

April 3, 2011
"In remembrance of me ..."
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Once a month we celebrate communion or - as we sometimes call it - the Lord's Supper. It's one of those things we just do. But why? What's it all about? Other Christian traditions do versions of the same thing, but there are differences. Today I want to think about what communion is all about - and why do we do what we do!

We call this celebration different things. We call it the "Lord's Supper" because, as we shall see, it commemorates the last supper Jesus had with his disciples. It is also quite correct to call it "Communion" -- this word comes from the word "common" which emphasizes that we share a common loaf and a common cup (although for practical, hygiene reasons we use individual portions), because we share, in common, a need for God's forgiveness and for spiritual salvation. We are all sinners in need of God's grace.

Other traditions refer to this as the "eucharist" which is from a Greek word meaning "good gifts" - as we shall see this bread and this cup are "good gifts" which symbolize our salvation in Jesus Christ. Roman Catholics refer to this celebration as "mass" which comes from a Latin word "mission": a sense that this is our mission, to share the good news of Jesus with the world.

What's it all about?

In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul writes, *"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*

All four gospels record that hours before his arrest, trial, and execution, Jesus shared a last meal with his disciples. It wasn't just an ordinary meal. Matthew notes that it was the Passover meal, on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 26:17). Most of us (not being Jewish), "pass over" those references because they don't mean much to us.

The Passover meal is still celebrated every year in the Jewish tradition. It recalls the events, back in the days of Moses, when God miraculously led the children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land. Exodus tells the story how Moses and Aaron brought all sorts of signs and plagues upon the Egyptians, but Pharaoh still wouldn't let the Jewish people go.

Finally, as recorded in Exodus 11, God intervened in a dramatic and miraculous way. He

instructed each family to take one perfect, unblemished lamb and sprinkle some of the blood on the doorposts of their houses. They were also to prepare unleavened bread (without yeast). They were to eat supper quickly, dressed in their travelling clothes. That night the angel of the Lord struck down the first born of the Egyptians, but "passed over" the homes of the Israelites, identified by the blood of the lamb. In the confusion the Israelites fled and were delivered. Read Exodus 12:14-17.

This was the symbolic meal Jesus and his disciples were celebrating. It spoke of God saving His people, by the blood of a lamb. Jesus took some of the symbols of that traditional Jewish Passover meal and, if the disciples caught it, reinterpreted them ...

What does it mean?

"This is my body, which is for you." In the Exodus story, the Israelites didn't have time to make bread with yeast; they only had time to make the dough. Ever since then, in Jewish thought leaven or yeast had the connotation of corruption or impurity. Unleavened bread, then, symbolized purity. Unleavened bread was uncorrupted. When Jesus took it and broke it, then, symbolically He was saying that He was the holy and pure one.

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood." The Passover lamb was the symbol of deliverance. On the night of that terrible destruction in Egypt, the blood of the lamb kept the Israelites safe. So here Jesus is saying that He is the Saviour. His blood, shed once and for all, would save us from slavery - not to a political power, but slavery to sin.

One key word here is the word "covenant." A covenant is a relationship between parties. A marriage is a covenant. A legal contract is a covenant. But in this case Jesus was not talking about a relationship between two human beings. He was talking about a covenant between God and us. That is to say, he was introducing a new relationship between God and us.

In the Old Covenant, the Old Testament, every year, people had to bring sacrifices to God to try to atone for their sins. If they had committed big sins, they had to bring big sacrifices. You had to try to be good enough.

In the New Covenant, or the New Testament, Jesus one supreme sacrifice paid the price for any and all sins. Because of his death -- his pure broken body, and his saving, shed blood, God's wrath will pass over us, and we can be freely forgiven. That is what it is all about. We cannot atone for our sins. We cannot be good enough. Jesus recognizes that as He willingly pays the price for all of our sinfulness.

That's the new covenant - we are saved from God's judgment and wrath because of the blood of the lamb - Jesus - shed for us. We cannot be good enough to earn it. We cannot be too evil to receive it. We simply must choose to accept it.

As we come ...

