WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:17-33; 10:14-17

“Without the Sacraments the Church would long ago have disappeared, and with the passing of the Church would have gone also Christian faith and the Bible. The Sacraments are the divinely given flying buttresses which save the Church from collapse.”

—Emil Brunner

As Protestants we believe that Baptism and Holy Communion are the two sacraments or ordinances of the church since only these sacraments were specifically appointed by Christ.

A sacrament or ordinance is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” It is a concession to the weakness of our humanity. It is a symbolic but real way of communicating God’s truth.

A RITE OF CONTINUING FELLOWSHIP

Just as baptism is a once-for-all event which symbolizes our union with Christ in His death and resurrection and our entrance into the fellowship of the church, so Holy Communion is a rite of continuing fellowship in the body of Christ.

A PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

There is in the term "sacrament" the concept of "allegiance" from its Latin meaning. The Latin "Sacramentum" often meant an "oath", "vow" or "pledge" of allegiance by which the Roman soldiers bound themselves to their commanders and their country. This indicates that the Lord's Supper was not a mere symbol, but a solemn vow of allegiance of the believer to his Lord.

THE PLACE OF FAITH

In observing this symbolic meal of bread and wine we partake, by faith, of Christ's body and blood to our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace, just as our physical bodies are nourished outwardly by bread and wine.

When we eat the bread and drink the wine, by faith (the "eye of the soul") we discern in these physical elements Christ's body broken and His blood shed for our salvation. Therefore when we reverently take the bread in hand and eat it, and when we put the cup to our lips and drink of it, in "remembrance" of Him, we enjoy a unique "communion," "sharing," “participation,” “fellowship” in Christ's body and blood (I Cor. 10:14-16).
WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:17-33; 10:14-17

A living faith in Christ as Lord and Savior is the only ground upon which we can derive any blessing or fellowship with Him in the meal. But approaching the Supper on that basis we see portrayed in vivid symbol the costly act of sacrifice by which our sin was atoned for, and we meet again our loving Lord, and taste again in faith the benefits of His passion. There we feed on Him by faith in the Spirit and are gathered into communion with Him in His ascended glory.

ONLY FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

The Bible is crystal clear that the memorial of Christ's death only belongs to those who have tasted of the benefits of that death. Since it is the Lord's Table it does not belong to any particular local church or denomination; it belongs to all of God's people. The requirement for participation is that we know in a personal way the power of the God of the Bible.

A PASSOVER FEAST

However, there is another stipulation in approaching the Lord's Table. And it is here that the sacredness of this meal is seen. Paul warns the congregation at Corinth:

"... 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep [died]. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgement. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world" (I Cor. 11:27-32).

At the Passover Feast the Jew was exhorted to look in, by purifying himself and his household from any thing that was evil. Before the feast could take place there was a day of purification (following a time of spring-cleaning) when the head of the house would perform a little ritual. He would take a light in one hand and a pair of thongs in the other, and systematically search through the house, looking for any scrap of leaven (representing sin).

Since the house had already been thoroughly cleaned already, he probably never found any leaven, but his concern for purity was to be so great that he would not take any chances. Before the Passover Feast could be held in his house, every trace of corruption had to be removed.
WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:17-33; 10:14-17

Paul's warning to the Corinthian believers referred to specific abuses of drunkenness and greed which were corrupting the Lord's Supper. There was great insensitivity as the more well-to-do members quickly ate the food (since they were the ones who brought it) so that there was nothing left for the poor believers. This violated fellowship and unity which the Supper represented (I Cor. 10:17).

Paul is not referring to perfection or not one person could partake of this meal. Rather he is pointing to the seriousness of sin and the sacredness of the Table.

Paul is saying that as with the symbolic day of purification, we must have a time of "spring-cleaning" whereby we "ransack" our own hearts, allowing the light of the Spirit of Christ to search for any trace of remaining sin, before we partake in the Lord's Supper.

