

# Taking Holy Communion Seriously



by Brett Cane



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# Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

J.I. PACKER  
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# Taking Holy Communion Seriously

*Brett Cane*

Sometimes we can take things too seriously and nowhere has this been demonstrated more clearly than in the disputes that have raged down through the centuries over the nature and purpose of the Holy Communion — also known as the Eucharist and the Lord’s Supper. These disagreements have taken place between denominations and whole streams of the Christian faith; they have also divided Anglicans from Anglicans. When the liturgy of the Church of England was revised at the Reformation, parishioners in Cornwall staged a full-scale rebellion because, in their words, the new Communion service was “but lyke a Christmas game.”

As Christians have tried to protect God’s design for this spiritual and dynamic fellowship meal which stands at the centre of Christian worship, much unnecessary division and misunderstanding has occurred, I feel, because the Biblical and Hebraic view of the use of the physical in worship has not been engaged seriously enough. In this small book, I will attempt to root our understanding of Communion directly in the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> I tackle this under the heading “Understanding the Sacraments.” Having thus laid our foundations, we will then move on to “Celebrating Holy Communion” in all its many and varied aspects, because, as we will see, God wants to engage and bless us at a very deep level through this service and when we neglect or misunderstand it, our fellowship with God and one another suffers. Taking Holy Communion seriously is good for our spiritual health! So working through the above agenda will be of benefit to us all.

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<sup>1</sup> Major passages in the Bible related to the subject that I will deal with are as follows:

Old Testament: Exodus 12:1-14; Isaiah 1:10-20; Psalm 51:1-17

New Testament: Matthew 26:17-30; John 6:55-69; 1 Corinthians 10:1-17; 11:17-34; Hebrews 9:11-14, 22, 27-28; 10:8-18

## I. UNDERSTANDING THE SACRAMENTS

We begin by looking at the sacraments as such, meaning Baptism and Holy Communion. These two ordinances were commanded by Christ and given by his example.<sup>2</sup> Some Christians expand this number and while I do not wish to enter into a discussion about that here, we will see that the Biblical use of the physical in worship can be extended to include many other spiritually-related activities which involve material substances or actions through which we can engage with God more deeply and through which God will bless and encourage us.<sup>3</sup> We will introduce the subject by looking at the elements of worship in the Scriptures and the common thread between them and then see how that is expressed in a sacramental way.

### 1. Introduction: Basic Principles

*The Sacramental View of Life:* Throughout history, Christianity has tried (usually unsuccessfully) to maintain the right balance between receiving and engaging our physicality and the material world as gifts from God to be enjoyed and used correctly (that is, as he directs) and the excesses of sensuality where the body and the pleasures of the physical world are abused and used self-indulgently. Back in the 1960's, the pivotal British Christian thinker, Harry Blamires, challenged Christians to regain what he termed "The Christian Mind"<sup>4</sup> and to reshape our thinking about life and the world from a Biblical rather than a secular perspective. He said that one of the characteristics of the Christian Mind was its "Sacramental Cast."<sup>5</sup> By this, he meant that the Biblical view of the physical world is positive and sees it as a means through which God communicates and engages with us. The greatest affirmation and example of this is, of course, the Incarnation, whereby the Son of God took on flesh as Jesus and became one of us. But the Incarnation is just the logical extension of the fact that throughout the Bible, beginning with Creation in Genesis 1, humans are seen not only as spiritual but physical as well. We are not just "spiritual" beings in a body but a "body-soul" in unity. This is confirmed in the description of our eternal state which is going to become reality in a "new creation" (Romans 8:21) with resurrection bodies which will be like that of Jesus with new capabilities and freedom from limitations we have now but will be none the less still physical (1 Corinthians 15). The Christian is to see and engage life sac-

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2 "Go therefore named make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..." (Matthew 28:19) and "This do in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25); Jesus was, of course, baptized himself (Mark 1:9).

3 Examples would be the laying-on-of hands for healing (Mark 6:5, 16:18) or blessing (Mark 10:13-26) or commissioning (Acts 13:3) and the use of oil (Mark 6:13, James 5:14).

4 Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*. (Ann Arbor, MI, Servant Books, 1963).

5 *Ibid.*, pg. 173.

ramentally, that is, appreciating its physical and material aspects as so many conduits for receiving and expressing fellowship with God.

