

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## “Do this in remembrance of me”

Eucharist, Communion, the Lord's Supper. By various names it has been a central feature of Christian worship—some Christians say *the* central feature—throughout the church's history. However, methods of observing this sacrament vary widely, and the differences often cause bitter controversy.

Some of the controversy among Christian denominations is based on differences in belief. Within congregations, however, it is more often about relatively minor aspects of the Communion method that is being used.

DO THIS IN  
REMEMBRANCE OF ME  
LUKE 22:19



## Give yourself, give your life

When Jesus says “Do this in remembrance of me,” what is he asking us to do? We assume that it is only to drink a token serving of wine or juice and eat a token piece of bread as a reminder that Jesus died for our salvation, but I suspect that the “this” in his command also refers to something infinitely greater.

Although Jesus and his last supper are unique, the Gospels describe them in a type of language that occurs in many other places. It is a symbolic, picture-story language in which physical objects and actions, or visual or verbal pictures of physical things, are used to express ideas, beliefs, and feelings. Throughout human history and in all cultures, people have unconsciously expressed themselves in this language. We find it not only in religious rituals and writings but also in art, literature, dreams, and other forms of spontaneous expression that express people's deepest feelings and beliefs.

We can't arbitrarily choose just any picture to convey a certain meaning symbolically. A symbol's meaning comes from our individual and cultural experience with the pictured thing, person, or action, and also from the experience of all people throughout history. And a true symbol carries many levels of meaning simultaneously.

In symbolic language a person's body often represents that person's whole self. Symbolically a visual or verbal picture of a person's body represents the person's feelings, thoughts, will, typical ways of behaving, and whatever other characteristics make up that person. So when Jesus says he has given his body, it means not only his physical body but also his entire self. And giving *our* whole selves is what he asks *us* to do.

Similarly, blood often represents life. This use of blood occurs often in the Old Testament (as in Gen. 9:4—“you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood”) as well as in many other places. So by saying that his blood is poured out for others, Jesus is saying that he is giving his life for others. And when he says “do this,” he is asking us to give ours, following his example.



When he says “Do this in remembrance of me,” I don't think Jesus is *only* saying “Drink some wine and eat some bread regularly in worship services, as a reminder of what I have done for you.” He is also saying, “Give your whole self as I gave mine. Give your life for others as I gave mine. Do *this* in remembrance of me.”

## Focusing on God

Focusing narrowly on superficial aspects of Communion can keep us from seeing God in it. To stay focused on God, we must periodically reexamine our beliefs and feelings about Communion. We must distinguish what is essential from what is optional.

By sharing my views with you, I hope to help both of us clarify our beliefs about Communion, see more of God's presence in it, and respond more faithfully to God's call that comes to us through it.

He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And he did the same with the cup

after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood ...”

— Luke 22:19-20



## Many methods, many feelings

Some congregations include Communion in every worship service, but others do it only monthly or quarterly. Some restrict participation, but others invite everyone who is present. Most use only token

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*("Do this in remembrance of me," continued from page 1)*

servings of bread and grape juice or wine, but some make Communion a meal. Some Christians see deep meaning in Communion, but for others it is a mere formality. Some take Communion daily, but others avoid attending church on Communion Sundays even when they are far apart.

### We disagree mainly about details

Disagreement about Communion within our congregations is often about details of our methods. Some church members complain if they are merely asked to walk to the altar in a different order or to come and go individually rather than in groups. People complain about being asked to take bread from a loaf instead of wafers from a plate, or to dip bread into a cup instead of drinking from one.

Complaints like these seem trivial, because there are so many different ways of taking Communion, even among congregations within the same denomination. And none of the details about how to

### A sacrament is an opening to God

A sacrament is similar to a symbol. It is an action or group of actions that represent a complex meaning. Our participation in the sacrament conveys the meaning to us. Like the meaning of a symbol, the meaning of a sacrament cannot be fully stated in words and we receive much of it unconsciously.

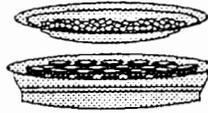
A sacrament is like a window through which we can see God. If we merely look at the words, actions, and physical objects that the sacrament includes, instead of looking *through* them to God, we miss the point. We make the window into a wall that *keeps us from seeing God*. When we claim that any one particular set of words, things, or actions are the sacrament, we make something human an object of worship. We make something sacred into an idol.



However, some people are more receptive to symbolic language than others are. Innate personality traits and personal experience can make a big difference in our conscious receptivity to symbolic, metaphorical language, even if not in its ability to influence us powerfully. In the observance of Communion, familiar, consistently repeated words and physical ingredients are therefore important ingredients for many Christians.

To reach all of God's people with God's sacrament, we must offer it in a variety of ways. We can't haggle about which bread, drink, and words must be used, and try to impose our own preference on all other Christians.

take Communion were prescribed by Jesus or even by the earliest church. They've come from ordinary human beings like us, in relatively recent years.



Jesus undoubtedly didn't have sanitary, uniform wafers or individual glass or plastic cups to give to his disciples at his Last Supper. No one recorded his words at the time he said them, and he didn't speak English, so the words of our traditional Communion rituals aren't his exact words.

His disciples probably weren't neatly lined up behind a table as they are in the famous Leonardo da Vinci painting that we tend to use as our mental picture of the scene:

In fact, the disciples who attended that first observance of



the Lord's Supper may not have been only twelve men. Other disciples, including the women who were among Jesus' closest followers, are likely to have been there too.

### We try to impose our views on others

Many of us mistakenly consider Leonardo's painting realistic, and our own limited experience or the words of a particular Communion ritual universal and timeless.