While we cannot make ourselves clean, we can confess and bring out into the open anything that we know is wrong, in order that God might forgive and cleanse. That is the significance of Paul's directive:

"Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast--as you really are. For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (I Cor. 5:7,8).

God requires moral living, sensitivity to the needs and feelings of our fellow believers and that we approach Him in sincerity and truth.

A DYNAMIC MEMORIAL

The words, "This do in remembrance of Me" points to the fact that the Lord's Supper is first and foremost a memorial. On the last night with His disciples, Jesus chose the memorial by which He wanted to be remembered.

He did not ask that a book be compiled of His memoirs; or that a mausoleum be named for Him. He requested instead that every time the disciples met together they should break bread and share the cup--in His memory. In the simple act of eating and drinking together they were to be reminded of Him.

Because the human mind so easily forgets with time, Jesus instituted this memorial as a means of stabbing awake the memory which has become forgetful or lethargic. Even the most poignant event loses its poignancy as the years go on. Therefore we need regular reminders of the event.
WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:17-33; 10:14-17

The most momentous event in the Christian religion is the death of Christ, and the Lord's Supper is Jesus' way of reminding us of what He went through on our behalf and what He accomplished for us on the cross.

Those who partake of the Lord's Supper are led to contemplate its purpose and lesson in the same way the Passover meal prodded memories of deliverance of Israelites from Egypt and slavery, and of the judgement of death of the firstborn.

The Passover feast was not just a remembrance; in a sense God's people were called to re-live their deliverance. The bitter herbs were used to forcefully remind them of the bitterness of the bondage that their fathers had suffered in Egypt; and the cups spoke of their coming salvation. The rabbis put it:

"In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth out of Egypt."

Every member of the household had to eat the Passover as if he were taking part in, or reliving his own deliverance from bondage. As the head of the household would hold the loaf of bread in his hand, he would say "This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate when they came out of Egypt."

This bread as it symbolized and represented the bread eaten by their fathers, helped the Jews to share vividly with the experience when we look at the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. "This is My body . . . This is My blood."

Remembrance then does not only include God's mighty acts in Creation and the Exodus but also in the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. But the focus is not on His selfless and sacrificial life, however perfect; not on his peerless teachings, however beautiful and authoritative. The focus of remembrance, says Jesus, must be on His death.

As we come to the Lord's Table our thoughts are primarily focused on Jesus and His saving death on our behalf. The very symbols used: bread symbolizing His broken body and wine symbolizing His shed blood--clearly and emphatically point to His death.

The Taj Mahal is one of the world's most famous monuments. Shah Hehan of India spared no expense in erecting this fabulous memorial to his beloved wife. The legend on the cornerstone reads: To the memory of an undying love." Over the memorial of the Lord's Supper we may engrave a finer line:

"To the memory of a dying love."
WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
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THE EUCHARIST: A FEAST OF THANKSGIVING

One of the names for the Lord's Supper is "Eucharist" which comes from a Greek words meaning "the giving of thanks." This is one of the most beautiful names for the Lord's Supper since it focuses not only on the gift of salvation and other gifts pertaining to our salvation, but it centers our attention on the Giver.

At the Passover Feast certain psalms were sung called the "Hallel." The title is taken from the repeated use of the word "hallelujah"--"Praise the lord" at the beginning and end of some of the psalms. Psalms 113-150 provide the basis of this outburst of thanksgiving. Here are the hallelujahs' sung by a grateful people.

Our Lord shared in this at the time of the Passover as He instituted the Last Supper which followed and replaced the Passover Feast. During the meal there were occasions of thanksgiving to God as Jesus "blessed" God and "gave thanks."

Paul points out that

"... on the night He was betrayed, [He] took bread, and when he had given thanks, He broke it and said . . ." (I Cor. 11:23b,24a).

What Jesus and the disciples were facing looked like defeat, but Jesus knew it ultimately meant victory. And so He asked the disciples to continue to celebrate the victory with a Eucharistic feast--even though the victory was one in which the Conqueror Himself lost His life.

