



Sometimes I feel unworthy to take communion because of my relationship with God.



*What should I do in light of I Corinthians 11:26-28?*

Addressed by  
Patric Knaak

**tell me more**



You have a friend/neighbor/co-worker who is Muslim. Although you have befriended them they have never really expressed that much interest discussing religion or Christianity. However, one day out of the blue they ask if they can come to church with you on Sunday. You say yes, however, when you arrive you realize that it is a communion Sunday.

During lunch, your friend has several questions he'd like to discuss. Remember that he has witnessed communion for the first time, but doesn't know really anything about Christianity or what just took place. He does, however, have some respect for scripture since he too consults a divine religious book, the Qu' ran.

What are you doing when people go and take bread and dip it in juice? What is it about?

Do all Christians do this? Do they do it the same way you do?

What do you get out of it?

## so what is going on with communion?



signs and seals

In the Reformed tradition we often speak of sacraments by referring to them as *signs* and *seals*:

*The simplest definition is that a sacrament is an outward sign by which the Lord assures us inwardly of his loving promises [i.e. a seal]. This strengthens our faith so that we can prove our calling in his sight and before men. More briefly, a sacrament is God's witness to us of his favor toward us, by means of an outward sign. We in him confess our faith to him.*

- Calvin, *Institutes* 4.14.1

So a sign is a visible, tangible representation of the God's promises to us (as embodied in the New Covenant) and a seal is the application of the truth of the sign personally to individual persons. Hence the sign isn't something that is true in general, or "just out there," but is true for you personally, applied by the Holy Spirit to you individually. This is equally true for the two Christian sacraments: baptism and communion.

in remembrance of me...

### ***So how does communion fit into this?***

How did it start?

What exactly is it to be a **sign** of?

*How is it supposed to benefit me **personally** as a seal?*

Jesus himself instituted communion in the following way:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."  
Matthew 26:26-9

Paul adds the following sentences from the tradition he received:

This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink of it, in remembrance of me.  
1 Corinthians 11:25

There are several things which communion "signs" and affirms:

- ✦ **Christ's Death:** The breaking of the bread and pouring out of the cup remind us that Christ's very body was broken for us and his blood poured out for us so that our sins can be forgiven.

- ✦ Our Participation in the Benefits of Christ's Death: Jesus command to "take" and "drink" causes us to tangibly proclaim with our actions, "I am taking the benefits of Christ's death to myself."

This mystery of the unseen union of Christ with believers cannot be naturally grasped, so God shows it clearly in visible terms. We realize that our souls are fed by Christ, just as the bodily life is sustained by bread and wine. Now we can understand the purpose of this mystical blessing: it assures us that the body of Christ was once sacrificed for us, so that we may now eat it and, eating, sense within ourselves the efficacy of that one sacrifice.

- Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.1



John Calvin indicating that Patric's lesson is number one with him.

- ✦ Spiritual Nourishment: Just as food and drink physically nourish us, there is also a special nourishing relationship with our souls and communion:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

*John 6:53-57*

- ✦ Unity of Believers: By participating in communion we also demonstrate our unity with fellow believers, taking from the same bread and the same cup (cf. I Cor 10:17)

So in taking communion we come **into the presence of Christ for in a special way** and for a special purpose, we remember that he **died for us personally**, we symbolically **participate in the benefits of his death** (and recall the literal benefits of it), we receive **spiritual encouragement, support and sustenance** and are also **united with other believers** as we do this demonstrating the extent of God's grace.

In doing this we also participate in several affirmations. *Christ affirms his love for us as individuals*—he bids us to come and sit at the table of celebration of his love; we are invited guests. *Second, Christ affirms that all the blessings of salvation are mine*—by welcoming me to his table, the King of Kings is again reminding me that I am now just as loved and accepted by the Father as Jesus himself is. *Third, we affirm our faith in Christ*—in taking communion we affirm, "Jesus, I need you. I trust you. I know that left on my own I would remain filthy and dirty with my sin. For life, for health, for nurture of my soul I need the sacrifice you made with your body on the cross.

## those pesky corinthians

what is going on?

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)



Paul is writing to his beloved, and often misguided, Corinthians. It was common at the time to celebrate the Lord's Supper as an actual meal eaten together in which the specific elements were used at one point and time. Evidently the believers had gotten into the habit of turning communion into a sort of "haves" and "have nots" activity where the



wealthier members of the congregation would bring an abundance of food to celebrate the meal while those who were poorer and who could not bring as much food got left out. Eventually this led to a "divided table" in which the wealthier Christians seemed to be celebrating communion on their own, and the poorer Christians on their own.

Paul is unhappy in the extreme! The event that should emphasize more than anything, solidarity and unity (after all, everyone God saved the same way, everyone needed the same infinite amount of grace) is now showing a divided body. It is this situation that Paul has in mind when he pens the passage above.

what is paul really saying?

