

# The Meaning of Communion

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"This do in remembrance of me." With these words ringing in our ears, we celebrate communion all over the church of God. As we drink the cup and eat the bread, we reflect on Christ's sacrifice and look forward to his return.

Yet communion is more than a memorial. Our continued participation in this powerfully symbolic ceremony molds our thinking and brings to life deeply spiritual truths in very concrete ways. It shapes our identity as a people of God and provides the truly blessed assurance that we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. The "message" of communion is important and deserves our full attention.

## An Unworthy Manner?

From what has been said, it follows that believers should share communion at every reasonable opportunity. Yet, often believers abstain from sharing in this rich experience. They allow the bread and the cup to pass them by as they sit in guilt and shame, wishing they were more worthy. There was a time when I myself would abstain if I were struggling with some sin.

What is it that drives believers from their Lord's table in these spiritually intimate moments? This practice stems from Paul's warning in I Corinthians 11:27-32. There Paul tells us to examine ourselves before communing, for "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27, NIV). Participating "in an unworthy manner" brings judgment (vv. 29-31), and none of us wishes to transgress this command. Therefore, we examine ourselves before participating, seeing how well we "measure up." If we feel spiritual enough, we may proceed; if we don't, better "safe than sorry."

But is this really Paul's meaning? Was this Jesus' meaning? Consider Jesus' words in John 6:

*Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink the blood, you have no life in you.*

*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" (vv. 53-56, NIV)*

Consider further the fact that Jesus' blood *cleanses* us from sin. When we are guilty, that is when we need Jesus the most. When we are struggling, that is when we need the help and support of the body. We need to be reminded that we are in a fellowship of brothers and sisters who represent Jesus to us, and we need the strength and assurance provided by the communion celebration. To shrink away from it is to retreat within ourselves and suffer silently.

What, then did Paul mean in I Corinthians? Consider the context. The Corinthian believers were abusing the Lord's Supper:

*When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! (vv. 20-22, NIV).*

The Corinthians' behavior contradicted the whole point of the communion experience. Rather than celebrating their unity, they were revealing their division. Hence Paul's question, "Do you despise the church of God?" They were eating and drinking "without recognizing the body of the Lord" (v. 30), that is, the body of Christ of which they were part. As such, they were eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner" and bringing judgment on themselves. The "unworthy manner" relates to the way they abused the Lord's Supper. This observation is confirmed by verses 33 and 34:

*"So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment" (vv. 33, 34, NIV).*

When we struggle with sin and find ourselves in need of forgiveness, let us eagerly seek that forgiveness and eagerly reach for the cleansing

blood of Christ. "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?" (I Cor. 10:16a, NIV). Let us share the communion experience and the reassurance that we are part of God's people. "Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (I Cor. 10:16b, NIV).

### **Participation in the Body**

This message is one of hope and comfort, but it is also one of warning. Paul directs our attention to the body and asks us to examine ourselves. Are we communing *as a body*? Right relationships within the body are essential. Jesus taught that this aspect of church life is to take precedence over worship (cf. Matt. 5:23, 24).

Communion is not an individualistic matter; it is a *body* matter. We commune as a body; we come to the Lord's table as a family. This truth is bound up in the biblical symbol of the one loaf and the one cup. "Because there is one loaf," Paul writes, "we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (I Cor. 10:17, NIV).

The New Testament Christians celebrated communion by sharing a single cup and a single loaf of bread as a visible sign of their unity (I Cor. 10:17). In this they followed the pattern of Jesus and his disciples at the first Lord's Supper (Mark 14:22,23). Without this symbol, it is easy to forget the communal nature of this important ceremony.

The next time your church celebrates communion, take a look around the room and consider the brothers and sisters with whom you are communing. Evaluate your relationships with them. Do you despise the church of God? Consider how to put an end to unresolved conflicts. Do you recognize the body of the Lord? If so, commune with thanksgiving. Are you struggling with sin? Drink deeply of the cup of forgiveness.

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