This joyful sense of thanksgiving is reflected in the accounts of the early Christians as they broke bread together with "glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46).

HOLY COMMUNION: AN INTIMATE COMMUNION

Participation in the Lord's Supper is a present participation and communion with Christ himself. Paul makes this point crystal clear when he states:

"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?"

(I Cor. 10:16).
WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:17-33; 10:14-17

At the sacred table God uses the material—bread and wine—as a medium to bring spiritual nourishment. They point us to the crucified and risen Christ.

"We taste Thee, O thou Living Bread
And long to feast upon thee still;
We think of Thee, the Fountain Head,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill."

As we partake of His supper, Christ is giving Himself to us anew--given to us by faith. His life becomes ours:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

We call this meal Communion because the bread and wine symbolize our oneness with and in Christ.

It is called Communion also because it symbolizes the communion or fellowship of God's people, the church. Paul makes this clear:

"Because there is one loaf, we, who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (I Cor. 10:17).

We literally are "blood brothers" through the blood of Christ. We are bound together because we are bound to Christ.

A JOYOUS CELEBRATION

At the Passover Feast the Jew was encouraged to look forward in hope as he waited in anticipation for the messianic age when Messiah would return and free His people. This would be the time when God's purposes for Israel would be fulfilled. An extra place would be set at the table represented by an empty chair to show their anticipation and expectation of the coming of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah.

At the Communion we are encouraged to look forward as well:

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (I Cor. 11:26).
WHY IS HOLY COMMUNION SO IMPORTANT?
Matthew 26:17-30; I Corinthians 11:17-33; 10:14-17

Communion is an expression of hope as we commit ourselves to the future with Christ, confident of what He will do with us in the days that lie ahead. Communion is an affirmation of the church's faith in the second Advent of our Lord: her "blessed hope--the glorious appearing of her great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

Jesus had said to His disciples:

"I will tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God"

(Mk. 14:25).

With the assurance of Christ's living presence, the Christian community can rejoice that the reign of Christ has already begun. It can therefore look forward, full of confidence and hope, to the marriage feast of the Lamb where we shall share the heavenly fellowship meal with all believers of all ages.

"People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God"

(Lk. 13:29).

It will be one table, the Lord's Table to which all those who have entered into the new covenant of grace will be an invited guest.

Holy Communion can be a genuine banquet of the spirit as it was for Alexander Whyte, the Scottish preacher, of whom it has been written:

"The sacraments became more and more precious to him. They were the great events of the year, and he journeyed from one of them to the next as a man counts landmarks on his pilgrimage. In them he rose above the earth altogether. They were genuine banquets of the spirit, symposia where men ate and drank at the table of God, places for conversation between the soul and Christ, where all that his life had strained after and his faith had laid hold on became the actual and present reality.”

2

The sacraments are meant by God to be a dynamic catalyst for spiritual growth. Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung testifies to the central place the sacraments have in the church:

"So much is clear: the Lord's supper is the centre of the Church and of its various acts of worship. Here the Church is truly itself, because it is wholly with its Lord; here the Church of Christ is gathered for its most intimate fellowship, as sharers in a meal. In this fellowship they draw strength for their service in the world. Because this meal is a meal of recollection and thanksgiving the Church is essentially a community which remembers and thanks. And because this meal is a meal of covenant and fellowship, the Church is essentially a community, which loves without ceasing. And because finally this meal is an anticipation of the eschatological meal, the Church is essentially a community
with looks to the future with confidence. Essentially therefore, the Church must be a meal fellowship, a Koinonia or communio; it must be a fellowship with Christ and with Christians, or it is not the Church of Christ. In the Lord's Supper, it is stated with incomparable clarity that the Church is the ecclesia, the congregation, the community of God."3

The sacraments are a witness and testimony to the enduring quality of the Christian faith.

Why is Holy Communion so important? Because, just as baptism is a powerful reminder of our initial relationship with God, communion is a powerful reminder of our continuing relationship with God.

NOTES

1 Emil Brunner, Our Faith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 104.