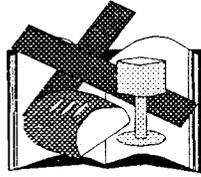


We combine those ingredients into an understanding of Communion that we try to impose on other Christians.

I've even heard church members claim that Paul's instruction to do everything decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40) confirms their own favorite Communion method, whatever that happens to be. That's a gross misuse of scripture. Besides, the church of Paul's time evidently wasn't orderly by our standards. Communion was often an actual

- "Eucharist" comes from a Greek word that means giving thanks.
- "Communion" emphasizes the common bond that unites all Christians.
- "The Lord's Supper" acknowledges the event in Jesus' earthly life at which he instituted the practice and told his followers to continue it. Meals in his culture were shared with family and close friends, and they expressed the participants' commitment to each other.

meal, and often a rowdy one. Some of today's Christians ignore that fact or try to get around it by saying that people in the early church were primitive and uncivilized. Because we are civilized now, these Christians say, we must worship only in sedate, rigidly structured ways. But I'm afraid this is merely our wish, and not God's. In fact, I suspect that most of the controversy about Communion in our churches is based merely on our personal preferences rather than on what matters to God. ❖



## Communion in community

In an important sense Communion is a function of the faith community, not of solitary individuals acting independently. Someone has rightly said that the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion. Yet we must respond to God on our own, as unique individuals, and Communion is a time for doing that.

### ▪ How many make a community?

Some churches offer Communion in a chapel, separate from worship services, with participants coming and going continuously. Some people consider this unacceptable, however, because Communion is meant to be a function of the church body. But how many people are necessary to be the church? When God is present, even one can be enough.

### ▪ Should only clergy administer Communion?

The United Methodist Church and many other denominations say yes, yet in effect we often ignore this requirement. Often our clergy merely oversee lay Communion servers or delegate lay church members to take Communion to shut-ins. To some lay people the requirement seems like merely a way for clergy to protect their turf.



### ▪ Must we be with our family members?

Many church members get upset if there isn't room at the altar for them to kneel beside their spouse or some other family member. But I doubt that God considers this important. Although we cherish our spouses and other family members and they play important roles in our growth in faith, each of us must make our own response to God, and Communion is an important time for doing so. Before God

## A time for repentance and recommitment

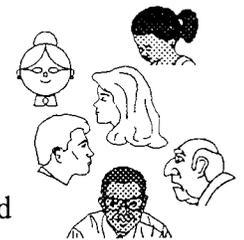
Over the centuries the church has associated Communion with Jesus' instruction to leave the altar and resolve anything that a brother or sister has against you (not what you have against them!) before presenting your gift to God (Matthew 5:23-24).

Remembering Paul's words to the Corinthian church, we also see Communion as a time for self-examination, repentance, and recommitment.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.  
—1 Corinthians 11:27-29

each of us is an individual, not just a parent, a son or daughter, or a husband or wife.

Surprisingly, Jesus tells us that our most important community is not our biological family or our chosen personal companions and friends. Important as these groups and relationships are for us, Jesus tells us that our relationship to God and to the community of faith is even more important (Luke 8:19-21, Luke 14:26, Luke 9:59-62, Luke 12:49-53 and elsewhere). Maybe what matters most during Communion, then, is not that we are beside our spouses at the altar but that we are surrounded by the larger faith community.



### ▪ A group performance or a personal act?

The question of whether we come before God as individuals or as a group shows up at Communion in other ways, too. As a long-time choir member I've heard many discussions about whether choir members should wait to kneel and rise together when the choir goes to the altar for communion. In my view, we need to move and dress alike for our musical role as a choir, but for the choir to act as a group when taking Communion gives an inappropriate message to choir members and to the congregation. At Communion, choir members are not a performing group; they are individuals who are part of the whole congregation. ❖



## What really matters is God

Receiving God's gifts thankfully, coming before God as responsible individuals within the faith community that God brings together, looking honestly at ourselves and recommitting our lives in response to God's call—these aspects of Communion are the ones that matter.

When we're clear on that, *methods* of taking Communion no longer look important. Details about where we are, who is with us, how we go to

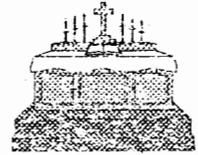
the altar, when or whether we kneel, and the form of the bread and wine are minor.

What really counts is letting Communion be a time for seeing God and responding to God with our whole selves and our lives, as members of the timeless worldwide Christian community of faith.

*Barbara*

Next month . . .

Worship



**Connections** 2-94

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**Do this in remembrance of me**

## What makes Communion Communion?

My most memorable experiences of Communion were on three very different occasions.

- Alone at home one day, immersed in a book written by a kindred spirit whose words had greatly expanded my view of God and heightened my awareness of God's presence. My bread and wine were a cracker from the pantry and a glass of orange juice from the refrigerator.
- At a restaurant one night after an evening worship service, with three lay women friends. We had met and become friends in a life-changing two-year program that was soon to end. Our Communion elements were wine, coffee, and dessert, and no one recited a ritual, but we were fully aware that we were observing Communion together.
- High up in the balcony of a huge barn-like convention center at an event attended by several thousand Methodists. Servers were stationed all over the main floor and balcony, and we took Communion standing in the nearest aisle.

None of these experiences was in a church building. I didn't kneel at any altar. On one of the occasions no one else was physically present. On two no clergy person was present, and the traditional words, bread, and grape juice were missing. Yet for me these experiences, more than the hundreds of times when I've taken Communion in traditional settings, were true Communion. I think God was present at all of them. What do you think? When has Communion meant most to you? What makes Communion Communion?