Let's go back to Corinth. As you read the context for these verses you will notice there are some funny things going on. Yes, they were celebrating the Lord's Supper, but ... Back then the church met in the homes of wealthier members. They would have a meal (a "love feast") *before* communion/the Lord's Supper. Since the dining area could only hold a few people, the host would choose a few select guests, typically the other rich people, to dine with him on the best food. The other people - the poor - would huddle in the open court or atrium of the house and have very little or nothing to eat. When they came to the Lord's Supper, some believers would be very hungry, having eaten virtually nothing; others had just eaten a feast and even drunk a little (or a lot) too much wine! Not surprisingly, this was causing problems within the church! There were grudges and hard feelings between church members.

Remember, too, this is Corinth, where some follow Paul and some Apollos, where people are suing one another, where some people are Ok with eating meat sacrificed to idols and others are not, where some folks are sexually amoral and others are into complete sexual abstinence (even for married folks). A lot of problems! A lot of egos. A lot of stubbornness. And not a lot of Christian love and grace, humility and compassion, selflessness and focus on Jesus.

Paul challenges the Corinthians - and us - to check our attitudes as we come to this table. Do we come to worship Jesus? Do we come in a spirit of love - for God and for our neighbour? Or are there things we need to deal with?

Let us come with a spirit of self-examination. At one level, the Jewish people needed deliverance from slavery to Pharaoh; at another level, they - like us - needed deliverance from spiritual slavery - slavery to sin. We find it so easy to do what is wrong, don't we? It is far easier to find fault, than to find praise, isn't it? The Corinthians were experts at this! It is so easy to live our lives and make decisions as if God doesn't exist. Jesus' invitation is to come in a spirit of honest self-examination, confessing our sins, asking God's forgiveness, in the certain hope that we are saved and forgiven by the blood of the lamb, Jesus!

Let us come with a spirit of remembrance. Scripture encourages us to celebrate this meal so that we would remember what our faith is all about. Every time we break this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death - why? Because that is the centre point of our faith. It is Jesus' death that saves us! It is His blood that causes God's wrath to pass over us. Some traditions see this bread and this cup as somehow imparting a special blessing. Nothing in Scripture suggests that physical bread or drink can bless us. It is the profound significance of what these emblems mean that is important. We are blessed as these symbols move us to remember Christ's death and celebrate our salvation.

Let us come with a spirit of thanksgiving. What are you thankful for? I hope we can all "count our blessings" in all sorts of ways. But the foundation of our thanksgiving ought to be our security as God's chosen people, safe and secure in his hands. This celebration reminds us that, yes, it is good to give thanks for our families, our friends, our homes, our food, etc., etc., but first and foremost we ought to give thanks for our salvation, for the bedrock security of our faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing and no one can ever take us out of His hands.

Let us come with a spirit of fellowship. In an ideal world, we would share one loaf and one cup, to celebrate that we are a family - God's family, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. Although we find it easier to cut up the bread and have individual cups, it is still important that this is a family celebration - we serve one another as we pass the trays along the rows. Who is the family? *"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ... born of God"* (John 1:12-13). All of us who believe in Jesus as our Saviour are part of the family and welcome to share in this table.

In some traditions, the communion table (or altar) is elevated, and only the priest or pastor touches the bread and cup. The priest serves each person. These traditions believe that priests or pastors are somehow more special or sacred than others and dispense God's grace on His behalf. In our tradition as Baptists, we emphasize that there is no distinctions between pastors, deacons, and anyone else at this table -- we are all sinners in need of God's grace. Our table is placed on the floor. We all serve one another. We are a fellowship, a family.

Let us come with a spirit of expectation. The good news of the new covenant is that Jesus' broken body and shed blood are not the end of the story! On Thursday, Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples. That night he was arrested and tried. Friday he was crucified, killed, and laid in a tomb. And on Sunday, what happened? He had risen! He is alive again! God had demonstrated his absolute sovereignty by overcoming the greatest enemy of all -- death!

Jesus' promise is that even though we may die physically, we will live eternally, spiritually, with Him in heaven. He will come again, one day, some day, to wind up history and begin a whole new order of things. John 14:1-3: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it 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 ... I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Copyright ©2011 by Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 - 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net