

WHAT IS THE COMMUNION AND WHY DO WE DO IT?

Luke 22:14-30

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In the Presbyterian Church in Canada, when someone becomes ordained, he or she becomes the minister of the Word and Sacraments. Here, the word Sacraments include baptism and Communion. This is following our historic tradition, that is the Reformation, particularly Calvin's teaching. We are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation next year. John Calvin was one of the most prominent teachers in the Reformation period besides Martin Luther. John Calvin published a book called the institutes of the Christian religion, which became almost the theology textbook of the Reformation movement at the time. His profound teachings in this book shaped many followers' theology and faith. One of Calvin's followers, John Knox, came over to Scotland and developed the church system based on these reformed teachings. And that was the birth of the Presbyterian Church. Its sound reformed teaching and brilliant church structure soon made the Presbyterian Church grow rapidly and it spread all around the world. Some Christians, who came from Europe, formed their church here in Canada and it became the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We have a large number of Presbyterian friends in South Korea that came over to Canada make up a significant size of the national church, but there are also other Presbyterian friends joining here from Malawi, Scotland, Ireland, Hungary, Taiwan, Latin America and many other countries.

One of the reasons why I'm giving you some history is because I would like to trace back to our foundation, which is Calvin's teaching, particularly on Communion. As I said earlier, the reason why we call a minister, the minister of the Word of Sacraments, is because of our Reformed tradition, particularly Calvin's teaching. Calvin strongly believed that the church must have the Word and Sacraments. If he was asked a question of what is the church, he would immediately answer the Word and Sacraments. We know that, because that's what he states in his books. He considered the church as the signpost to God's Kingdom. In other words, God gathered people and formed a church in order that it became a visible sign of God's Kingdom on earth. In Matthew 6 from verse 13, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." You and I are called as the member of the church to shine his glory and light to the world. In that sense, the church is the signpost to God's Kingdom. It allows the world to see the invisible God through the visible church.

This is particularly true for our worship. Worship makes what is invisible visible through the visible things. Let me give you an illustration. There is this beautiful and glorious sight that is blocked by this large curtain, and the curtain is so thick that you cannot see anything behind it when you stand far away from it. But as you come closer, you notice there is a little hole on the curtain and you peek through that hole. Now, in your eyesight there is this glorious and beautiful sight in front of you. That's what worship sometimes does. You are called and drawn closer to see what is behind the curtain, the beauty and glory that you did not see before but this is now fully revealed to your eyes. In Hebrews 10 from verse 19, it says, "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by

the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” What was not visible now became visible. This is what it means by the word ‘mystery’ used in the New Testament. For instance, in Colossians [COL-A-SSIANS] Paul says he is called to share “the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints” (1:26). The same is true with the Sacraments. They allow us to peek through the hole and see the beauty and glory unseen before.

So, the Communion is not a memorial service. It’s not where we mourn the loss of someone and meditate on the legacy. That’s not Communion, because we all know that Christ Jesus who died on the cross rose from the dead and is alive today. There is a strange phrase Apostle Paul taught us to say in our Communion and that is “We proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.” This phrase only makes sense when someone believes that the Lord is alive and is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. So, when we have our Communion, we are not thinking about someone who is not approachable, but someone who promised to be here in our midst when the two or three are gathered in his name. In fact, a couple of chapters later from today’s reading in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus appeared to two disciples, who were on their way to Emmaus [EMMA-OUS] and they received the bread and drink from Jesus without realizing that he was Jesus. And they ate the bread, it says, “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31a). When we have Communion, this is what Jesus intends to do for us. He blesses the elements and when we consume these elements, our eyes are opened and we see the Lord who is the host of the table. In the phrase Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of me,” the word “remembrance” apparently does not have the same meaning as the way we use it today. It’s not our intellectual or mind exercise, but it is experiential. One scholar says this word carries the meaning of re-experiencing the past in a very tangible way. In other words, when we take these elements in remembrance of Jesus, we are able to experience the presence of Jesus like his disciples experienced at his table.

Now, Calvin’s teaching was more profound than this. He believed that Communion was where we actually see and taste the feast in heaven. In other words, when we come to the table of the Communion, rather than God coming down to meet us, He believed that our souls are lifted up into heaven and join the real feast table that Jesus prepares for us. In other words, this is not incarnational experience, but transcendent experience. God is not coming down in flesh here, but by faith in Jesus Christ who came in flesh, we are uniting in his resurrected body to be lifted up to his heavenly throne and heavenly feast. This is why Calvin’s line of reformers do not believe that the bread and wine here at the table do not literally become the body and blood of Jesus. We believe that the Son of God came down and died on the cross once and for all two thousand years ago, and we believe he doesn’t need to come down again and be sacrificed over and over again like animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. This is why we don’t call this an Altar but we call it the Table.