*Elements of Worship:* Seeing the world sacramentally has a direct impact on how we worship. The great commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). This means that we are to love God with our whole beings, body, soul and spirit. If worship is the expression of our love for God then our worship, too, must be an expression of our complete selves — mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. We do not just love God with our minds but also with our lips and voices, our eyes and ears — indeed our whole bodies and actions. The Biblical view of humanity is that we are integrated compounds — body and spirit — and so our worship must involve our outward as well as our inward selves.

This is confirmed in Scripture. God not only reveals himself through words of law and prophet that call for words of response from our hearts, but also gives us carefully laid-out instructions as to how to worship him outwardly. Passages about sacrifices, dress, buildings and altars, such as are found in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, set up a system of worship that shows God is concerned about the outward expression of our devotion. In fact, the manufacture of the various physical components of worship that God there prescribed was enabled by the gifting of the Holy Spirit on certain individuals “to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts” (Exodus 35:32-33). In the New Testament, Jesus underwent baptism by engaging in the physical action of being washed in water and instituted the Lord’s Supper which involves the eating of bread and drinking of wine. The spiritual and the physical, the inward and the outward, are here conjoined as essential elements of worship.

*Much confusion:* However, there has been much misunderstanding and confusion when it comes to the ritual or outward actions of religion. Humans tend to divorce the outward from the inward and to think of the former in manipulative or magic terms. In the days of the prophet Isaiah, people were abusing in this way the sacrificial system set up by God and so he spoke directly against how they were using the physical expression of worship:

“The multitude of your sacrifices — what are they to me?” says the LORD.

“I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals;

I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...

Stop bringing meaningless offerings!”

(Isaiah 1:11-13)

Then he emphasized the importance of a right attitude of the heart above mere physical observance.

“Take your evil deeds out of my sight!

Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!

Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.

Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

(Isaiah 1:16-17)

And yet it was God who had ordained the sacrificial system and the ritual.

We can see similar confusion in the outward observances of the Christian religion. Already in New Testament times, the Eucharist was being abused as an occasion for disunity rather than unity in Christ: “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” (1 Corinthians 11:20-21). In subsequent Christian history, people have brought children to be baptized almost as a token of “good luck” and without any intention of living out the promises that would be made, or of being involved in the Christian family. The Eucharist has been used as a “bargaining chip” to release souls from purgatory and the elements viewed in almost magical terms. Different churches have emphasized one sacrament over the other and while Anglicans are supposed to be in the middle, holding a right balance, we often end up by just being fuzzy about what it all means!

*A Common Thread:* In the midst of the confusion, though, we see a common thread with respect to the sacrificial system, the sacraments of Christ and the inner attitude which will help us understand how to approach the external observances of religion correctly. It is summed up in Isaiah 1:16, 18:

Wash and make yourselves clean.

Take your evil deeds out of my sight!

Stop doing wrong...

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord.

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

The common thread is repentance and receiving forgiveness for sin.

In the sacrificial system, this is obvious. Speaking of the great annual day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), Scripture affirms, “On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be

clean from all your sins” (Leviticus 16:30). “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Leviticus 17:11). In the internal attitude the common thread is seen in the quote from Isaiah above and in Jesus’ first words in the gospel of Mark: “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). In the sacraments, the cleansing from sin is at the heart of the actions: Baptism — “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38); Holy Communion — “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Both Judaism and Christianity are religions of forgiveness from sin and to this the inner attitude required along with the outward signs bears clear and explicit witness. This is the common thread.

*The One, True Sacrifice:* It is within this thread that we see Jesus as the one, true sacrifice for the sins of the world.

We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all...when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10: 10, 12, 14)

Jesus’ one, true sacrifice is contrasted with the sacrifices of animals which, though instituted by God, were not able to deal with the root problem — genuine removal and forgiveness of sin.

It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins... The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 10: 4; 9:13-14)

Our sin needed to be dealt with and God did this for us in Christ on the cross of Calvary once and for all.

