



Cleansed and Fed: The Sacramental Life God Feeds Us Jesus

COMMUNION DESERVES OUR CAREFUL ATTENTION

In his Large Catechism, Luther says:

Since we now have the true understanding and doctrine of the Sacrament, there is also need for some admonition and encouragement. Then people may not let such a great treasure – daily administered and distributed among Christians – pass by unnoticed. (LC, V, 39)

How could a treasure so great as Communion “pass by unnoticed”?

By not receiving communion often, or by receiving it mindlessly or heartlessly (“going through the motions”) ILLUSTRATION: fast food window: wolf down a burger while driving. Why don’t five star restaurants have a drive-up window? Transition: Communion is a meal infinitely finer than anything served in a five-star restaurant. It deserves our careful attention.

Preparation

1 Corinthians 11:27-28

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 of the bread and drinks of the cup.

Large Catechism

Those who are lewd and morally loose must be told to stay away. They are not prepared to receive forgiveness of sin, since they do not desire it and do not wish to be godly. (LC, V, 58)

What does it mean to receive Communion “in an unworthy manner”?

The answer is right there in 1 Cor. 11. “Unworthy” means the man didn’t examine himself: “Why am I taking Communion?”

Why is it important to prepare before coming to Communion?

If I see no sin in myself, then how can I see my Savior?

Those who have chosen a sinful lifestyle (“lewd and morally loose”), are unworthy for Communion NOT because of their sinfulness, but because of their attitude toward sin (sin isn’t so bad) and their attitude toward God’s forgiveness (I don’t need it).

Small Catechism

Fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose, but he is properly prepared who believes these words: "Given" and "poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins."

What good purpose can fasting and other outward preparations serve?

They can help to focus us on the treasure we are about to receive. Kind of like folding your hands when you pray. But fasting and outward preparations are not essential (neither is folding your hands when you pray).

In a word, what is the essence of true Communion preparation?

Faith.

In days past, people prepared for Communion by announcing to the pastor ahead of time that they were planning to come.

What were some benefits of this practice?

One-on-one interaction between pastor and people. Opportunity for pastor to discuss any issues that might prevent someone from attending. Helped people to think about preparing for Communion. Natural place for personal confession and absolution, if desired. Easy way to deal with visitors wanting to attend Communion: did you announce to the pastor?

Why do you suppose we don't follow this practice anymore?

Potential legalism: "If I stopped to see the pastor, that makes me ready for communion."

Logistics: Today's work schedules are different than in days past.

Christian freedom: There are other ways to schedule one-on-one time with pastor, and there are other ways to prepare before Communion.

Implied question: Should we go back to this practice? No easy answers. Perhaps the energy it would take to do such a thing would be better spent in helping the whole congregation regularly review what communion preparation is all about. There will be more discussion on the topic of Christian freedom on pages 4 ff.

What helps you prepare for Communion?

Answers will vary.

Sing or say the following hymn stanzas together.

I come, O Savior, to your table,
For weak and weary is my soul;
O Jesus, you alone are able
To satisfy and make me whole.
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

Oh, grant that I in manner worthy
May now trust solely in your Word,
And, conscious of the sins before me,
Look only unto you, O Lord.
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

*Friedrich C. Heyder
Christian Worship Hymn 310, s.1-2*

Christ's Command and Promise

1 Corinthians 11:25

²⁵ [Jesus said,] "Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Based on this passage, how often does Jesus want us to take Communion?

No rules. Jesus leaves it open-ended.

Martin Luther: "It is implied that we should do it often" (LC V,47)

Evaluate: We take Communion because it is a commandment from God.

It is indeed a command of God, and that is reason enough to take Communion. But if our only reason for taking Communion is that God tells us to, we're missing the point.

Martin Luther: "Here he offers to us the entire treasure that he has brought for us from heaven." (LC V, 66)

Someone might say, "Why come to Communion, when I can benefit in the same way from listening to God's Word and remembering my baptism?" How would you reply?

They're asking the wrong question. Imagine a five-year-old saying, "Why should I open another birthday present? I already opened one." Desperate sinners crave God's forgiveness in all of its forms.