In light of this the main questions for our passage seem to be:

What is meant by eating and drinking communion in an "unworthy manner?"

The entire passage of 11:17-34, not just these verses, is addressing the issue of taking communion in an unworthy manner. Hence, the real issue is not the condition of the person doing the eating, but rather the manner in which the eating was being done (i.e. as a separate event for the rich believers). The unworthy manner then is this divided meal since the purpose of the meal is to proclaim the glory of God's grace, in Christ's death and our salvation. This focus had been lost and the meal had become an exercise in social standing instead of worship to God.

According to commentator Gordon Fee, reading these verses as personal instructions rather than seeing them as part of the larger passage which address the corporate state

of the church in Corinth has led to a grave misunderstanding of Paul's admonition against taking communion in an unworthy manner. "This is especially true in the more pietistic sectors of the Protestant tradition. People [consider themselves] 'unworthy' if they have any sin in their lives, or have committed sins during the past week. This in turn has resulted in reading v. 28 personally and introspectively, so that the purpose of one's self-examination has to become worth of the Table, lest one come under judgment. The tragedy of such an interpretation for countless thousands, both in terms of a foreboding of the Table and guilt for perhaps having partaken unworthily, is incalculable." (Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 560 n. 10)

What is meant by Paul's admonition that we examine ourselves before we take communion?

Fee offers further correctives for understating self-examination in light of this larger context: "The problem lies with imperative 'let a person examine himself/herself,' which along with verse 27 has been the cause of untold anxieties within the church. This is not a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the Table. Rather, it stands in contrast to the 'divine examination' to which unworthy participation will lead." (Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 561)

In light of the separate communion celebrations going on at the time, the call to "examine oneself" is really a call to examine the motives and reasons why these separate celebrations were being held. The Lord's Supper should not be entered into casually, it is after all *His* supper not ours and should reflect his priorities, his standards and his attitudes. There was a marked failure to celebrate communion in a truly Christian manner of grace and self-sacrifice, putting others ahead of our own needs, and embodying the command to "love one another" above all. This is a consistent theme in worship which Christ himself introduced (cf. Matt 5:23-24 regarding leaving our sacrifice at the altar if we need to make peace with a brother or sister). Paul is making it clear that what was happening wasn't an acceptable way of celebrating the loving sacrifice which Christ poured out on our behalf.

To the extent that we are harboring "sins" against Christ's body, our fellow believers, Paul warns and encourages us to handle these situations forthrightly and not allow communion to be the occasion for further division. To the extent that we feel that we are unworthy to take Christ's body, the bread and wine, because of our own personal failings before God Paul remains silent here.

## answering the tq: salad bars and ballons

Sometimes we treat doctrine like a salad bar. There are compartmentalized, separated doctrines, all laid out in a row and we come along with our "plate of beliefs" and load up on what we like, skip what we don't, and sprinkle in those things which we think are good for us: "A healthy dose of grace, a sprinkle of my obedience and then just a touch of predestination for some zing. Come to think



of it, I'm not sure I really care for any zing right now. We'll leave out the predestination thing."



However, doctrine, like scripture, has an organic unity to it, a built-in set of relationships which are interconnected. In this way doctrine is a lot more like a balloon with different pictures drawn on it. They all center around God and are interconnected. But we take one picture and distort it, say by pushing in on it, it will cause the other pictures to become distorted. All of our doctrines are related to one another. A failure to properly understand sin will cause us to improperly understand salvation. A failure to properly understand the nature of Christ as fully human-fully divine will cause us to misunderstand what happened on the cross.

Hence the importance of seeing communion linked to the doctrines that it is supposed to represent and nourish. Because communion touches on these most basic tenets of our relationship with God (our need for him, his self-sacrificing love for us, his grace and constant goodness to us) we need to be sure we bring these topics to bear when we answer the question: *Sometimes I feel unworthy to take communion because of my relationship with God. What should I do in light of 1 Corinthians 11:26-28?*

Think of it this way. How did you get into a relationship with God? Was it because you finally figured it out, cleaned up your act, and got it together and then God finally said, "OK, I can deal with you now?" Or did you get into this relationship because when you were in a far-off land, alienated from God, hurt, dirty, tired, poor and hungry he came looking for you just like a shepherd? Did he insist you "get it right" or did he bring the best robes and sandals and announce to all, "Here is my son. Here is my daughter. They have been enslaved in a foreign country, but I have ransomed them with my own blood. They are home and hear to stay."



If communion is to "sign" and "seal" these very realities (God's remedy for our sin on the cross, his forgiveness and grace, our part as adopted sons and daughters in his family), it too must reflect them. We didn't do anything to earn them; in fact we did everything to lose them. Yet God gave them to us freely.

So how should this impact our answer to the question of not wanting to take communion because of our relationship with God is in a difficult place?