*The Purpose of the Outward Signs:* What, then, is the purpose of all the outward actions related to forgiveness which are laid down in Scripture? Of the Old Testament sacrifices, we may straightforwardly say that they were a *looking forward* to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us:



This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order. (Hebrews 9:9-10)

Of the New Testament sacraments, we may say with equal forthrightness that they are a *looking backward* to what Christ did for us at Calvary. This is true of Baptism:

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life... our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with. (Romans 6:4, 6)

and it is also true of Holy Communion:

“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. (1 Corinthians 11:25-26)

The purpose of both outward signs is to point backwards to what God has accomplished for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus — the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of new life.

## 2. What is a Sacrament?

Having clarified the purpose of the outward signs as pointing to Christ, we now ask: what is the nature of a sacrament? What is it and how does it function? In the catechism of the Book of Common Prayer, a sacrament is described as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” with three component functions: Sign, Means, Pledge.<sup>6</sup> We shall look at each of these components as they reflect the outward and inward characteristics of the sacraments.

*Sign:* The outward sign in Baptism is washing with water which represents the inward action of God in cleansing from sin, causing us to die to the old life of self, and rising again to the new life of the Spirit. It speaks to us of new birth and initiation into the Body of Christ, the Church for which

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<sup>6</sup> “*Question.* What do you mean by this word Sacrament? *Answer.* I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace and a pledge to assure us thereof.” *Book of Common Prayer, Canada*, pg. 550.

he died. The outward sign in Holy Communion is eating bread and wine which represents inward feeding on the benefits of Christ, sharing in his life and the life of his family, with thanksgiving for all that he has won for us through his body broken and blood shed on the cross. It speaks of nourishment, support and belonging. A sacrament is a sign of Christ's blessings to us under those three heads.

*Means:* Now we come to the point which has been central to the confusion down through the ages — exactly *how* does a sacrament work to be the means of receiving all the benefits it signifies? In Ephesians 2, Paul is very clear that salvation is not by rite but by faith: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is through a personal encounter involving faith and trust in the Son of God that we receive salvation. The Anglican 39 Articles of Religion, rising out of the tumult of the Reformation, one of whose foci was regaining a Biblical view of the nature of the sacraments, are also very clear that faith is the means by which benefits are received through the sacraments: e.g. “In such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation;” “Such as rightly, worthily and with faith receive the same.... The means whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.”<sup>7</sup> The effect of the sacraments is not automatic but requires a receptive heart.

At this point we need to remember the Hebrew understanding of the use of the physical in worship that we spoke of earlier. The Old Testament equivalents to the New Testament Sacraments are obvious: Circumcision prefigures Baptism and the Passover prefigures Holy Communion. In Christ these are expanded to new dimensions (e.g. Baptism as initiation includes both genders, not just one, as was the case with circumcision) but the mode of operation is the same. The rites are neither literal representations nor acts of mere remembering but *vehicles* through which we are drawn into spiritual reality. This is demonstrated by the phrase in the Jewish Passover Seder where the presider says, holding up the Matzo, “This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.” Now, no one believes this to be the same physical bread eaten thousands of years earlier at the Exodus, but it is meant to be a means of drawing one's heart and mind back into the saving action of God in delivering and redeeming the nation of Israel from physical slavery in Egypt.

In the Eucharist, we celebrate and take up afresh our deliverance from spiritual slavery to sin. Jesus is truly present, not literally in the bread or

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<sup>7</sup> Articles XXV, XXVIII, *Book of Common Prayer, Canada*, pg. 708f.

the wine so that if we drop the wafer or spill the liquid we have dropped or spilled Jesus, but that as we eat and drink, he conveys himself and his life to us in a very deep and real way. Just as a hand-shake is far more than a brushing of one hand against another, but is a genuine way of communicating and expressing friendship, so consuming the elements is to be seen as a means of God, and specifically our Lord Jesus, the second divine person, communicating and expressing his love, forgiveness, new life, and his very self to us. Another analogy to use is that in the action of the Eucharist we experience God's "hug" to us. Thus a sacrament serves as a tremendous audio-visual-spiritual aid. The truths the bread and wine represent are brought home to our hearts in a tangible and intimate way. They are "vehicles through which God works."