Sing or say the following hymn stanza together.

Unworthy though I am, O Savior,
Because I have a sinful heart,
Yet you your lamb will banish never,
Nor will your faithfulness depart.
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

*Friedrich C. Heyder
Christian Worship Hymn 310, s.3*

Frequency of Communion Celebration

1 Corinthians 10:23,24

“Everything is permissible” - - but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” - - but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

The Apostle Paul is talking about matters of Christian freedom, things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God. For example...

Drinking in moderation, dancing, worship forms:

“Adiaphora”

What loving principles does he help us apply to matters of Christian freedom?

Seek your neighbor’s good. Use your freedom to benefit your neighbor.

Matthew 15:8-9

[Jesus said,] “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”

What’s wrong with making rules in church about things for which God hasn’t given us rules?

**Draws attention away from God and focuses the attention on us and our rules. Becomes false source of confidence. “I kept the rules I made.”
LEGALISM.**

Frequency of Communion celebration is a matter of Christian freedom. The trend within our circles over the past hundred years seems to be toward more frequent celebration. A number of Lutheran congregations have even begun to offer Communion every week.

What do you think about that idea?

Answers will vary. Note that offering Communion more often does not always translate into people receiving Communion more often. Weekly Communion just means it’s available every week.

How can the two passages above help a congregation that wants to approach this particular area of Christian freedom?

Your congregation will have to decide as a group what is best in your own setting. If there is a change toward offering Communion more frequently, everyone has to be clear about the reason for this change, so that people don’t draw their own legalistic conclusions. (“Does this mean I’m now required to go every week?”)

Sing or say the following hymn stanza together.

Your heart is filled with fervent yearning
That sinners may salvation see
Who, Lord, to you in faith are turning;
So let me, too, come trustingly,
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

*Friedrich C. Heyder
Christian Worship Hymn 310, s.5*

Symbols and Ceremonies

Colossians 2:16-17

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Old Testament rules for worship no longer apply. We're free to worship God anywhere, in whatever way we think is best. Why will New Testament believers still pay close attention to things like art and symbolism in their houses of worship and their patterns of worship?

Because art and symbolism can communicate to us in ways that a spoken word cannot. While we're free to do what we want in New Testament worship, it's hard to ignore that God made such prominent use of art and symbolism in the worship of his Old Testament people.

What are some ways churches can use art and symbolism to help people pay careful attention to God's gift of Communion?

- Altar Design and Placement
In chancel design, less is more. Let altar be focal point. Be careful of using the altar for other purposes (covered in flowers so you can barely see it, or as a table for props). Be careful of unnecessarily blocking people's view of the altar.
- Ritual – Drop the preface / proper preface to save time? Perhaps. But is saving time really a priority when taking Communion? **Implied in retaining the preface / proper preface is this idea: it's important to *prepare* before coming to Communion.**
- Music – Canticles like Holy, Holy, Holy and O Christ Lamb of God have been used in Christian churches for a long time. Why? **Study the content of these songs with people, and help them see their connection to Communion. Note that the texts of these canticles have stayed the same, but the musical setting is available in great variety. Could also discuss some Communion hymns here.**
- Art – **Discuss some of the sacramental art in your church, or other churches, and what it means.**
- Ceremony – **Ceremony refers to the actions of worship. Can discuss kneeling/standing, individual or common cup, receiving host in the hand or on the tongue, crossing self. All matters of Christian freedom, but still important to discuss. If we try to avoid all ceremony, something else will likely fill its place. If I toss back my individual cup like I'm doing a shot, am I communicating something unwittingly?**

Sing or say the following hymn stanzas together.

Who can condemn me now? For surely
The Lord is near, who justifies.
No hell I fear, and thus securely
With Jesus I to heaven rise.
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

Though death may threaten with disaster,
It cannot rob me of my cheer,
For he who is of death the master
With help and strength is always near.
Lord, may your body and your blood
Be for my soul the highest good!

*Friedrich C. Heyder
Christian Worship Hymn 310, s.13-14*