

What Happens at the Table?

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[0 : 00] Now, as I said, shortly in our service, we will share bread and wine together in communion. And I wanted to take this chance at the end of one series and before the beginning of the next, really to reflect on this part of our worship.

We call communion a sacrament, which simply means something that's been set apart for us by Jesus for us to do as an act of worship.

Jesus commanded his church in every time and place to carry out two things, to baptize with water in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to share together bread and wine and remember his death.

And so this meal that we have before us is a meal that's shared by Christians all over the world, in all places. And doing it rightly by God's word is a mark of distinctive Christian worship.

And so it is worth us taking some time to reflect on what is going on here, what we are doing.

Perhaps you've heard those words in 1 Corinthians many times, and maybe you've sat in communion services your whole life, or maybe this is your first time this evening, but whether it is the first or the thousandth time that we've heard them and seen and received this meal, it's always good, isn't it, for us to go back and to be refreshed so that we can appreciate what Christ has given us in it, to fill out our worship with understanding.

[1 : 43] It's like if you were to do a little bit of reading before tucking into your Michelin star meal, maybe you would appreciate more what you are about to eat and to drink, what you're looking for, what it might taste like or feel like or smell like.

So think of this sermon a little bit like tasting notes, if you like, ahead of our meal, because we want to understand communion, to help us to appreciate it spiritually for all that it is worth.

So what happens at the table when we come and take communion? I use that word very deliberately, what happens in this meal?

Because from the very beginning of the big controversies about communion 500 years ago, and possibly today more than ever, the question has often been, what does communion mean?

What do the bread and wine symbolize or picture? Now, of course, the bread and the wine do symbolize something very clearly, don't they? The body and the blood of the Lord Jesus.

[2 : 58] But scripture takes us further than that. And the clue is in what we call this meal, communion. We get that word from the letter we just read, chapter 10, verse 16, the word translated participation, which could also be translated fellowship, or as we know it, communion.

And that word takes us beyond signs and symbols. Possibly you remember the classic M&S; ad. This is not just bread.

This is M&S; bread. This is not simply wine. This is M&S; wine. Well, brothers and sisters, this is not just a table. It's not even just an M&S; table.

When it is set like this in a service of worship, it is the Lord's table. And so it says, Paul, the cup that we drink, it isn't just a cup.

It's not even just a cup of thanksgiving. It is, verse 16, a participation in the blood of Christ. This is not just bread.

[4 : 11] It is a participation in the body of Christ. In other words, this isn't a table set with sort of plastic food and drink, the kind of which children play with.

It's not purely symbols that mean something when we look at them. No, it is a spiritual feast with real food and real drink to taste and smell and touch, which in the context of worship do something for us.

This meal gives us, through faith and by God's spirit, spiritual fellowship or communion.

Firstly, with Christ, then with one another. And as we share in it, it speaks to us, of course, about Christ, his death, and the gospel that brings us into union with him and with one another. And so that's where we're going tonight. We'll start with communion with Christ. And this is, to warn you, the biggest part of our time, communion with Christ.

[5 : 20] So if you just look at chapter 10, verse 16 with me again, Paul writes, is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?

It is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ. Now, Paul's wider point in the section is relevant because it's to do with where and how Christians in Corinth were eating and drinking.

And so as we read in verse 20, he writes, the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God. And I don't want you to be participants with demons.

Now, that is what has been going on in the church in Corinth. And that sets everything that Paul's saying in that context of worship. He's saying if you go to some kind of worship service in a pagan temple and you eat of the sacrifice that has been made in that temple, that does something.

What does it do? There's that word again, makes you a participant. Or gives you fellowship or communion, but in that context with demons. And so that's just to show I'm not twisting verse 16 out of context.

[6 : 37] This whole issue of who we commune with in worship, it is what Paul is talking about here. If taking the bread and wine is communion with Christ, then sharing in a pagan sacrifice, says Paul, is communion with something else.

So which will you choose? Because, he says to the Christians there and then, you can't have it both ways. That's Paul's case. And it puts a lot of weight, doesn't it, on that word, communion.

It's something spiritual. It has to do with worship. And it does something. So, zooming in then to verse 16, what is Paul saying happens at the table?

Well, notice this firstly, Paul says it's not communion with Christ generally. We enjoy, don't we, Christ's presence with us all the time.

Our union with him gives us communion with him. But what does Paul say the cup gives us communion with? He says, with the blood of Christ.

[7 : 52] And the bread with the body of Christ. This supper, he says, gives us special and spiritual communion with the body and blood of the crucified and risen Christ.

Now, maybe just hearing that puts some of us on edge. Okay, fingers kind of hovering over the heresy button. I can see it in your eyes.

