



Cleansed and Fed: The Sacramental Life God Feeds Us Jesus

COMMUNION IS A MYSTERY

When we use reason and logic, we can learn a great deal about ourselves and our world. For example...

How to heal and repair the human body, to make a healthy meal, to manage finances, etc. Name almost any benefit that has come from the sciences and you're seeing a blessing that comes from God's gift of reason and logic.

Even within the realm of science, there are things about ourselves and our world that reason and logic will never help us learn. For example...

We can give a detailed description of the chemical composition of the human body. We can describe the electrical and chemical processes of human biology with remarkable clarity. But how can all of these things come together in such a way that we have a human life? Reason fails us on a very simple question: Why are we alive?

How much more will we expect that the work of God in general will defy logic? Specifically, it shouldn't surprise us to find out that there are things about God's saving plan which also defy logic and reason...

Communion and Christmas (in what way are the two related?)

John 1:1-3, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Who is the "Word"? What does it mean that "the Word became flesh"?

What term do theologians use for this mystery from God's Word?

Jesus. God became man. Incarnation.

Identify some logical problems with God becoming human.

God is infinite; man is finite. God is unchanging; man changes. God is immortal; God is mortal. When you know who God is, and you know what a human is, it is logically impossible to hold to the idea that one person can be both God and man.

How should we expect the world to react to such logical problems?

(See John 1:5,11)

We should expect them to reject such things.

Read Luke 1:34-37. What solution does this passage offer as to the mystery of the incarnation?

"Nothing is impossible" implies God is not bound by rules of logic.

Matthew 26:26-28

²⁶ 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." ²⁷ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you." ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

What words does Jesus use to describe the bread and wine he gives his disciples?

This is my body. This is my blood.

When you take these words at face value, what is Jesus saying that his disciples are receiving in this meal?

Jesus' body and blood.

Identify some logical problems with the teaching of the *Real Presence* of Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion.

There's only so much body and blood one person has; Jesus never runs out. Body and blood have certain empirical qualities (consistency, color, etc.) But the body and blood in the Lord's Supper can't be perceived by taste or feel.

How should we expect the world to react to such logical problems?

Rejection.

Agree or disagree: When reaching out to the world with the message of Scripture, we should downplay parts of the Bible that defy logic, like the incarnation of Jesus and the teaching of the *Real Presence*.

If we try to make God's saving plan seem entirely logical to people, they will soon become disillusioned and disappointed. Better to celebrate the mysterious nature of God up front. Start with "God can do anything." (Luke 1:34-37) Then open scriptures to see what he *did* do.

What do Christmas and Communion have in common?

Salvation

Both show us the great love of God. Both are miracles.

The combination of infinite and finite:

God became human.

Jesus' body and blood in the bread and wine.

Why do you suppose God has chosen to do such mysterious things?

The best answer is: *I don't know*. But we can speculate:

- a) Because it's who he is.
- b) Because there was no logical, rational way for him to rescue us from sin.
- c) He's testing our faith. He's freeing us from our tendency to rely on ourselves (our own logic, reason) and not him.
- d) He's inviting our meditation upon these things. Think of Mary after Christmas, *pondering these things in her heart*.

Sing or say the following hymn stanza together

Soul, adorn yourself with gladness;
Leave behind all gloom and sadness.
Come into the daylight's splendor;
There with joy your praises render
Unto him whose grace unbounded
Has this wondrous supper founded.
Though he reigns above most holy,
Deigns to dwell with you most lowly.

Johann Franck
Christian Worship Hymn 311, s.1

Attempts to solve the mystery

Some well-meaning Christians believe that when Jesus said "This is my body" and "This is my blood" he was using a figure of speech. They say the bread *symbolized* his body and the wine *symbolized* his blood. They think that when they receive the Lord's Supper, they only receive bread and wine, not the body and blood of Jesus.

What is the basis for this interpretation? What do these interpreters hope to gain by this line of thought? What is lost?

The basis is reason and logic (not scripture). They're hoping to make the Lord's Supper easier to understand. But they completely ignore the gift Jesus gives here, and they lose all the benefits Jesus wants to provide (more about the blessings next time)!

The Swiss reformer John Calvin taught that the body and blood of Jesus are really present in the Lord's Supper, in a spiritual way. He said that when we receive the Lord's Supper we are lifted up to heaven by faith and are connected to the very body and blood of Jesus who died for us.

