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Matthew 26:17-30

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“DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”

We focus our attention today upon Communion. Although the whole Church acknowledges the central importance of communion, there is tremendous confusion over most aspects of the event. There is confusion over what to call it. In my sojourns all over the world, I have been involved with churches of many denominations: Anglican, Baptist of several flavors, Presbyterian, Brethren, and now an independent Bible church. In these churches I have participated in Communion, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Table, and the Breaking of Bread. The only thing I have missed out on is the Mass, for I have no experience of the Catholic Church. What do we call it? I need to call it something, to give it some label for convenience, so I will follow PBCC custom and call it communion.

How often should it be done? Some churches take this rite so seriously that they have communion every week or even every day. Others take it so seriously that they have it only every three, six or twelve months. The former think the latter trivialize communion by taking it so rarely; the latter think the former trivialize it by taking it so frequently. Or should we have communion randomly, like we do here at PBCC?

What sort of event is this? Is it a sacrament, an ordinance, a memorial, a means of grace, or some combination of these four? What verb do we use? Do we celebrate communion, or observe it, or partake of it, or take it, or receive it, or have it, or just do it?

Who is to be admitted to this event? Is the table open to all who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? Or is it restricted only to those who have been baptized? Or is it even further restricted to those who have been baptized into a particular church, as the Strict Baptists or Closed Brethren do? I have participated in all three types of churches. A few years ago, when visiting a church in southern California, I was examined before the service by the pastor, to determine whether I could be admitted to the table.

What do we do in the communion service? We all eat something and drink something, but what do we eat and what do we drink? Do we eat a piece of bread torn from a common loaf, or a tiny square of white bread that has been cut up beforehand, or a chicle, or a tasteless wafer, or a piece of *matzah* bread? Do we drink real wine from a common chalice, or grape juice from a little plastic cup, or do we, perhaps, dip the bread in real wine? For two years I belonged to a church in Geneva, Switzerland. Visiting Americans were horrified that we used real wine; the Europeans were baffled at the thought of using grape juice. Did Jesus really have a bottle of Welch's grape juice on the table? And what do we do with the leftovers? Can we just throw out the unfinished bread and wine, or does the minister or priest have to finish it all off? When I was at boarding school in England, we were always amused to watch

the minister finish off the wine at the end of the Anglican service each Sunday.

Finally, how is Christ present in all this? Do the bread and the wine become the physical body and blood of Jesus? If so, do they still also remain bread and wine? If not, is Jesus present in some other mystical way? Or is he present only in the lives of the believers gathered around the table?

Now that I have totally confused and amused you, I want to attempt to bring some order and understanding. I will do so in three stages. First we'll look at the Last Supper which Jesus ate with his disciples, then at how the New Testament shows the early church repeating certain aspects of that meal, and finally at what the Church has done with the meal in the past 2000 years.

The Last Supper

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.”

They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely not I, Lord?”

Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?”

Jesus answered, “Yes, it is you.”

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom.”

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:17-30 NIV)

Jesus ate a final meal with his disciples in Jerusalem just hours before he was betrayed into the hands of the Jewish authorities. The meal was significant for three reasons: it was a fellowship meal between a rabbi and his disciples; more specifically, it was a Passover meal; and during the meal a new covenant was inaugurated.

The gospels are full of meals, either descriptions of meals themselves, or parables told by Jesus about meals. Sharing table fellowship with someone was a powerful symbolic act in the Biblical world. Jesus didn't have power lunches with the rich and famous. He sat down to eat with the little people, the despised people. He ate with the tax collectors and the sinners. The Pharisees got bent out of shape over this, for Jesus broke all decorum, he broke all their rules. It's not that they didn't believe in table fellowship. Many of them belonged to the *haburim*, brotherhoods who shared table fellowship together. But they ate only with the right sort of people, only with people like themselves, lest they become unclean. Jesus wasn't like that. He didn't sit down with the nice people, the right people. By eating with the tax collectors and sinners, he showed that they were welcome in God's kingdom of which he was the herald. The people he chose to be the nucleus of this kingdom were not the right sort of people. Several of his disciples were fishermen from Galilee, despised by the Pharisees for their failure to keep the law. Even these disciples would have thought that some of their fellow disciples were not the right sort of people. Matthew was a tax collector, whom the fishermen would have known well as a hated collaborator with the Romans who extorted money from his fellow Galileans. At the opposite extreme was Simon the Zealot and possibly Judas Iscariot who wanted to overthrow the Romans by force. Imagine how they felt about Matthew. Nathaniel was a man without guile, but Judas Iscariot was a devious man. This was the motley crew whom Jesus called to follow him, to be with him, to eat with him. They were a fractious lot: Luke tells us that during the meal they squabbled over which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24). But these were the people that Jesus chose to have at his farewell dinner, the people to whom he extended his hospitality, his welcome and his acceptance. Jesus' table fellowship with sinners is but one of the scandalous aspects of his ministry and of this meal.