Okay, you can't fool me. Because a purely kind of symbolic view of the supper has become normal in the church. It's become standard for lots of Christians.

And that's partly because it's so easy for us to get our heads around. But the problem is, because that is the kind of dominant view, anything that suggests that Christ might really be present in a special way in the supper, well, we are immediately suspicious of that.

It sounds like heresy to our ears, but it's not. It's biblical. And it's reformed. And the easiest way, I think, for us to grasp this is to take just a very quick whistle-stop tour of the ways that this question has been answered by Christians in the past.

[9 : 09] What happens at the table so that we have communion with Christ? Well, you perhaps know, the Catholic Church says that this happens because the bread turns into the body.

And the wine into the blood of Christ. They say on the outside, it looks and tastes, smells and feels like bread and wine. But in its essence, it has become body and blood.

And the word for that is transubstantiation. Now, there's lots of problems with that. Not least that it is disgusting to think of eating body and blood.

It is. But the biggest problem is that that change is supposed to happen when the priest offers the bread and wine as a fresh sacrifice for sins.

That is offering the body and blood of Christ again every day a fresh sacrifice. Of course, it totally denies, doesn't it, the sufficiency and the power of the cross of Christ.

[10 : 15] Because Jesus said, of course, from the cross, it is finished. But if we need a fresh sacrifice every time we come to God, well then, it is not finished.

Listen to Hebrews chapter 10. Day after day, every priest stands and performs his religious duties. Again and again, he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

But when this priest, that is Jesus, had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

And since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice, he is made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Okay, did you catch that? The Bible says on the cross, Jesus made the one ultimate, once for all sacrifice, never to be repeated.

[11 : 17] For all his people's sins, past, present, and future, it is finished. And so, if the bread and wine do turn into somehow the body and blood of Christ to be offered afresh, well, how is that different from the old covenant priests?

It is not. That cross hasn't changed anything, if that is true. Now, one of the first people to point that out 500 years ago, Martin Luther, well, he had his own take on this question.

The bread and wine, he said, don't turn into the body and blood. But somehow Christ must still be there because he says himself, this is my body. This is my blood.

And so, said Luther, Christ's body and blood come with the bread and wine, like an invisible layer that kind of sit on top of the bread and the wine.

That's called consubstantiation. Now, that solves the issue of the sacrifice, but not really the issue of where Christ's body is.

[12 : 28] Because we know, don't we, a living human body can't be portioned out or in more than one place at a time. Christ rose bodily from the grave.

And while his body was transformed and glorious, it is still a human body, which he still has. When Christ ascended to heaven, he didn't shed his body like a snake skin.

He has his body still. The incarnation was a permanent thing. And so, when Luther says his body comes with the bread, well, the question has to be, which body?

Because Christ's resurrected body is in heaven, not on a piece of bread. So, if Christ's body and blood are not somehow kind of in or on top of the bread and wine, then how is Christ present in the supper?

Well, this is where our signs and symbols, friends, come into it. Because Luther's friend, Zwingli, then said, because Christ's body and blood aren't physically in the supper, the bread and the wine, they're just bread and wine, then they must only be symbols that represent his body and blood.

[13 : 50] So, he said, Christ is present in the supper in our hearts by faith as we remember his death. That's called memorialism.

And perhaps that sounds very like what you think and what you believe, and it may be. And on the face of it, it's quite straightforward, isn't it? Jesus said, do this in remembrance of me.

And so, the bread and wine, they do, they are here to remind us, help us remember his broken body, his blood poured out for our forgiveness. To be clear, it is not less than that.

But the problem with that view is that it takes Christ himself away from the table and out of the supper. The memory of him is in our heads and our hearts, but it says he's not with us in any kind of special manner.

There's no real communion or participation on his part. Because I thought about this, I thought it was a bit like, you know, say at dinner time, the children have been told, Dad will be home for dinner.

[15 : 02] And so, they get excited. They're looking forward to spending time with Dad, him being with them, experiencing him. But when dinner time comes, Dad isn't at the table.

Where is he? Ask the children. Well, Zwingli says, he is here as we remember him in our hearts and minds. Now, that would be a letdown, wouldn't it?

You'd be pretty disappointed if your parent told you that. That's not fair, we'd say. That's not what you promised. Well, Zwingli would say, well, it is in a spiritual sense true.

But because we're clever children, we would reply, but spiritual doesn't mean not real. Real communion, real fellowship, involves a real presence.

Someone actually being there with us to experience, to see and hear and taste and smell and touch. We want the head of the family at the table with us.

