

Why are we doing Communion more often?

By Ryan Dean

You may have noticed that we have begun to take Communion more often. Whereas in the past we've shared at the table only once a month, we are now beginning a pattern of sharing every other week. Why are we making the change? We want you to understand that it is motivated by some deep convictions about the nature of Communion and its value in the life of the Christian. So, let me share with you some of the reasons why we feel our church will be blessed by making the Table a more central aspect of our life together.

1. Communion uniquely orients us to our place in God's redemptive drama.

First of all, *Communion directs us to consider God's saving work in the past.* You've got to imagine that the disciples were fairly confused as Jesus distributed the bread of that last Passover meal with his disciples, "Take, eat; this is my body." And then the cup: "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." What exactly did these words imply? Certainly theirs was not the confusion of the Roman Catholic Church, who believe that the bread and wine of communion are literally the body and blood of Christ even as they continue to look like regular elements. Although the most literal reading of Christ's words, this is clearly not the best as it fails to take into account our Lord's use of metaphor (as elsewhere, "I am the gate").

I imagine that the disciples' confusion was a result of their failure to understand the essence of God's purpose in sending Jesus. They envisioned revolution of the political variety, where they in particular would share in the spoils of King Jesus' victory. On the contrary, God sent Christ-first and foremost-to suffer. They anticipated in Christ the glory of King Solomon, yet the Father prepared for him the ignobility of the Passover Lamb.

You see, with these words of institution, Jesus does something shocking: he identifies himself as the lamb of the Passover, whose blood was placed on the doorposts of the Israelites that last night of their captivity in Egypt. Those who did so were protected from the judgment of God as the angel of death came to kill all the first-born sons IN Egypt. With these words, Jesus clarifies the particulars of the ancient Jewish feast of Passover. As the Old Testament saints celebrated their participation in God's salvation by eating this feast, so we celebrate ours by celebrating that same feast (although with more complete information), for it is Christ who has always been the spiritual food and drink of God's people.

Secondly, *Communion directs us to anticipate God's future saving work.* Following his words of institution, Jesus tells his disciples, "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in the Father's kingdom." In a matter of days, Jesus will be dead. Although after His resurrection He will appear to his disciples, never again in this life will he share the Passover/Communion table with them. Yet Jesus promises that there will be a day, following that last day of His return and judgment, when He and his disciples and, in fact, all who belong to Him will physically sit down at the Father's table and eat the consummate Passover/Communion meal. This is the marriage feast of the Lamb and His Church described in Revelation 19:6-10, with God the Father playing host.

We must understand that Communion is not an end in itself, rather it is a foretasting and foreshadowing of this final feast. It is meant to build anticipation in us with every partaking as we are reminded that God's redeeming work in the world is not yet complete. As Paul says elsewhere, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Thus, Communion is important because it helps us to view our lives in the context of the bigger picture, drawing us out of ourselves to consider God's both past and future redemptive work.

2. It is the symbol of our sharing in the benefits of Christ's death.

This point builds on the last one. As the Old Testament saints ate the Passover meal to identify themselves as the beneficiaries of the blood of the Passover lamb (who was Christ), so we eat the Communion meal to identify ourselves as the beneficiaries of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Bread and wine are particularly effective symbols of this relationship. As bread and wine provide for the basic needs of our bodies and ensure our physical survival, so do we recognize that Christ's sacrificial death is the staff of our spiritual life. As we consume the elements we are vividly reminded of the absolute necessity of Jesus' sacrifice for our redemption.

Of course, there is nothing magical about the elements. They do not in and of themselves communicate these benefits; rather, as we come to the table believing in Christ and trusting Him for our salvation, He meets us here in a special way, assuring us of our forgiveness and ultimate acceptance (which is symbolically offered to us through the bread and wine) before the Father. As we eat and drink, we are in effect responding to Christ's offer: "Yes, I belong to You!"

3. It is the symbol of our unity with each other and true believers everywhere.

Personally, I wish we would develop the habit of keeping our eyes open during Communion. That, I think, would help us to realize that Communion (as the name suggests) is a *communal* activity, not primarily meant for individuals but for the Body of Christ. No matter our age, our vocation, our level of spiritual maturity, our race, or our sex, the table is the great equalizer among us, for here we are vividly reminded that all of us depend on Christ for salvation.

Perhaps there is someone in the congregation with whom you don't particularly get along. Seeing that person take the elements should remind you that God gets to pick his own friends; He hasn't asked for your advice! In this way, the table should serve to help us "accept one another as Christ has accepted you" (Romans 15:7). As Paul reminds us elsewhere, "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17).

4. Creates a balance in our service between word and picture.

John Calvin said that God talks to man in "baby talk." When we talk to our infant children, we suspend our regular way of speaking and resort to "goo-goos" and "gaa-gaas". This is because both our knowledge of the world and our ability to describe it is unfathomable to the newborn. Yet because we desire to interact with our children, we stoop ourselves in order to relate to them. Analogously, such is the relationship between us and our Creator. Our finite minds could not contain his infinite wisdom. Were he to speak with us as if to an equal, we would be utterly overwhelmed (if not dead). Yet because He loves us and desires our salvation, he has stooped himself to communicate with us. Thus, Scripture is his "lispering" to us.

Yet even beyond the written Word, he has given us the Word in pictures as a type of extreme lipping, that is in Baptism and Communion. This is an important reason why we desire to do Communion more often: we better comprehend the Gospel when it is not only spoken but also enacted. This creates a balance in our service between the Word preached and the Word pictured, appealing both to the right and left brain. In the act of Communion, God stoops himself as low as he can to assure us of His love.

Conclusion

For these reasons, we believe that more frequent Communion will encourage us to worship Christ more deeply. Of course, we are familiar with the argument against regular Communion, that it will lose its significance, becoming mere rote. There is some merit to this argument, for the Church has a long history of doing things “just because we've always done them.” Yet surely it doesn't inevitably have to be this way. Think of all the things we do every week without exception in worship. We sing. We read Scripture. We pray. We listen to a sermon. Certainly it is possible that the regularity with which we do these activities could cause them to lose their significance for us. Certainly it is inevitable that sometimes we do do these things more or less as a matter of rote, depending on our current degree of intimacy with Christ. Nonetheless, believing in the value of these things, we continue to do them week after week.

As your church leaders, we are committed to doing our part to help these things (including Communion) retain their significance for you by reminding you of their meaning and content. You, on the other hand, must be responsible for stirring your own soul as you come to corporate worship, entering with a spirit of expectancy and wonder. In this way, we can all ward off spiritual lethargy and experience all the blessings God extends to us through corporate wor