

“THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION”
John 6:48-59, Luke 22:14-20, I Corinthians 11:23-32
October 7 & 8, 2023

“In his book, *The Body*, Charles Colson tells about Pat Novak, a pastor in a nonsacramental denomination, who was serving as a hospital chaplain intern just outside of Boston several years ago. Pat was making his rounds one summer morning when he was called to visit a patient admitted with an undiagnosed ailment. John, a man in his sixties, had not responded to any treatment; medical tests showed nothing; psychological tests were inconclusive. Yet he was wasting away; he had not even been able to swallow for two weeks. The nurses tried everything. Finally they called the chaplain’s office. [Why do they always wait till the last option to get the Lord involved?]

“When Pat walked into the room, John was sitting limply in his bed, strung with IV tubes, staring listlessly at the wall. He was a tall, grandfatherly man, balding a little, but his sallow skin hung loosely on his face, neck, and arms where the weight had dropped from his frame. His eyes were hollow.

“Pat was terrified; he had no idea what to do. But John seemed to brighten a bit as soon as he saw Pat’s chaplain badge and invited him to sit down. As they talked, Pat sensed that God was urging him to do something specific: He knew he was to ask John if he wanted to take Communion. Chaplain interns were not encouraged to ask this type of thing in this public hospital, but Pat did.

“At that John broke down. ‘I can’t!’ he cried. ‘I’ve sinned and can’t be forgiven.’

“Pat paused a moment, knowing he was about to break policy again. Then he told John about I Corinthians 11 and Paul’s admonition that whoever takes Communion in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself. And he asked John if he wanted to confess his sin. John nodded gratefully. To this day Pat can’t remember the particular sin John confessed, nor would he say if he did, but he recalls that it did not strike him as particularly egregious. Yet it had been draining the life from this man. John wept as he confessed, and Pat laid hands on him, hugged him, and told John his sins were forgiven.

“Then Pat got the second urging from the Holy Spirit: *Ask him if he wants to take Communion.*

Now, having confessed his sin, John did want communion. Pat gave John a Bible and told him he would be back later. Already John was sitting up straighter, with a flicker of light in his eyes.

“Pat visited a few more patients and then ate some lunch in the hospital cafeteria. When he left he wrapped an extra piece of bread in a napkin and borrowed a coffee cup from the cafeteria. He ran out to a shop a few blocks away and bought a container of grape juice. Then he returned to John’s room with the elements and celebrated Communion with him, again reciting I Corinthians 11. John took the bread and chewed it slowly. It was the first time in weeks he had been able to take solid food in his mouth. He took the cup and swallowed. He had been set free.

“Within three days John walked out of that hospital. The nurses were so amazed they called the newspaper, which later featured the story of John and Pat, appropriately, in its ‘LIFE’ section.”¹ The power of forgiveness and the taking of the Communion elements brought John new life.

Hear the words that Pat gave to John. This is I Corinthians 11:23-32. (READ I Cor. 11:3-32)

The Sacrament of Communion, the Lord’s Supper, is a means for us to have life, as we remember the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that made payment for our sins. The Passover meal that Jesus and His disciples were sharing the evening before Jesus was arrested, was in memory of the miraculous way that God provided rescue to the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt. They were saved by putting the blood of a spotless lamb on the doorposts and lintel of the doorway to their homes. The Angel of Death recognized the sign that God had told the people to put on the doors, and “passed-over” the houses bearing the blood. The Hebrew people were saved from the death brought to Egypt on account of Pharaoh not letting them go as God had directed Moses to tell him. The Passover meal is the memorial service to remember God’s giving them life out of slavery!

During that Passover meal, Jesus used the Afikomen, the bread that is hidden during the meal, as His body, breaking it, giving it to the disciples as a sign that His own body would be broken and “hidden” for a time. Then He gave the third cup of wine, the Cup of Redemption, to His disciples as the

¹ (Charles W. Colson, *The Body*, [Nashville: Word Publishing, 1992], pg. 139-140)

symbol of His blood that would be poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of the world. In that way Jesus turned the Passover meal into a new sign of God's grace and forgiveness and freedom for all who believe in Him and follow His teachings.

The Sacrament of Communion, then, is a memorial for us, reminding us of our redemption in Christ Jesus as He then gave His body and blood for us. He told the disciples, "*Do this in remembrance of Me*" (I Cor. 11:24-25). It was for them to connect the miraculous works of God in the time of the Egyptian emancipation with the salvation work that God had planned through Him. Jesus went on from that Passover meal, having become the Passover Lamb that was the sign of the New Covenant, gave His life into the hands of the Jewish leaders who then delivered Him into crucifixion by the Romans. Jesus fulfilled the salvation of God for all people as He died and then rose again for the forgiveness of sins.

