

About Communion

Intro: Let's talk for a few moments about "communion". What do you think of when you hear that word? The word "communion" is often used as a synonym for the Lord's Supper. People say, "I took communion".

What is communion? Did we just "take communion?" Let's take a few moments to clarify what "communion" is all about and the lessons it teaches us!

Communion in 1 Cor. 10:16

Three translations

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16, KJV)

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? (1 Corinthians 10:16, NIV)

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16, NASV)

"Communion" translates the Greek word "koinonia".

Participation or sharing in something (Bauer, Gingrich and Danker)

Paul affirms that all who eat the Lord's Supper share in the sacrifice Christ made for us in giving His body and blood.

"Communion" is not the thing we eat (i.e. we don't "take communion"); communion is the sharing we experience when eating.

What does it mean to have communion in Jesus' body and blood? What lesson is Paul seeking to teach by this expression?

Three analogies

The altar of Israel

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? (1 Corinthians 10:18)

What happened at the altar of Israel.

At God's instructions God commanded the Israelites to build Him a tent so that He could dwell among them. In keeping with the symbolism of His presence, he commanded that priests be appointed to serve Him in His tent. They would prepare "food" or "offerings" for Him on a "barbeque pit" or "altar" outside the tent. The sacrifices went up to God as a pleasing aroma and symbolically indicated the desire of the people to honor and please Him. Of course, God, a spiritual being, did not need such things to keep Him alive; but the people needed such experiences to learn important lessons about God.

The principles taught through the altar.

Israel learned that God was pleased when they made offerings to Him of this kind and that through them they could solicit His favor and be forgiven of sins.

The ritual of sacrifice was symbolically a way for the worshipper to say to God, "I want you dwell with us and I want to please you." But in addition, it was a way of saying, "I am sorry for displeasing you and I want to be forgiven. I want to be in your favor and be blessed by you as my God".

Israel learned that God had accepted them into His favor by the invitation to eat of the "table" they had prepared for God.

It is as if God says to the Israelites. Have some of what you have prepared for me; I am pleased to share it with you.

And all who ate the food offered there could be said to be "sharers in the altar". Their participation in this ritual said, "We all believe in this God. We all want the blessings of this God. We all want the forgiveness of this God and acknowledge all who come here to be partners in serving this God!"

The altar of the church

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? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

What happens at the altar of the church.

The physical symbolism of the tabernacle has a higher spiritual fulfillment. God still says, "I want to be your God and for you to be my people. I want to dwell among you." But this time God elevates the concept to the spiritual level.

The tabernacle or temple is not a physical structure; it is a "spiritual place". We are the temple or tabernacle of God. *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)*

The altar is not a pile of rocks, but a spiritual one upon which the sacrifice of Jesus' body has been offered.

We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. (Hebrews 13:10)

(By the way, Catholicism utterly destroys the spiritual symbolism when they make the cathedral God's house, the clergy "priests" and the mass a "sacrifice" and build an "altar" at the front of the cathedral! We still have the vestiges of Catholicism when we called the church building "God's house" and the place in the front of the building "the altar".)

Lessons learned at the altar of the church

We learn that nothing we bring to God could ever truly merit His favor and forgiveness. Instead we are accepted by Him on the basis not of what we offer but what He offered for us!

Jesus' sacrifice of Himself has secured for us eternal redemption!

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. (Hebrews 9:11-12)

How could we eat of this sacrifice in any physical sense? We would have to be cannibals (by the way, a charge made of the early church!) Instead Jesus took the bread and fruit of the vine available at the Passover and instituted a feast of another kind where we eat together not Jesus' flesh and blood (as the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation affirms) but that which declares our common access to His sacrifice. Thus, Paul observes that the sharing of all Christians in the body and blood of the Lord through eating bread and the fruit of the vine points to the unity we have through His sacrifice, not just congregationally but universally!

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:17)

Like Israel, our participation in the Lord's Supper declares that we want God to be our God and that we want to be His people and for Him to bless us. It acknowledges that we want to please Him and to receive His forgiveness when we sin.

Like Israel, we are invited by God to share in His table (what Paul calls "the table of the Lord", and this eating declares our acceptance by Him!

But the primary lesson of this section comes as we turn our attention to the third analogy.

The altar of Gentiles

What happens at this altar

All over Corinth and around the Roman world temples were built to the gods of the Greeks and the Romans and to the "emperors" who were deified. To these "gods" altars were

built to offer “food” to them and to seek the favor of these gods. In other words, the sacrifices of these altars had the same significance to the worshipper that the altars of the Jews and Christians had.

However, participation in these sacrifices resulted in serious problems for the Christian.

Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Corinthians 10:19-22)

One could reasonably argue that since the pagan gods didn’t really exist, what harm could there be in eating their food!? If the god was not real, then the sacrifice was not real? But Paul points out that there was a reality behind these temples. It was not real gods, but real demons. Thus, participation in such sacrifices brought the worshippers into partnership with the wicked spirit world. It would be in effect as if to say to them, “I want you to be my God and for me to be one of your people. I want you to be in your favor. And those Christians who joined such worship would be united with those who honored these false gods. This Paul said Christians could not do! In fact he urges a different course!

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. (1 Corinthians 10:14)

To do otherwise is to arouse the Lord’s jealousy and bring upon oneself His wrath, a wrath against which we have no power to withstand. And that is the point of Paul’s last question. Do we have the strength to resist His punishment?

The Israelites had learned this lesson at great cost! (v. 7-8).

Thus, the Christian is forbidden to participate in the worship of any other god other than the God of the Scripture and that includes even false gods created by those who profess to be “Christian” (1 Jn. 5:21).

Conclusion: The communion of the Lord’s Supper teaches a powerful lesson about our relationship with God.

In it we say to God that He is our only god—that we want to please Him alone, that we want to be in His favor alone, and that we are exclusively His! This should truly challenge us each week to be a holy and righteous people. Are we living this life?

In it He says to us that He accepts us through the blood of His son and that He seeks for us to be His people, trusting in Him as God and obeying Him as His children. This should give us the greatest joy to know that He accepts us on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice. Do we have this joy?