More specifically this was a Passover meal. Matthew, Mark and Luke all identify it as such. For 1400 years the families of Israel had gathered each year to eat a Passover meal. Each family took a lamb to the temple where it was slaughtered. (Incidentally, John's chronology of Jesus' death is one day different: he shows Jesus dying on the cross at the same time as the Passover lambs were being slain in the temple.) The lamb was brought home and prepared as the central dish of the meal. Several other symbolic items of food were also served, including unleavened bread and four cups of wine. Some of you have attended a Passover meal or *seder* (order). The book which describes the *seder* is the *hagaddah* (telling), for telling the story is a prominent feature of the meal. The *seder* as currently observed originates in the Mishnah, the codification of Jewish oral law in the second century AD, but many of the elements would have been the same in the time of Jesus. In the *seder*, the youngest person present four times asks the question, "Why is tonight different?" The person presiding replies by telling the story of the

Exodus: of how the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, suffering under the harsh rule of Pharaoh, of how God performed mighty acts against Pharaoh, of how he passed over the houses of the Hebrews when he saw the blood of the lamb applied to the doorposts and lintel, of how he brought the Hebrews out into freedom, of how they ate unleavened bread because they came out in such haste that they did not have time to let their bread rise. This eating of unleavened bread and telling of the story was in fulfillment of the Lord's command (Exod 13:8).

Jesus presided at the Passover meal he ate with his disciples. He was the one who would have told the story. But he changed the story, he departed from the *seder*. At the appropriate moment Jesus took the bread, broke it, and gave thanks. He didn't bless the bread; he blessed God: *Barukh attah Adonai Elohenu melek ha-olam ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz*, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Passing it to his disciples he said, "Take and eat; this is my body." The unleavened bread no longer represents that which their ancestors ate in their hasty departure from Egypt. Now it represents the body of Jesus that is about to be given. A little later, Jesus took the cup of wine, and again gave thanks: *Barukh attah Adonai Elohenu melek ha-olam borey p'ri ha-gafen*, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine." Passing it to his disciples, he said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The cups of wine represented the Israelites' joy that God had redeemed them. Jesus says there is a new reason for joy: redemption not from bondage in Egypt but from bondage in sin. The Passover story is being transformed. In the past God, through his servant Moses, went into battle against Pharaoh to bring his enslaved people out into freedom. Now he is about to go into battle, through his servant Jesus, against a greater enemy Satan, to bring his enslaved people out into a greater freedom, freedom from sin and death. Victory will be won over the offered body and poured-out blood of his obedient servant Jesus. This victory will henceforth be remembered with the same symbols that once represented the victory in Egypt.

But there is still more. Jesus introduces a third element into the meal. It is no longer just a fellowship meal with his disciples, or a transformed Passover meal. Now it has become a meal marking a new covenant. After God had redeemed the Hebrews from Egypt, he brought them to meet with him at Mount Sinai, where he declared to them his intent, "You will be my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6). He then made a covenant with them: on his side he had graciously taken them to be his people and undertaken to be their God; on their side they were to be loyal by keeping his Torah, his law. The covenant was sealed with blood: Moses sprinkled the blood of sacrificial animals upon the people and proclaimed, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you" (Exod 24:8). Moses and the Israelite elders then went up Mount Sinai and ate a meal in the Lord's presence. God had bound himself and his people together; the meal represented their reconciliation. Though God was faithful to the covenant, Israel rarely was. Nevertheless the Lord did not give up, but announced through Jeremiah that he would make a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). Jesus announces to his disciples that this new covenant has arrived. It will be sealed not by the blood of bulls and goats, but by his own blood. His shed blood

will do what the shed blood of animals could never fully do: atone for sin and bring forgiveness.

The Last Supper served three purposes. It was a fellowship meal between God’s servant and the people he was welcoming into his new kingdom. It transformed the Passover meal into a celebration of a new exodus whereby God brought his people out of slavery into freedom. And it was the meal solemnizing a new covenant between God and his people.