Therefore, we do not believe the elements of bread and wine literally or physically become Jesus’ flesh and blood. Instead, we believe these become our spiritual nourishments when we take them in faith. In verse 20, Jesus says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my

blood.” Here, he says “the new covenant.” The disciples knew that this table fellowship they were having with Jesus was according to the Old Covenant custom, that is Passover. Passover is the day that God took the Israelites out of Egypt. He took them to Mount Sinai and there he gave the Ten Commandments. With these commandments and many other little commandments, he made the Covenant relationship with the Israelites. But, the problem is that it was impossible for human beings to be perfect in keeping the Law. So, this is what God says in Jeremiah, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” So, here again, the relationship in the Covenant remains the same: I will be their God, and they shall be my people. But, the reason why it’s a new covenant is because the manner the relationship goes through would be different. It would be no longer like the old days where they used rules and regulations to make relationships. Instead, he says he would insert these laws in our hearts. In other words, when he says he would put the law in our hearts, it means he would put the Holy Spirit in us and it would be the Holy Spirit that would change us, encourage us, discipline us, and empower us to have a healthy and intimate relationship with our God. And Paul says this is possible because of the death of Jesus.

Coming back to Communion, we believe that when we take these elements in faith, by grace they become spiritual nourishments that change us, encourage us, discipline us, and empower us to have a healthy and intimate relationship with our God. And we believe this is possible because Jesus poured out his blood on the cross for us 2000 years ago. This is why Jesus says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” So, if you take these elements of Communion in faith, believing that Jesus is the host of the Table and his blood can give us the power of the Holy Spirit through these elements, these elements can actually have a significant effect on your soul, on your body and on your life. There are many records in some parts of the world that have many bodily healings occur in the Holy Communion, and all of these occur, not only to give us the signpost to God’s beauty and glory, but also to renew us and nurture our souls.

So, when we take the elements in faith, God pours out his Holy Spirit upon us by grace. Calvin strongly believed that there are two major flows in worship, particularly during the Holy Communion; there is God’s grace coming to us, and in response, God’s people give thanksgiving to God. God gives us grace, and we give back our thanksgiving. In fact, one of the common terms we use for the Communion, the Eucharist, literally means “Thanksgiving” in Greek. The prayer we offer just before receiving the elements is called “Prayer of the Great Thanksgiving.” This is to follow the model Jesus made: “He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them” (vs. 19). I wonder if our communion today can reflect on more of this grace and thanksgiving. Imagine if we are sitting at the table of the feast with the Lord in heaven and our hearts are filled with thanksgiving because of his abundant grace he made available through eating the bread and drinking the cup. That’s what God wants us to experience at the Communion, and that’s what God wants to

reveal to the world if anyone desires to come to the Table and peek through the hole (in other words take the elements in faith).

Eight years ago, when I sensed God's calling to be a minister of the Word and Sacraments, there was one Sunday morning, where I felt terribly inadequate to become a minister. I mean, "look how weak and awful I am. God must have made a mistake. Or God must be scraping the bottom of the barrel." There was no way that I could say God did not call me, because there were so many convincing proofs that I could not deny, but it must be God doing all of these to tell me I need to be a minister. But, when I looked at myself, I could not understand why God would call someone like me. That Sunday morning, I went to the church, and it was a Communion Sunday. My minister was preaching on the text that we read today. He went through the whole chapter with us in his sermon, pointing out the things he noticed. There was Judas who would betray Jesus for his love for money. There was Peter who disobeyed Jesus when he came to wash his feet. There was a dispute among disciples about who was greater. The minister shared how disappointing this Jesus' movement and his group looked to him. Then, he pointed out the words of Jesus, who were observing all of these disciples' ugliness. From verse 28, "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Isn't this amazing? This really spoke to me that Sunday morning and when I was given the bread and wine, I was so overwhelmed. It was such a powerful experience, as I felt I was receiving these elements from my Lord, and he was inviting me to eat and drink at his table in his kingdom and sit with him on his throne. This invitation is also to you. It is his great pleasure to have you come and join his table and experience his love and power. The table is ready. Let us come and join at his table. Come, and taste his goodness.