[16 : 08] That's where he told us he would be by promising us communion with his body and his blood. So then, how is he present in the supper?

Well, this is where our friend John Calvin enters the conversation. It's not so much, he said, that Christ is present with us as that we are present with him.

He said, it's not so much that Christ's body and blood come down somehow into or on top of the bread and wine. He said, it's at the table that we are spiritually raised up to him to be where his body and blood are into the presence of the crucified and risen Christ in heaven.

In Calvin's own words, quote, Christ then is absent from us in respect of his body, but dwelling in us by his spirit, he raises us to heaven to himself.

The point he is making is that we have nothing less than real, spiritual, heavenly communion with the risen body and blood of Christ himself in this meal.

[17 : 30] We have his real presence in a special way at the table. He is really there. As we eat the bread and drink the wine, you can picture yourself sitting there and glancing up to the head of the table to see the head of the family present, sitting, in the flesh, Christ himself, risen and glorified.

For this is his table where he sits and he serves his family. Now, that's all interesting, you say, but why does that matter for us this evening?

Well, Tim Chester is helpful on this, in this book. He puts it like this, perhaps somebody has told you, if ever you have struggled maybe with singleness or relationships or loneliness or loss, the standard Christian answer.

Well, you might not have everything that you wish for, but don't worry, you have Christ. And we know that's true, says Chester, but then he asks the question that probably we have all at some point asked in our hearts, if not out loud.

But where is the holding of hands? Where is the touch? Where is the embodied relationship? Well, the answer to that, he says, is on this table.

[19 : 04] What does Christ feel like in our hands? Well, he feels like broken bread. What does Christ smell and taste like to us?

He smells and tastes like red wine. For as we drink the wine and eat the bread with faith and in worship, we are raised into spiritual communion with him.

In his body and blood, we know and experience his glorious, personal, bodily presence. And brothers and sisters, this then is what being with him feels like.

That at the table, we see and hear, we touch and taste and smell something of him. And as we taste and are fed by the bread and wine physically, so spiritually, we taste and are fed by Christ himself inwardly as we share with him at his heavenly banquet table.

Sinclair Ferguson goes as far as to say that at the table, we do not get a better Christ, but we do get Christ better. We have the same Christ, but we have him better because we experience him in a unique way.

[20 : 31] We feel our union with him. We taste it and smell it, our spiritual proximity and closeness to the crucified and risen Savior.

And so in the context of our worship service, brothers and sisters, this is not simply bread, but a participation with the body of Christ.

This is not simply wine, but a participation with the blood of Christ. Christ. And he so graciously gives us this supper that we might taste and feel and smell something of the intimacy that we have with him because we get him better through our hands, our mouths, our eyes and ears at his table. What a wonderful gift that is to us as we walk through this world by faith, not seeing, not hearing, touching him, but at his table we come near.

Communion with Christ. But there's another kind of communion in this meal and it is a horizontal one. It's our second and much briefer point this evening. Communion with one another.

[21 : 49] And again, this isn't something that we actually think about very often at the table, partly because Paul's words in chapter 11 have been used so often to encourage Christians to look inwards.

Our faith, our hearts. So much so that we've forgotten sometimes to look outwards at one another. But the irony is that that is exactly what Paul wants the church in Corinth to be doing.

So if you'd have a look at verses 27 and 28 in chapter 11, these are famous words. words, words, words, I think, that have made many a Christian fear coming to the table.

But what sort of unworthiness should we be looking for in our hearts before eating and drinking together? Well, let's look at the problem there and then in Corinth.

Because it's not that they have secret sins that they should scour their hearts to discover. It's not that they're not good enough and should never come to the table.

[23 : 05] No, it's that. Verse 20, when you come together, it's not the Lord's supper you eat, for when you're eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk.

So the issue that Paul's dealing with is self-centeredness in worship. Or if there is a regard for others, then it only extends as far as people who agree with me.

It's been called, helpfully, me-first-ism, this problem in Corinth. And so at the table, says Paul, the result of that is some people are kind of tucking into the focaccia over here and other people are downing the wine over there while others go hungry and don't get a look in at the table.

And he goes so far as to say it's stopped being the Lord's supper at all. So at the end of that section, verse 33, he concludes, so then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.

See, this is the issue at stake here is a lack of communion with one another at the table. Now, I don't think I can imagine, okay, it's a scene of such craziness and chaos here at Bon Accord.

[24 : 25] In fact, you should see the diagram that Mike put together for the elders tonight. It's better planned than a royal wedding. But to put the question this way, how much does the person next to you matter when you eat this meal?

You know, I guess you have to get on well enough to be able to pass the bread and the wine on to them. But, okay, what about the person sitting behind you or in front of you?