What's wrong here?

Again, it's an attempt to squeeze the Lord's Supper into the realm of reason and logic. Saying Jesus' body and blood is present in a *spiritual* way is another way of saying it isn't really present. (FC SD, VII, 3)

Agree or Disagree: We should understand everything in the Bible literally.
No. Take literal things literally, and figurative things figuratively. Just basic laws of discourse and conversation.

Agree or Disagree: If there's a question as to whether or not a Bible passage should be understood literally or figuratively, it's up to us to decide which interpretation we like better.

No. Context. For example, the reference to a thousand years in Revelation 20 is clearly figurative both in its narrow context (Revelation is apocalyptic literature) and wide context (clear teachings of Jesus in Matthew 24-25. But the context of Jesus' words at the Last Supper is all literal. He was giving his last will and testament, not telling a parable. Consider, also, the wider context of scripture (see below).

What inevitably happens when humans try to find a logical solution for something from God's Word that is supposed to remain a mystery?

Not only do we fail to solve the mystery, but we change God's Word into something it isn't, and we empty it of its saving power.

Sing or say the following hymn stanza together

Now I kneel before you lowly,
Filled with joy most deep and holy,
As with trembling awe and wonder
On your mighty work I ponder,
How by mystery surrounded,
Depths that no one ever sounded.
None may dare to pierce unbidden
Secrets that with you are hidden.

*Johann Franck
Christian Worship Hymn 311, s.4*

The Testimony of Scripture

How do the following Bible passages shed light on Jesus' words: "This is my body," and "This is my blood"?

1 Corinthians 10:16

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?

Koinoneia (participation) + genitive in common usage comes out to: The wine is a means by which we participate (commune) with the blood of Christ. The bread is a means by which we participate (commune) with the body of Christ. See Joel Fredrich's symposium paper on Communion. Put simply, the bread and wine are truly present.

1 Corinthians 11:27

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. Why not just say, "guilty of sin?" Why add "sinning against the body and blood?" Testifies to real presence.

In his Small Catechism, Luther says:

What is the Sacrament of Holy Communion? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink.

How well do Luther's words match what Scripture says?

"under" (unter) is Luther's word. Note how this word communicates real presence while also communicating that this is a special kind of presence (not a natural presence, as though what we eat tastes like human body and blood)

If Scripture already says it, why does Luther put it in his own words?

To aid others in learning, and to defend against non-scriptural ideas.

When might you have an occasion to put the teaching of the *Real Presence* into your own words? How can you be confident that what you are saying is true?

Talking to friend or family member who is coming to church with you on a communion Sunday.

When it comes to the mysteries like the *Real Presence*, why are Christians happy to trust Scripture more than they trust their own reason and logic?

If human wisdom and knowledge is like a drop of water, then God's wisdom and knowledge is like the ocean. See Romans 11:33-36 for a good example of a Christian's attitude toward God's mysterious wisdom.

Sing or say the following hymn stanza together

Human reason, though it ponders,
Cannot fathom these great wonders,
That Christ's body must be boundless
Since the souls it feeds are countless,
And that he his blood is giving
With the wine we are receiving.
These great mysteries unsounded
Are by God alone expounded.

*Johann Franck
Christian Worship Hymn 311, s.5*

Why this mystery matters

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Colossians 2:9

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

Who is Jesus Christ? What does the Bible say?

Fully God. Fully human.

1 John 1:7

The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

What has Jesus accomplished for us sinners by the shedding his blood for us on the cross?

Cleansing of every last sin on our record. We stand forgiven.

Whose body and blood do you receive in Communion? What does this mean?

The body and blood of the Son of God, your Savior. This is the same Jesus who lived a holy life, the same Jesus who endured suffering and shame, who died on the cross, and who rose again. This body and blood is present for you. "Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

Evaluate: Since the Lord's Supper is difficult to comprehend we shouldn't spend too much time thinking about it.

Just the opposite. This mystery begs us to dwell upon the saving work of Jesus and the means of grace God gives us in word and sacraments.

Sing or say the following hymn stanza together

Lord, by love and mercy driven,
You have left your throne in heaven
On the cross for me to languish
And to die in bitter anguish,
To forgo all joy and gladness
And to shed your blood in sadness.
By this blood redeemed and living,
Lord, I praise you with thanksgiving.

*Johann Franck
Christian Worship Hymn 311, s.6*