Jesus confirmed this after the feeding of the five thousand when he said "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you" (John 6:53) — a statement which he then clarified immediately by saying "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." He was speaking, not directly about the Holy Communion, which he had not yet instituted, but that of which Holy Communion is itself about, namely faith. Fellowship with himself through the blessing of the Holy Spirit on his teaching, the Word which his speech was spelling out. So why, hearing and reading his words, should we not just forget the sacrament, and simply talk about "spirit and life" all the time? Archbishop William Temple provides the following insights:<sup>8</sup>

- a) First, "spirit" and "life" are very vague concepts. People contemplate nature and say this is a wonderful "spiritual" experience. Speaking of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man makes the focus of our worship very specific. It is in *Jesus* and Jesus only that we have life.
- b) Secondly, it is through Jesus' self-sacrifice for us on the cross that this new life has been won for us. His body broken and blood outpoured focus us even further on his death for us.
- c) Finally, it shows why the Eucharist, Holy Communion, is to be the focal point of our worship. Eating and drinking the physical elements of bread and wine make us focus even more clearly on Jesus and what he has done for us; we are centred on our dependence upon him through the sacrifice of himself which has delivered us from sin and death to eternal life. However, he

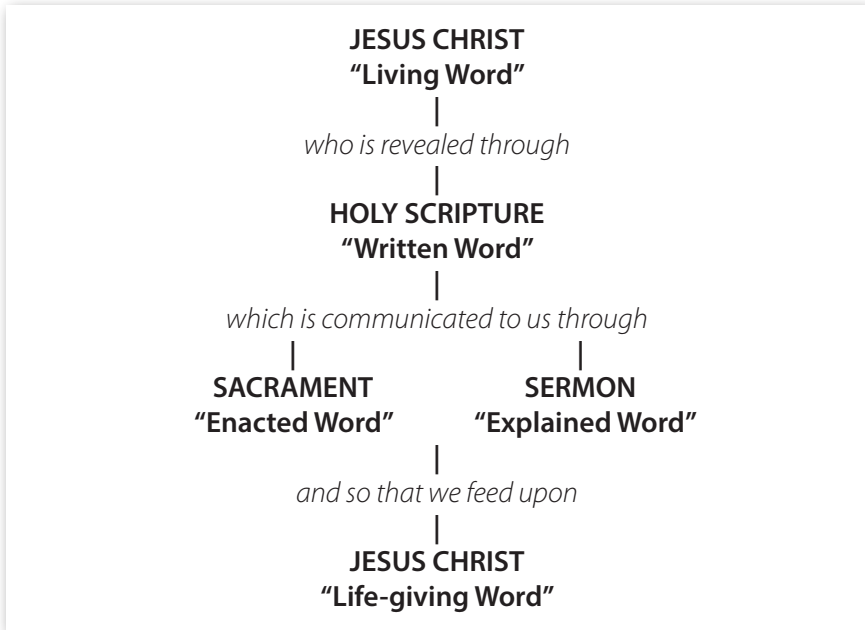
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<sup>8</sup> William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*. (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1952), pgs 98-99.

takes pains to deliver us from a mechanical or magical view of communion by stressing that we feed upon him in a spiritual manner.

Thus, the sacraments are not magic but *means of encounter*; their focus is not the physical properties of the elements themselves but the purposes behind them. The crucial point is the *action*, the time of administration that is the climax of the service. In Baptism it is obvious that the pouring of/dipping in water is the focal point of the service. Likewise in Holy Communion it is the taking and eating/drinking of the elements that is the zenith of the celebration — the moment when Christ is uniquely encountered and we “feed upon him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.”<sup>9</sup>

The following diagram can be helpful in explaining what I have just described:



By the action of the Holy Spirit, the following takes place. Jesus, the Living Word of God, comes to us through the Bible, the written Word. In the sermon, the Word is explained, and in the sacrament, the Word is enacted. Through both mediums of encounter, verbal and visual, thought and action, Christ feeds us with himself in our innermost selves. In this way the sacrament is a means of encounter with Christ.

*Pledge:* The final function of a sacrament is as a pledge — a way of con-

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<sup>9</sup> *Book of Common Prayer, Canada*, pg. 84.

firming to us the benefits that it signifies — chiefly the two realities of our forgiveness and belonging to Christ and his Body. In Baptism, we receive affirmation that we are dead to sin, alive in Christ and born again: God has “made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:5); “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). We have a new family and are a part of the Body of Christ and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit: “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body... and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

In Holy Communion, we receive the same affirmations. We are assured afresh of God’s forgiveness — every time we see the bread broken and wine poured out we are taken back to that upper room on the evening of the first Easter Day where Jesus assured the frightened disciples of their restoration after running away on Good Friday: “‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side” (John 20:19-20). We are also assured afresh that we belong to Christ and are part of his body: “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17).