But this was not the first time He had spoken about this. Jesus had talked to the people about His becoming the way to life earlier in His ministry, particularly right after He had performed the feeding of the thousands on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. He had told them, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty*" (John 16:35).

Jesus then compared the life-giving ability that He has as the Son of God with the life-giving manna given to the people following Moses in the wilderness. While the manna gave them physical life for this world, Jesus gives spiritual life for us. His body and His blood are what give us eternal life, and when we take them into ourselves, believing in His great love for us, we also gain life.

Jesus stated it clearly, "*Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise them 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 them*" (John 6:53-56).

But they didn't understand at that time what Jesus was saying. They only thought that He was talking about His physical flesh and His physical blood. This is what caused many of His followers to fall away, since they did not comprehend the significance of His great sacrifice that He was going to

offer. To eat the flesh and drink the blood of another person was a practice detestable to God, so they did not - they could not - receive these words of Jesus as truth.

However, we see the fulfillment of these words in the Lord's Supper, as Jesus invites us to take the bread, His body, and drink the cup, His blood, in remembrance of His sacrifice given for us. And we are to receive these elements into us so that we might have eternal life through Him, recognizing ourselves as His followers who believe and trust in His sacrifice on the cross as our salvation.

So the Sacrament of Communion is a symbol of Christ's death for all sinners. When He allowed His body to be broken by the brutal flogging that He received and His blood to be poured out from the wounds in His hands, His head, His feet and His side, He was taking the place of the sacrificial lamb offered for the forgiveness of sins. His sacrifice became the ultimate sacrifice needed to once and for all pay the price for our sins. As we profess our belief in His death and resurrection as the avenue to the forgiveness of sins, we claim Jesus to be our Messiah, the Savior of the world. So we receive the words, "*This is My body, which is [broken] for you*" (I Cor. 11:24), and "*This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it...*" (11:25), to vividly remember Jesus' sacrifice, in our own life on a regular basis in order to put it into practice in our daily living.

Chuck Colson explains it this way. "Various traditions attach different meanings to the elements. But however we view them, it is important to remember the underlying reality. And whether symbolic or actual, when we receive the elements or when we go to the Communion rail, we are making a physical gesture. When we take the cup and the bread, it is a physical bonding. Communion is the holiest moment, when we signify our oneness with Christ. Failing to celebrate that communion, or doing so infrequently, can drain the vitality from a church body.

"And failing to treat the sacrament with holy reverence is a grave error. Whenever I participate in the Lord's Supper, I think of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two oldest sons. Nadab would have succeeded Aaron as high priest, but both he and his brother were consumed by the fire of the Lord after they '*took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before*

the Lord' (Leviticus 10:1-5). Similarly, Uzzah unthinkingly touched the Ark of the Covenant - and died (2 Samuel 6:6). These offenses may seem trivial, the punishment harsh, but God has never lightly suffered the desecration of the holy.

“For this reason, Scripture sets forth three conditions for Communion: ***First, only believers can partake.*** Jesus' invitation to ‘remember Me’ was to His disciples. Paul's instructions for the sacrament were to the church. And the act is the supreme signal of the inner work of grace in an individual's life.

“For a nonbeliever to take Communion is to taunt God. This is why many churches, understandably, warn partakers of the meaning and significance of the sacrament and tell non-Christians to abstain.

“Second, believers partaking must be at peace with one another. This is evident from Paul's anger that the church was divided and therefore should not be meeting for the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:17-18). Before participating in Holy Communion, every believer should examine his or her heart and take whatever steps are necessary to be reconciled with fellow believers.

“Third, believers dare not come to the table except with a repentant heart. ‘Whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner,’ as Paul puts it (in I Cor. 11:27-28) ‘*drinks judgment to himself.*’ That should be a sobering warning, especially when the apostle adds that because of this offense many have fallen ill or died. Any pastor who takes the Word of God seriously should never administer Communion without adequately warning partakers. Those who are unrepentant should flee the table rather than trivialize the sacred.”²

The Sacrament of Communion is also a thanksgiving feast for the believers. Often known of as the Eucharist, the very meaning of the Greek word is “thanksgiving.” We are giving thanks to the Lord for all His grace freely given to us so that we might be found in His favor, having repented of our sins and turned to Him through Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Communion, shared within the fellowship of believers, professing our faith that “we believe in the holy communion of the saints.” (Apostle's Creed)

² (Charles W. Colson, *The Body*, pg. 138-139)

As such, the Sacrament of Communion is also a family meal. The Passover, which it was modeled after, includes a meal where the whole family can remember the works of God. As a body of believers, as the body of Christ, we are one family together celebrating the great works of salvation of God for us.

The Lord's Supper is also a Sacrament. The word sacrament mean an outward and visible sign of God's inward and spiritual grace. It is the outer expression that the whole world can see of the inner faith that we have in the One we call Lord, Messiah, and Savior - Jesus Christ. By His grace given freely to us, we outwardly profess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God every time we participate in the service.

