

# Come to the Table of Grace

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(A Communion Reflection)

## I. Call to Worship

- A. Churches of Christ are congregational/autonomous— can vary in dramatic ways
1. I ran across an article this week that used the term “*hard shell*” and “*soft shell*”
    - a. That is far too simplistic—some congregations have no shell at all
    - b. With apologies to Bro. Gump, Church of Christ is like a box of chocolates...
  2. But one thing we do all share in common is **observing communion** each week
    - a. Why? Some may argue about a pattern and that “*every week has a first day*”
    - b. The real reason is the cross; we see the cross as the center of our worship
      - 1) The way the NT tells us to “*proclaim the Lord’s death*” is in communion.
      - 2) So each and every Sunday, we are going to **observe the Lord’s Supper**
  3. Of course, there’s a practical problem with **observing communion** each week.
    - a. It can become repetitive, traditional and rote—it can be “old hat.”
    - b. One of the things we do to guard against that—communion focus service
    - c. Today is such a services where everything leads up to **observing communion**
- B. Did you notice that I used the expression “*observe*” communion 5 times in opening
1. You probably didn’t, because that is a command label-- **observe communion**
    - a. Ever thought about that? The word “*observe*” means “to watch or to witness”
    - b. The phrase used by other religious traditions is “**celebrate communion.**”
  2. I don’t want to hang too much on our word choice, but is there something here
    - a. We generally “*observe communion*” as quiet, isolated, solitary meditation
    - b. More than anything else, the way we do communion reflects a **FUNERAL!**
- C. **Consider:** We should see communion, not as a funeral, but as a **funeral meal.**
1. In our tradition, a funeral is usually sad, dignified, quiet and introspective.
    - a. But the funeral meal afterward is often a boisterous and joyful celebration.
    - b. At the funeral meal we share stories, we laugh, and we celebrate life
  2. Communion is not a funeral where we grieve a loss—we celebrate a life!
    - a. It is the funeral meal where we share stories and hope as we remember
    - b. Communion is a table of grace to celebrate the One who died and lives again
  3. And our invitation today is to “*Come to the table of grace for there is mercy!*”
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## II. Introduction

- A. When I was a kid, Mom and Dad ran family business which at times ran our lives
  - 1. But they always insisted on having a family supper at home—together as family.
    - a. Sometimes we had to wait and wait on Dad to get there, but he always did
    - b. On Wednesdays, are at a restaurant before church (*all you can eat fish at HJ's*)
  - 2. Part of the ritual of family meal was being asked, “*Did you wash your hands?*”
    - a. And I never did! So after waiting for Dad, then they’d wait for me to wash!
    - b. You’d think at some point I’d learn the routine, “*Wash and come to the table*”
- B. Well, “*wash and come to the table*” is part of our family tradition in the church.
  - 1. At the center of our faith is the cross—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (**1 Cor 1:18**)
    - a. The cross was God’s dramatic and ultimate victory over Satan (**Col 2:15**)
    - b. So to be a Christian is to be a man or woman, boy or girl of the cross!
  - 2. There are two special ways we experience cross— we **wash** and **come to table**
    - a. **Wash:** In water of baptism, we join with Jesus at the cross (**Rom 6:4**, NLT)
    - b. **Table:** We participate and proclaim the message of cross (**1 Cor 11:26**, MES)
- C. For a hundred years, the role of baptism in plan of salvation has been downplayed
  - 1. The evangelistic meetings of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century changed baptism
    - a. Huge crowds heard men like Billy Sunday preached and offered invitation
      - 1) They were invited to the mourner’s bench where they prayed for salvation
      - 2) If we’re saved by faith, then all that is needed is faith—the Sinner’s Prayer
    - b. Baptism was connected to local church membership rather than to the gospel
    - c. In many ways, baptism came to be seen as something of an “*optional extra*”
  - 2. In the NT, baptism is anything but optional extra (*Sinner’s prayer not mentioned*)
    - a. Baptism was one of the few things mentioned by Jesus in great commission
    - b. Baptism was specifically mentioned in every conversion story in Acts
    - c. Baptism is stressed in several theological reflections on new life in Christ
      - 1) We are all equal and one in Christ because of our baptism (**Gal 3:27-28**)
      - 2) Our response in baptism is part of the process that saves us (**1 Pet 3:21**)
    - d. All of these verses, it appears that something happens when we are baptized
  - 3. If you have never been baptized, then talk to me, Roger or one of the elders