All this is beautifully summarized by the prayer after communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Almighty and everliving God we most heartily thank thee that thou dost graciously feed us, in these holy mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ; assuring us thereby of thy favour and goodness towards us; and that we are living members of his mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people; and are also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

The sacraments pledge to us that we are forgiven and belong to Christ and one another. We shall expand on these pledges when we come to look at the benefits of receiving communion below.

### 3. Conclusion

Idolatry is denied in the Bible because it puts God in a box; it restricts him and localizes him — it is a subtle but futile attempt to give a God is under our control and we can manipulate. The Old Testament sacrifices and the temple itself were designed to avoid this. King Solomon affirmed this when he said at the dedication of the temple, “‘Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!’” (1 Kings 8:27). Buildings, sacrifices

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<sup>10</sup> *Book of Common Prayer, Canada*, pg. 85.

and sacraments are to be means of grace not objects of adoration. They are a means to an end, not the end in themselves. They are to be used to bring us into closer communion with the Lord. We will now turn to see just how that happens through our celebration of the Holy Communion as a regular part of the church's ongoing worship.

## II. CELEBRATING HOLY COMMUNION

We will look at how to celebrate Holy Communion from two perspectives — the first from the Biblical references to the service and the second from what can happen when you come to a Communion service today.

### 1. Holy Communion in the New Testament

*The First Holy Communion:* The first Holy Communion service was instituted by Jesus the night before his crucifixion and is recorded in the Gospels (e.g. Matthew 26:17-30) and referred to in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26). We speak of it as "The Last Supper." It was set in the context of the annual Passover Festival which commemorated the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt under Moses. The shape of the festival meal Jesus would have celebrated is echoed in the Passover Seder today which reenacts the first Passover (recorded in Exodus 12:1-14). The Israelites were told to repeat it every year: "This is the day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord — a lasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:14).

In Exodus 12, the first Passover was took place while the Angel of Death was destroying all the first-born in Egypt, the last of ten plagues inflicted by God as a judgement on the gods of Egypt whose Pharaoh would not liberate the Israelites who had been subjected to slavery. The Israelites escaped the plague by taking the blood of the lamb to be eaten at supper and putting it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of their houses. The blood was to be a sign; God said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you" — thus the name "Passover." In this way, the Israelites escaped death and were then set free to live a new life in the Promised Land.

The parallels with Jesus' passion and the salvation it has brought are profound and were made clear by Jesus in his transformation of the Passover at the Last Supper. "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the (new) covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28). Jesus himself is the lamb that was slain — as acclaimed by John the Baptist, "Behold

the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). It is his blood shed on the cross which allows the sentence of death to pass over us. Only this death is not just physical death — it is spiritual death due to sin. At the Passover, the Israelites were delivered from physical slavery in Egypt; at the cross, we are delivered from spiritual slavery to sin. (It is interesting that, in putting the blood on the lintel and doorposts on the first Passover, the sign of the cross would have been made). The freedom and new life that Jesus has won for us is for a new “Promised Land” — not merely a tract of real estate but a whole new dimension of life where the spiritual and the physical are renewed and reunited for life in a transformed world as prefigured by his resurrection body. This transformation begins now and is completed in the world to come. All this is in accord with Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant:

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt... This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... they will all know me... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

(Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Thus Jesus transformed the Passover Seder into the Holy Communion with its new and powerful significance.

*The Service in the New Testament:* Jesus’ command to “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19) was followed by the early church. We see this in references in Acts — “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42) — and, more extensively, in 1 Corinthians (10:14-22; 11:17-34). The setting of Holy Communion appears to have been in the context of what we would call a “pot luck supper,” a fellowship meal where everyone brings their own food. There were underlying problems of status-seeking and inter-personal tensions in the church in Corinth and these were being demonstrated by how the believers were treating the Holy Communion — it had become an occasion for discrimination and disunity, as Paul trenchantly declared:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it... 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... do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)

From Paul's admonitions we not only take warning against abusing the Sacrament but also glean deeper insights into its meaning and significance. One insight is that Communion is not a magical guarantee of blessing but is indeed a real encounter with Christ. The second is that the right celebration of Communion is inseparably linked to healthy relationships within the Body.

