THE CHRISTIAN ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION

Communion is an ordinance that Jesus Christ instituted and commanded. Jesus and His disciples were gathered to observe the Passover. We can look in on this scene through the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. At some point during the meal, Jesus took the bread, blessed it and shared it with the disciples saying, “This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). After supper, Jesus takes the cup and gives thanks and gave it to them and said, “This is my blood of the new testament in my blood, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Apostle Paul confirms that this is to be an ongoing practice for the Christian. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 “I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come.”

Communion is a commemoration. “We do show the Lord’s death...” Just as the Jewish Passover reminded them of the miraculous salvation from Egypt, so Communion reminds the Christian of his salvation from sin. We look back to the place we were – the bondage, the condemnation, and the certainty of eternal death and separation from God. We look back to the death of Jesus Christ, the One who died that we might live. The Communion helps us remain tender towards our Savior when we purposefully remember what our sins cost Him.

Communion is an anticipation. “…Till he come.” We cannot look back without looking forward. Built into the story of death is the story of life! Jesus Christ died. Yes. But He rose again, is alive forever, and is coming back! This hope thrills all souls who believe in Him. Jesus’ life holds a promise of eternal life with Him. It holds the promise of a living Lord Who is coming again. Each time we observe Communion, we look forward to the time we’ll see Him face to face.

Communion is a confirmation. The introductory article to this series defines an ordinance as “an external, visible ceremony or symbol that God has established with deep spiritual meaning.” Let’s extend that definition to include, “an ordinance is an outward sign of an inner reality.” What is the spiritual meaning or inner reality of Communion? Is it more than looking back at Christ’s death and resurrection and looking forward to His return? Yes. The spiritual reality that Communion expresses is a relationship with Jesus Christ. John 6 records a discussion between Jesus and His followers about miracles and bread from heaven. Jesus says in verses 32 and 33, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews, therefore, strove among themselves, saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life
in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live forever.”

These verses show that we are to partake of Jesus. This can be somewhat confusing if we try to make this a physical thing. Jesus is clearly using spiritual language here. Notice verse 53, the people that He was addressing surely had life in them, but Jesus said that unless you eat of me, there is no life in you. Obviously then, this is not cannibalism, nor is it grounds for transubstantiation. There was really no way that eating Jesus physical body would give everlasting life. We see parallels to this idea in the Matthew, Mark, and Luke when Jesus says that the bread and cup were His body and blood, and they clearly weren’t.

So how do we partake of Jesus? We partake of Jesus when we believe in Him (John 6:47). Partaking of Jesus carries the idea that He becomes our energizing force, just as physical bread gives us physical energy. We live spiritually by partaking of Jesus. Participating in the ordinance of Communion is a confirmation to those we fellowship with that we are experiencing the reality of living in union with Christ – that He is our energy and sustenance. Another aspect to partaking of Jesus Christ is to be part of a local body of believers. When we consider the analogy of the physical body in 1 Corinthians 12, we understand that we are part of the body of Christ. Communion is also a confirmation that we are at one with and love the other members of the body.

Partaking in Communion unworthily is warned against in Scripture. “Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor 11:27, 29). This is a serious warning. No one wants to bring condemnation upon themselves. Verse 30 indicates that spiritual weakness and sleeping is a result of partaking unworthily. To avoid this, Paul tells us to examine ourselves. By this ordinance, we are forced to analyze our condition purposefully before God and our brethren. Are we partaking of Jesus Christ, has He delivered us from “Egypt?” Are we looking forward to His return? Am I at peace with the local body? These are the questions we must ask and answer honestly before we know whether we are ready to partake of Communion.

Communion is a blessing. Partaking in Communion with a local congregation of believers can be a wonderful blessing. Here are some suggestions to keep Communion a blessing. First, we need to keep a current relationship with God and our brothers and sisters. Confess sins to God and one another as needed. If we do this consistently, there is no need for a quick patch before Communion. Second, we should not use Communion as a time to air differences of opinion or to cast criticism on the church. And last, we should remember that our identity is in Christ, not in each other. We operate under the same head and get our identity from the body, which is Christ’s. It is sad to think that there are times and situations when this ordinance has been postponed or unobserved because of conflicts in the body. Keeping an emphasis on Communion as a blessing, will help to keep that from happening.

Let’s continue showing the Lord’s death till He come. And when we are finally in that ultimate presence of Christ, we will commune with Him and each other in perfection.

~Lyndon Burkholder