### III. What Happens at Communion: History

- A. Here's our question for today— does something also really happen in communion?
1. Sure, the Lord's Supper is a sacred time during which we remember the cross
    - a. We suggested that “remember” has come to mean meditate (shut other out)
    - b. Does anything really happen? Is communion only a type of visual aid?
  2. **Ukraine:** Our juice turned out to be clear fruit punch (*it had grapes on the label*)
    - a. So our first communion service in Zhitomir was with “*Banana Juice!*”
    - b. Is it OK to use white grape juice? Must it be red like blood to be a visual aid?
- B. At the risk of having eyes glaze over, let me make a quick foray into church history.
1. In the medieval church, God was seen to work through certain sacraments.
    - a. Sacrament is an act or rite where one encounters God and receives grace.
    - b. Medieval church had 7 sacraments; Reformation cut it to communion/baptism
  2. In the Catholic view of communion, bread and wine became the body and blood
    - a. When Jesus said, “*This is my body,*” He meant that to be taken literally
    - b. This is “*Transubstantiation,*” the actual substance of the host is transformed.
    - c. This led to a rather superstitious view of what happened during the Eucharist.
      - 1) The cup at one time denied the masses... Don't spill Christ's blood
      - 2) Mother calls her priest worried after her son threw up after 1<sup>st</sup> communion
- C. This something all Reformers wanted to reform— but disagreed themselves
1. **Martin Luther** believed the body and blood of Jesus were somehow present.
    - a. This was called **consubstantiation**; Christ's presence is “*in, with and under.*”
    - b. Substance is still bread and wine, but Jesus' is somehow spiritually present.
  2. **John Calvin** argued Christ's body isn't present in communion, but he is
    - a. Christ's body ascended to Father, and now He reigns on the right hand of God.
    - b. In a spiritual, mysterious way, communion takes us into the presence of God
    - c. So this is really the opposite of transubstantiation—we are taken to God
  3. **Ulrich Zwingli** introduced the idea that communion is only a **memorial**.
    - a. He saw the supper as simply symbol: bread and wine are visual aids of cross.
    - b. We should see the bread and wine in communion as memory aid.
    - c. Nothing really happens in communion except that we focus on Jesus

## IV. What Happens at Communion: Today

- A. Zwingli view has been predominant in most of our churches— a little inconsistent
1. Other traditions see baptism as only a symbol; we think that something happens
  2. So doesn't it stand to reason that **something happens** in communion as well?
    - a. Is it not possible that Supper not only symbolizes cross, but connects us to it
    - b. Was Calvin right; does communion in some sense take us into God's presence?
  3. Maybe is the point of the very intriguing, difficult text in **1 Cor 11:29-30**
    - a. **Problem:** There was a disconnect in the church in communion and agape meal
      - 1) Their meal recognizes the rich and poor social divisions in city Corinth
      - 2) They didn't recognize the body—they did not affirm their communion
    - b. This failure to connect with one another and the cross meant they were sick
      - 1) They weren't recreated by the cross—loving, giving, sacrificial, holy, etc.
      - 2) They weren't being energized by the spiritual power of crucified life
    - c. Failure to commune meant a failure in spiritual life—*because nothing happened*
- B. Jack Reese, in book *In Search of Wonder*, re-examines our view of memorial
1. In the west, a memorial is a sacred place where we go to remember the past
    - a. Washington Memorial like more or less a shrine-- to reflect and remember
    - b. And that's how we see communion—a **visual aid** to remind us of our past.
  2. But the ancients saw memorials differently; Passover was a living memorial
    - a. So the youngest son asks, "*Why is this night different from all other nights*"
    - b. Patriarch would answer by telling the story of His people (**Deut 26:5-8**)
      - 1) Passover wasn't the story of past ancestors—"the Lord brought us up"
      - 2) In Passover, Jews re-experienced Exodus, they didn't just re-examine it.
      - 3) Story of Exodus was their story—the reality of their lives, not just the past
  3. This is the kind of memorial that Lord's Supper becomes for us each week
    - a. Bread and juice are not some Zen-like focal point simply to aid meditation.
    - b. There is some real and powerful sense in which we reconnect with cross
      - 1) Not about goose-bumps and tears (*though if we never experience either...*)
      - 2) In some real and spiritual way, communion reconnects us to story of cross
  4. This idea shouldn't be shocking; it's basically what we've sung for years (**songs**)

## V. Communion

- A. Maybe communion is like one of the Washington memorials— Vietnam Memorial.
  - 1. Perhaps you have seen [this picture](#) of a man reconnecting with past at the wall.
  - 2. The power of this memorial lies in the life of the one remembering.
    - a. I missed that war by months— my connection is through family stories
    - b. Some of you left pieces of yourself there—or had friends that left it all.
  - 3. This memorial is more than visual aid; it is where past and present collide
- B. In a similar way, this communion memorial is more than a visual aid (*servers*)
  - 1. It is here where we connect each week with the story at the center of our faith
  - 2. We pause once again to share bread and grape juice and the story of the cross
  - 3. It is in this story that we have life, both now and for all time. ([Communion](#))

## VI. Invitation

- A. The cross is more than a story that we remember and reflect on each week
  - 1. For Christians, the cross is the very center of who we are and will be.
    - a. The disciple is one who vows to takes up the cross daily ([Luke 9:23](#)).
    - b. The disciple lays down his life for other people because of cross ([1 Jn 3:16](#)).
  - 2. For people of the cross, this is not just a story of idle historical curiosity.
  - 3. The cross is also our commitment to live each day for the one who died for us
- B. This song asks the intriguing question, “*Can he still feel the nails?*”
  - 1. Each day this week, you and I will make decision to glorify God... or not
    - a. We will choose to align ourselves with the cross or we will rebel against it
    - b. Each day, we choose to live in such a way that proclaims the cross or not
  - 2. During those times when we chose to rebel, “*Can He still feel the nails?*”