our solidarity. We share together in the blood of Christ. His death for us brings us together. We share together in the body of Christ. There is one bread, one loaf, that represents the body of Christ. And so we who are many are one body, the church, the body of Christ. The one loaf we share signifies this. The bread

represents Christ's body given for us. It also represents the fact that we are one as the body of Christ.

Our fellowship is in Christ. Because of our relationship with him, we share new life together in him. Fellowship is part of the church's essence. And we celebrate and recognize and renew that fellowship at the Lord's Table. And on this World Communion Sunday we remember that our fellowship extends all around the world. Christians everywhere are gathering around the Lord's Table, celebrating our relationship with him and each other.

I've been thinking about Rich Mullins and listening to a lot of his music lately. He was an outstanding singer-songwriter. It was twenty years ago in September that he was killed in a car wreck. One of his songs fits this theme we're talking about.

Well the other side of the world  
Is not so far away as I thought that it was  
As I thought that it was so far away  
But the other side of the world  
Is not so far away  
And the distance just dissolves into the love  
Into the love

And I see the people who have learned to walk in faith  
With mercy in their hearts  
And glory on their faces  
And I can see the people  
And I pray it won't be long  
Until Your kingdom comes

(from the album *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth*, 1988)

I once heard about a father and son who were struggling in their relationship with each other. The father would overcorrect and the son would overreact. On a camping trip in the mountains, they opened up to each other as they never had. They decided that when they would have

trouble in the future, they would say the words, "the mountains" to remind them of this time. Not long after they returned home, they had another episode. After the son stormed out, the father went to his study, discouraged and regretful. But he found on his desk a piece of paper with the words written on it: "the mountains" (Jim Buskirk, "Why Holy Communion Anyway?" First UMC, Tulsa, audio tape, n.d.).

In Communion we're called to remember "the mountains" in our times of separation, when we need reconciliation. The mountain of Calvary is our place of reconciliation with God and each other. Our fellowship flows from our Lord's giving himself for us.

Notice the people who kneel with you to receive Communion. Nancy and I once worshiped in a church that had kneelers on both sides of the Communion rail, so you would face another person as you knelt to receive the Sacrament. In Nancy's home church, the chancel and Communion rail are circular, so you face others as you come to kneel, as you receive, and as you rise to go.

One more thing about our fellowship, our communion: It includes the saints who have gone before us. Gathered at the Lord's Table are all of God's people of all times and places.

Hebrews 12:1 speaks of the great cloud of witnesses who surround us. Those faithful people who have gone on through death to be with the Lord are cheering us on and encouraging us. In the Creed we talk about "the communion of the saints."

Remember, heaven isn't far away. God is with us. If they're with God, then they're also with us in some way. Without getting too sentimental or weird, we can remember and feel close to our loved ones who are with the Lord, as well as all the saints of the ages. We can kneel with them and sit with them at the Lord's Table. I'm not sure of all that this means, but we can take some comfort in this and feel a closeness to all God's people, even those we can't see right now.

As we come to the Table of the Lord today, realize that our communion is with the Lord and renew that relationship. Let's realize that our communion is also with each other and renew our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Bob Bennett is another fine Christian singer-songwriter. His song, "The Communion Rail" is a good reminder of what this sacrament is about.

Iron and marble, wood and stone  
Craftsman's chisel, hammer and nail  
All the straight lines form our gath'ring place  
At the Altar of God, at the Communion Rail

And the powerful and common, we all come alike  
With our faith so weak and our souls so frail  
To dine upon the promises of Christ the Lamb  
Kept safe for His sheep at the Communion Rail

I can't help but watch this blessed parade  
Of strangers and neighbors, we all fall and fail  
We come to have our lives made new again  
And to return our thanks at the Communion Rail

And a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us out of time  
We will follow their footsteps beyond this earthly veil  
We will all join together at the Supper of the Lamb  
And we glimpse that shining time  
At the Communion Rail

(from the album *The View from Here*, © 2002 Bright Avenue  
Songs [ASCAP])