Did you notice who they were as you sat down this evening? Paul's point here is that we should care for whoever it is at the table with us.

The Corinthians had lost that sense of coming together at the supper because the Lord has set his table not for me and you this evening but for us.

As a church, he's brought us together, everyone here who will eat and drink and share together. He set our name cards out on his banquet table.

[25 : 31] But because we've become so used to thinking of faith and perhaps especially communion as something private, a private matter of the heart, we struggle with this. You perhaps, for years, you have been or are even today held back from the table because even though you do know Christ and you trust in his finished work, you look inward at your heart and don't feel good enough to take part.

Because we tend to think this is about me and how I feel but this meal is anything but personal and private. We eat and drink together the same thing.

It's not something we can do on our own, is it? Paul clearly, I think, has in mind one cup and one loaf that the whole church shares.

that's not binding on how we do it but it tells us something, doesn't it? That this is a church supper, a corporate act of worship. It's family dinner time.

And again, brothers and sisters, what a wonderful gift that is from Christ to us. That at his table we come together as one. That at his table there is no loneliness, there's no hierarchy, there's no one left out, no cliques, no distinction.

[27 : 01] It's only the family of Christ sharing together spiritually in his presence. And so if you belong to his family through faith in him, then the supper is for you.

Whoever you are, however far from him perhaps you feel, whatever you may have done or not done, if your trust is in Jesus' death for your sins, you have a seat at his table.

And that is a wonderful thing, isn't it? This is a wonderful occasion in our church life for us to taste our unity and to experience our adoption into Christ's family.

to taste it. And so even as we are lifted upwards at the table by the Spirit, so we are pointed outwards, communing with Christ and with one another.

And finally, I just want to touch on this communication of the gospel aspect of this meal. In a moment, we will read those words together from chapter 11.

[28 : 04] Paul says he received those words and passed them on from the Lord Jesus himself. We're told Jesus himself first broke the bread. It's a sign of his broken body.

He first took the cup himself. It's a sign of his blood to be poured out on the cross for many for the forgiveness of sins. And this is why the Reformers, Calvin and others, called the Lord's Supper a visible word.

That goes hand in hand with the preached word because as we look at this bread and this cup, as we hear what it is they point to, they speak the gospel to us. In the very act of breaking the bread,

taking the cup as Jesus did that night, these physical things preach good news to us. What is it that we do as we eat and drink? Just glance down at verse 26 in chapter 11. Paul writes, for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. That's what we're going to do together, proclamation, sharing the gospel, preaching the good news of Jesus to our own hearts, to one another, of course, to others watching on.

[29 : 29] Now, there's no doubt, is there, this meal is only for those whose faith is in Jesus. He's sharing this meal won't do anything for you if your trust is not in him. But if that is you tonight, it is so, so good that you are here because what you'll see and hear in a moment is a collective announcement by every Christian here that Christ came into the world to save sinners and a collective confession that we each are the worst of sinners and need him to have died so that our sins might be forgiven.

That is the message of this meal. That is what it tells us, the gospel. And so if you're here and you're not a Christian, please do watch, listen, and take to heart the good news that Christ laid down his life for us to bring us to God.

Believe it. Next time, come and join us and share in the meal yourself. As we close, I just wanted to mention this conversation I had with a friend.

As a younger Christian, I asked him, do you think we will take communion in heaven? And he pointed me to this verse, verse 26, because it ends with three beautiful words.

Until he comes. Brothers and sisters, we won't have this meal in heaven. We won't have this meal in the world to come because there we won't need it anymore because there we will have Christ bodily with us.

[31 : 17] then we will see him face to face. But on this earth, in this age, this meal is as close as we get, a window of his grace through which to look, be brought near to him, to collapse the distance between this world and the next.

This table which proclaims his death for our sins. This meal which at once fills our hearts and leaves us hungry for more. You have a taste of his presence that leaves us longing for him to come and never again to leave.

He has given us this supper to feast on spiritually until he comes. And so tonight, brothers and sisters, let us enjoy every mouthful for all that it is worth to us.

Let's pray together now. Father, we thank you so much for Jesus Christ. Thank you, Father, for what the bread and the wine tell us about him.

More than that, our Father, we thank you for what they do for us. that they draw us into his presence, that we might be with him, taste of him, and see that he is good.

[32 : 45] Father, we confess that we are not worthy of it. Father, we confess that so often we have taken it for granted. Father, we confess times that we have eaten and drunk and not discerned and not appreciated all that you have given us, Lord, at your table.

Lord, fill our hearts, we pray. Draw us near to Christ. Fill us afresh and meet with us, for we ask in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.