Communion in the New Testament Church

Jesus told his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). It is not surprising therefore to find the early church doing just this, repeating aspects of the Last Supper as a memorial feast. Luke describes the Jerusalem church in the earliest days:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Given the origins of the Last Supper in the Passover meal, we might expect the early church to have celebrated this once each year, at Passover. But the early Christians met together every day, and each time they got together they broke bread and gave thanks. The breaking of bread and the giving of thanks was a characteristic action of Jesus. When he fed the 5000 and the 4000 he gave thanks and broke the loaves (Matt 14:19; 15:36). It was when Jesus “took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them” that the eyes of Cleopas and his companion were opened so that they recognized him (Luke 24:30-31). What had been a characteristic action of Jesus now became a characteristic action of his people. Not only were they imitating their Lord, but it was a tangible way of devoting themselves to the fellowship, to the *koinonia*, by sharing table fellowship together in their house churches.

While Luke describes the Jerusalem Church’s practice of breaking bread, he does not give us much theological explanation. For that we have to turn to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, written twenty years later. In Corinth, as in Jerusalem, breaking bread together was part of normal Christian fellowship, seemingly a feature of every Christian gathering. But the Christians in Corinth were a rowdy bunch, and matters were getting out of hand. The symbolism of the meal was getting lost. Rather than the meal uniting the believers, it was dividing them, breeding hostility. Some Christians, by their behavior at the meal, were causing others to stumble. Paul reminds them that the bread and the cup are about union with Christ and union with one another.

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 Cor 10:16-17)

By drinking the cup and eating the bread the believers partake, have *koinonia*, in the body and blood of Christ. The first century Jews who celebrated Passover in Jerusalem had not been present in Egypt when God delivered his people from slavery. But through telling the story and eating the symbolic meal together, they participated in that history. It was as if they had been there. They understood themselves to be the beneficiaries of that deliverance. Similarly, the symbolic elements of the cup and the bread symbolize participation in the history of what God has done in Christ. They are in communion in Christ. But they are also in communion with one another, as symbolized by the common loaf. That realization ought to govern their behavior when they gather together.

As we sang earlier, we have an interest in our Savior’s blood. Baptism symbolizes our induction into that interest: we died and rose to new life in Christ. Drinking the cup symbolizes our ongoing interest in Christ’s blood. It is not enough for me to rest upon a single symbolic telling of the story in baptism. I need to continually retell it symbolically, continually express my participation in the blood of Christ, by drinking the cup regularly. If I fail to do so, I risk losing sight of that participation. But I also risk losing sight of my participation with all God’s people, for eating together of the one loaf is the symbolic acting out of our communion as the one body of Christ.

Communion through Church History

The Church has taken many different views of communion over the past 2000 years. A brief look at some of the major debates can help clarify our understanding.

The Church early concluded that the Eucharist was a sacrament. Augustine defined a sacrament as “a visible sign of a sacred thing” or “a visible form of an invisible grace.” There are two things present: something visible and something invisible which it represents. The fact that the sacred thing or the grace is invisible doesn’t mean it isn’t present. In the case of communion, the visible sign or form is the bread and the wine. The invisible grace is spiritual nourishment, as Jesus said:

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. (John 6:54-56)

Most of the Church has continued to understand both communion and baptism as sacraments. The Protestant Church recognizes only these two; the Catholic Church recognizes five more. But some Protestants are uncomfortable with the idea of sacraments. They prefer to call baptism and communion ordinances, because they are rites ordained or commanded by our Lord. There is no invisible grace, no spiritual nourishment. The rites are practiced as memorials only because Jesus so commanded. Other Protestants, while still uncomfortable with the notion of sacraments with their perceived Catholic overtones, refer to these as means of grace, holding on to the idea that grace is communicated.

Recognition of communion as a sacrament raised a debate over its efficacy. How does the sacrament work? How is the invisible grace communicated? Does it work *ex opere operantis*, from the work of the one doing the work? Is communion effective as a sacra-

ment only if it is administered by a properly ordained priest who is not harboring sin? The Church declared, no, communion works *ex opere operato*, from the work done. Communion fulfills its sacramental purpose regardless of the saintliness of the one officiating. What a relief: the “success” to you of communion does not depend upon me!