So as a sacrament, as a sign of God's grace to us, we need to treat the Lord's Supper with reverence. To treat the Lord's Supper any differently would be a sign that we are seeking to earn, merit, or purchase salvation all on our own, and that is an insult to the Giver.

“Imagine yourself invited to a banquet in the White House by the president of the United States. You are seated at a table that is filled with the choicest foods. Every effort is made to give you a most enjoyable evening. At the end of a lovely visit, the president stands at the front door to bid you good-bye.

“What do you do? As you leave, you press a dime into his hand and say, ‘Thank you very much for your kindness. I have enjoyed the evening very much. I realize it has cost you a lot of money, and I want to help you pay for the meal.’ Is that the proper response to his kindness? On the contrary, it is a rude and insulting gesture.

“So it would be with God's grace,”³ if we were to treat Holy Communion with anything less than respect and thankfulness. God gave us His Only Son, Jesus, to live with us, teach us, call us closer to God, and then die for us so that we could be set free from the separating effect of sin. To disrespect God by dishonoring the Memorial Service of Jesus' loving sacrifice would be disgraceful and dangerous.

³ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville; Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg.249-250)

God does not take lightly to our disregarding His sacrifice to bring us back into His presence, and He takes offense when we take Holy Communion with anything less than humility and gratefulness.

So the Sacrament of Communion is also a Covenant of Grace. It is our making a renewal of our baptismal vows to let Jesus live within us. Jesus told His disciples, “*This cup is the New Covenant in My blood...*” (I Cor. 11:25). This is the saving covenant between God and all of humanity, to whomever receives Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives. It is the covenant of grace that we are no longer judged by our sins, but we are now judged through the blood of Christ. Sins power no longer condemns us to death, but rather we are free to live in this world for Jesus, and then live in eternal life with Jesus when our time here is finished.

This Covenant with us goes beyond the obedience to the Law of the Commandments. It is the fulfillment of all of the Scriptures. And as we accept this covenant with the Lord God Almighty, we are telling Him that we intend to live our lives worthy of Him in our world today, following all of His Laws and Commands as a sign that our lives have been changed to conform to His standards.

The Sacrament of Communion is our invitation to go out and share this Good News with all the people around us. Here in I Corinthians 11:26 we hear, “*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death...*” The word proclaim means that it is a sermon for all of us to preach through this Lord’s Supper. Not only is it a sign of God’s grace to us, it is our calling as followers of Jesus to “tell it to others” so that they might come to understand and believe the importance of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

I had a woman question me once because she did not understand Jesus’ mission for the world. She said, “You mean to tell me that the whole reason that Jesus came to the earth was to die? How can that be?” I then had the opportunity to explain to her the situation we are in, and that since we cannot earn our way into heaven, only a perfect sacrifice could be made on our behalf to break the bond of sin, and free us to eternal life. Jesus’ whole purpose for being here on this world was to “*Seek and to save that which is lost*” (Luke 19:10). And the only way to save the lost was to die for them and break the

condemnation of sin that holds us all captive, away from God's presence. So Jesus came to tell us about God's ways of life for us. He came to explain the consequences of our rebellion against God. He came to release us from our slavery to sin and to set us free from eternal death. But even in His sacrifice given for us, it is still our choice as to believing in Him. Only those who believe in Him, trust Him as their Savior, and live according to God's standards of life, can find the reward of eternal life.

Finally, the Sacrament of Communion is a symbol of Christian hope. We proclaim the Lord's death "*until He comes*" again to claim His own to take them into His Father's house in heaven. As we participate in this sacrament, we remember Jesus' words of John 14 (2-3), "*My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.*"

Our home is no longer here in this world when we believe in Jesus Christ, but it is in the Father's House. As we participate in the Sacrament of Communion and take the bread into us and let the cup flow into our bodies, we, as believers in Christ Jesus, are redeemed, forgiven and set free as a child of God, no longer destined for death here in this world, but for eternal life with Jesus in the kingdom of God. We no longer belong to this world, but to the world beyond this life, for all eternity.

That is what makes the Sacrament of Communion so precious and holy. That is why we are to receive it with repentant hearts and renewed spirits. That is the purpose, to honor the Lord our God, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Let's pray...

Father thank You for this great gift of life, given to us in Your Son, Jesus' death and resurrection. As we remember His passion for us, give us the courage to give our lives completely over to You so that You might transform us from the ways of death to the ways of life. Open our eyes once more to the truth of Jesus, so that we might honor and glorify Him in all that we say and do. And as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, call us to remember His great love for all of us so that His life, death, and resurrection brings life to us and to all those around us. This we pray today, in Jesus' Name. AMEN.