First, Paul warns the Corinthians not to take the sacraments for granted. In chapter 10 (1-13), he uses the example of the Israelites at the Exodus, who, though they had experienced the great signs and deliverance of the Lord, later rebelled against him. In their case, their participation in the sacramental life was no guarantee of their right standing with God:

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

(1 Corinthians 10:2-5).

Sacraments are not be used as magical talismans but are only effective in the context of a life of obedience. However, this does not mean the Communion is merely symbolic and is simply a commemorative meal: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). Paul then goes on to say that just as sharing at pagan temple feasts is participation with demons so sharing in the Communion is participation in Christ. "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons" (verse 21). In other words, the two are mutually exclusive because there is in each case a real spiritual presence — demons at the temples and Christ in the action of the Sacrament.

Secondly, in chapter 11, Paul focuses on the importance of right relationships with others as a critical dimension of sharing in Communion. In the previous chapter, he has already emphasized the importance of Communion as expressive of the reality of being one in Christ: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Now he shows that the unloving behaviour at the feasts (which were simply extensions of the underlying disunity and lack of love



in the church) is a sin against Christ himself. “Therefore, 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” (verse 27). We are reminded here of John’s admonition, “For any of us who do not love a brother or sister, whom we have seen, cannot love God, whom we have not seen” (1 John 4:20). God’s plan is to bring “all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ” (Ephesians 1:10) — the Church is the primary place where this great plan of reconciliation is to be demonstrated, so we deny the reality of the body of Christ if it is not seen or even betrayed in our primary gathering, the Eucharist. “Those who eat and drink without recognizing the body of the Lord (i.e., possibly the breaking of Jesus’s physical body in his death for us, but at least as likely, the Church and our relationships with one another and Christ) eat and drink judgement on themselves” (verse 29). Communion is to be the celebration and experience of both union with Christ and also union with one another. The two are inseparable.

In addition to these two areas of insight, Paul throws in a short affirmation which highlights yet another essential dimension of the Sacrament: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (verse 26). In the Eucharist we uphold the central focus of our faith — Christ and his death on the cross for us. We declare this not only to ourselves but to the world around us. By sharing in this meal, we also proclaim that this is just a foretaste of the Great Banquet to come, when Christ returns — as both Judge or as Saviour — and that our call is to all to repent and receive him now that they may then welcome him as the latter and not tremble before him as the former.

Thus, our celebration of Communion is multi-dimensional — with Christ, with ourselves, and with others.

## 2. Holy Communion Today

We will conclude our reflections on taking Holy Communion seriously by looking at how we are to celebrate Holy Communion today. We will not go into the components of the service or how it is structured — this has been adequately done elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Instead we will look at how to approach the service devotionally, examining the benefits to be received and the attitudes of our hearts to be offered.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. Sue Careless, *Discovering the Book of Common Prayer, Vol. II: Our Life in the Church*. (Toronto, On: ABC Publishing, 2006), pgs. 209-296; Elizabeth Culling, *Making the Most of Communion*. Grove Spirituality Series #66. (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd., 1998), pgs. 4-8.

<sup>12</sup> Much of what follows I have gleaned from sources I no longer have access to and so regret that I can not give adequate acknowledgment to the original authors.

*The Benefits of Communion:* We can look at the benefits we receive from Communion by looking at the names given to the service. In the Book of Common Prayer, there are three: The Lord's Supper, The Eucharist and The Holy Communion.<sup>13</sup> To this we can add another familiar title from our the church's Catholic heritage, The Mass. Each of these names describes different benefits we are given when we celebrate Communion.

- **The Lord's Supper:** This speaks to us of nourishment, of sharing or participating (1 Corinthians 10:16) in Christ, feeding upon him in our hearts (John 6:53-58, 63). Here we are dealing in deep intimacy with God; one senior cleric I know even likened communion to human sexual intimacy. We can see this as a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit—a breathing-out of our sin and a breathing-in of his presence.
- **Eucharist:** This speaks to us of thanksgiving (from the Greek *eucharisteō* = give thanks) and celebration as we remember and proclaim God's central act of love for us in Christ. We need regular reminders so we can receive:
  - a fresh appreciation of the *cost* of our forgiveness — our pride is thus punctured.
  - a fresh assurance of the *fact* of our forgiveness — our doubt is thus eliminated.
  - a fresh anticipation of the *return* of our forgiver— our despair is thus avoided.