But this raises a further question. Does the efficacy of communion depend upon you? The Catholic Church said it doesn't, that the sacramental nature is something inherent to the symbols, so that grace is necessarily communicated. This leads to a magical view of the sacraments: the sacraments necessarily convey grace, and are necessary for the conveyance of that grace. The Reformers rejected this understanding, arguing for the necessity of faith. Communion is sacramental only if the recipient has faith, identifying himself with Jesus Christ. There is nothing magical about the elements at all. To the one who eats and drinks without faith no grace is conveyed; but to the one who has faith the conveyance of the grace of spiritual nourishment is not ultimately dependent on the bread and the wine. This means that God can still nourish his saints who have no access to the symbols of communion.

This question of the efficacy of communion leads into the biggest debate of all: how is Christ present? What did Jesus mean when he said, “This is my body...this is my blood?” Bill Clinton wasn't the first to quibble over the meaning of the word “is.” There are four views. The Catholic position, called transubstantiation, is familiar to many of you here who have Catholic backgrounds. By prayer the priest consecrates the bread and the wine, making them holy. At that moment the substance of the bread and the wine are changed into the substance of Jesus' physical body and blood, while their appearance (accidents) remain the same. Christ is physically present, and the one who takes communion literally feeds on Jesus. Because the bread and the wine have been transubstantiated into the body and blood of Jesus, they cannot be disposed of carelessly. This led the medieval Catholic Church to withhold the cup from the laity, which it deemed unworthy to handle the blood of Jesus.

The nature of Christ's presence became the breaking point between the German and Swiss Reformers. Luther argued that the body and blood of Jesus is present “in, with and under” the bread and the wine, a view known as consubstantiation (Latin *con*, “with”). The substance of the bread is both the bread itself and the physical body of Jesus. Calvin argued that Christ's physical body is in only one place, in heaven, where it remains. Nevertheless he is present spiritually with his people and particularly in the receiving of the bread and the wine. It is a mystical presence. Zwingli, another of the Swiss reformers, rejected even Calvin's position. There is no mystical presence of Christ. He is present only in the sense that he is anyway present with his people, whether they are receiving communion or not.

The modern evangelical church has practically rejected a sacramental understanding of communion, and has necessarily ended up with Zwingli's position. Communion is simply a memorial of Christ's death. It is an ordinance which we do because the Lord commanded it. It can be tacked on as a brief extra at the end of

a service every couple of months. How often we do it does not matter too much. Christ is not present sacramentally, though he is present where his people are gathered in his name. But is this an adequate understanding?

Conclusion

The early church shared communion frequently, and quickly took to calling it the Eucharist, from the Greek word for thanksgiving. It is not only that the Church, like Jesus its model, gives thanks for the bread and the wine. The Church lives a life of thanksgiving, and that thanksgiving reaches its pinnacle in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is therefore an appropriate word for the meal. But so are most of the other words, for they are also Biblical. Paul calls it both the Lord's Table (1 Cor 10:21) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20). Throughout 1 Corinthians 10 he stresses the *koinonia*, the fellowship or communion that flows both vertically and horizontally. Both Jesus and the early church broke bread, and there are church traditions even today that prefer this term. The variety of names used in the New Testament and their persistence throughout church history shows the impossibility of summarizing the significance of this meal into one word.

Communion is a fellowship meal between Christ and his people. We are welcome at the Lord's Table to eat his Supper. It is not the “right people” that Christ has invited to his table, but us, the last, the least, the lost and the dead. The meal spread by him consists of bread and wine, which symbolize unseen realities with which we identify by faith. They require us to tell a story: why at this table do we eat the bread and drink the cup? Because by the body and blood of his servant Jesus God redeemed his people from bondage, bringing them out into freedom to be his people. With the poured-out blood of Jesus he sealed a covenant with us, and invites us to the table to eat a meal in his presence, a meal which demonstrates the reconciliation between God and man. By drinking the cup we participate vertically in, we have *koinonia* with, the blood of Christ. By breaking the one loaf we participate horizontally, we have *koinonia* with, the one body of Christ which is his Church. We have communion with Christ and communion with one another.

Come to the Lord's Table to eat the Lord's Supper. Here let us break bread together, give thanks, and have communion with God and with one another. Here let us be nourished by Christ, who feeds us with himself, the Bread of Heaven, the Bread of God, the Bread of Life. Here let us proclaim the Lord's death until he come, for he will come to gather us to that much greater feast, the wedding supper of the Lamb.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:5b-6)

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship (communion, *koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)

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