Our celebration today is a foretaste of the Great Banquet ahead in the age to come.

- **Holy Communion:** This speaks to us of fellowship — which of course begins with fellowship with God but we have seen that fellowship with others in the one Body of Christ is an essential element of the sacrament. (“We, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” — 1 Corinthians 10:17). “Making my communion” as a solitary individual is a concept foreign to the Biblical picture of what happens at the Lord's Supper. Here, also, we experience a foreshadowing of the great fellowship that awaits us in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21, 22).
- **The Mass:** This speaks to us of commissioning, being sent out (from the Latin *missa est* = go, you are sent) to live the life of Christ in the world in service to others. We are “saved to serve.” This self-offering is beautifully expressed in the closing prayer after

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<sup>13</sup> Book of Common Prayer, Canada, pgs. 65, 67.

communion in the BCP: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto thee.”<sup>14</sup>

*How should we come to Communion?* Here are three attitudes to nurture in your heart as you approach the celebration of this great Sacrament:

- **Come repentant:** Be at peace with God and your neighbour. Paul exhorts us: “We ought to examine ourselves before we eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). Ensure that you are not taking the sacrament lightly or for granted — are you trying to eat at both the table of the Lord and the table of demonic temptations that would dehumanize and compromise you? Examine your relationships with others — are you “in love and charity with your neighbours”?<sup>15</sup> Are you taking seriously the importance of your relationships within the Body and seeking to encourage and build one another up, being “Kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32)? Taking communion with no thought about these matters would be taking communion irresponsibly, and that might mean you leave the service worse than you were when you started!
- **Come hungrily:** Do you want to feed upon Jesus in your heart? His cup and bread are only of value to the starving. If you are exhausted by the battles of life and the struggles of your heart during the week, then this meal is for you! The morsel of bread and sip of wine are like “iron rations”<sup>16</sup> that are just enough to keep you going until you reach your journey’s end.
- **Come expectant:** Is taking Communion just routine with you? Come expecting to be filled afresh with God’s presence and his power. Come:
  - to be renewed, cleansed, strengthened, inspired by Jesus’ death for you
  - to be encouraged by Jesus to begin again
  - to be challenged to live more like Jesus
  - to be made strong to love and work for Jesus

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<sup>14</sup> Book of Common Prayer, Canada, pg.85.

<sup>15</sup> Book of Common Prayer, Canada, pg. 76.

<sup>16</sup> A term used in war-time to describe emergency food supplies carried by soldiers into battle to eat should they be cut off from their supply lines. I gladly credit my theological college principal, the late Jim Hickinbotham, for this helpful analogy.

If you expect nothing to change when you come to Communion, then you will likely not be disappointed. If you come expectant, then your life will likely be transformed!

### **3. Conclusion**

By celebrating Communion regularly we uphold again and again to ourselves and to the world around us the heart of our faith — Jesus' death and resurrection for our salvation. No matter how weak the sermon, how inadequate the music, how unorthodox the theology — the liturgy of the Eucharist proclaims unambiguously the reality of sin and our need for forgiveness and how that has been accomplished through Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross. At Communion we welcome Christ's risen presence amongst us and within us by the power of the Holy Spirit and look with hope to his renewing of all things at his coming again. In the Sacrament we experience and celebrate our unity with one another as the Body of Christ and pilgrims on the way. Having been filled afresh with him in our hearts by faith we are recommissioned to serve him in a world so desperately in need of his love and salvation. This is why, and how, we take Holy Communion seriously.

## Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Do you agree with the sacramental view of created reality, as set forth here? Do you think of the Lord's Supper sacramentally?
2. Do you attend services of Holy Communion regularly? If not, why not? How often do you think Christians should take part in this service? Why not more or less often?
3. Does (a) your understanding and (b) your experience of communion with Christ in the Eucharist match the exposition in the text?
4. How, in your own church setting, can fellowship in the body of Christ at Holy Communion be made as real and meaningful as possible?
5. How should one prepare to attend a Holy Communion service?
6. In what practical ways should we follow up our participation at a Holy Communion service?

