



Foundational Essay

CELEBRATE COMMUNION

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the earliest days of the church, Christians have eaten together when they gather. This is what the followers of Jesus did: tell the story of the gospel, share a meal like the one Jesus shared with his disciples, and pray. Over the centuries, Christians varied the method and frequency of this meal, but its celebration has remained central to worship. Whether it is called the Lord's Supper, communion, or Eucharist, the sharing of bread and wine is an essential part of how Christians relate to God and to one another.

The biblical witness points to a range of meanings of the Lord's Supper. We understand the sacrament to be an expression of thanksgiving to God, a remembrance of all that Christ has done, an arena of the activity of the Holy Spirit, communion with God and with one another, and an anticipation of the coming reign of God. In this holy meal, we are fed by Christ's own body and nourished for the journey of the Christian life. We are blessed by the very presence of Christ, who invites us to his table. We are united with one another by the power of the Holy Spirit.


Communion is a gift. And it is also a call, for in the practice of the sacrament we are given a pattern for living, in which we receive the gifts of God, give thanks, break them open, and share them with one another and with the world.

No one narrative, no single term, is enough to express the depth of meaning of this ritual act that was given to us by Jesus Christ. We will focus, however, on four key facets of the practice of communion:


- Give thanks
- Share meals
- Be fed
- Feed others

GIVE THANKS

All four Gospel writers include an account of Jesus feeding the multitudes (Matthew 14:1–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–13). In each of the three Synoptic Gospels (and to some extent, in John's Gospel), we hear the same language that Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: Jesus



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takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples to distribute to the people.

In the communion liturgy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and many other Christian communities, a prayer of thanksgiving is said at the Lord's Table before the meal is shared. This prayer is *eucharistic*, from the Greek *eucharistia*, meaning thanksgiving, gratitude, or thankfulness. Just as Jesus gave thanks over the meal he celebrated with his disciples, we give thanks over every communion meal we celebrate with our siblings in Christ.

The classic form of eucharistic prayer, modeled on one believed to be from the fourth century, is trinitarian. We give thanks to God for the gift of creation, for the guidance of the prophets, and God's continuing care. We thank God for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and anticipate his promised return. With thanksgiving, we call on the Holy Spirit to bind us with Christ and with one another, to nourish us in the holy meal, and to send us out to be the body of Christ in the world. In the words of our prayers and in the very act of eating and drinking, we give thanks to the God who was, who is, and who is to come. This trinitarian prayer, then, gathers up the memories of the past and brings them into the present moment (*anamnesis*), invokes work of the Spirit in the present moment at the table, and gives thanks for all God will do in the future, bringing the hope in our redeemed and reconciled future into the present moment (*prolepsis*).

The prayers of thanks we say around our family tables at home are reflections of the prayers we say at the Lord's Table; we give thanks for what God has done for us, for the gift of food before us, and for God's continuing care for us and for the world. We remember, too, all the ways that Jesus fed people during his ministry. In the dining room of our home hangs a serigraph by the Mexican American artist John August Swanson, depicting Jesus feeding the multitudes with loaves and fishes. The sea of people stretches on and on into the distance, while people share an abundance of food that comes from the miracle of grace. As we share meals at our own table, it reminds us of all the meals Jesus hosted, and of all the people he fed. It reminds us of the meals of bread and wine we have shared with others at Christ's table. And it reminds us that every meal at our own table is an extension of the eucharistic meal. For just as Jesus fed people on the hillsides and by the shorelines, he feeds us at his table, and at our own tables, where he is both our host and our guest.

SHARE MEALS

It is no accident that the Gospel writers used these same four words to describe Jesus' actions—take, bless, break, give—for these were likely the words that their own worshipping communities used whenever they celebrated communion. They are the same words we use whenever we celebrate the sacrament, words that make their way into our hearts and minds:

On the night he was betrayed,
Jesus took bread, and giving thanks, he broke it,
and gave it to his disciples, saying,
“Take, eat: This is my body, given for you.”
Take, bless, break, give: the same four words.

The sharing of bread is a mark of the Christian community; the very practice of communion helps to define who we are. Yes, we are people of



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the Book, people of the Word, people who have heard the story of Jesus and said yes to him. And we are also people of the Bread, a community bound together by both a shared story and a shared meal.

The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus feeding people: on a hillside; by a lake; in the homes of Zacchaeus, Mary and Martha, and who knows how many others. He ate countless meals while traveling with his disciples. He shared bread and wine with them the night he was betrayed. Even after he was raised from the dead, he ate with them, meeting them on the road to Emmaus, appearing to them in the upper room, and preparing breakfast for them on the beach.

Sharing the Lord's Supper was an integral part of worship for the first generation of Christians. When Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he chastises them for coming together but failing to share the eucharistic meal:

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you proceeds to eat your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have households to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

—1 Corinthians 11:20–22

Then Paul goes on to write the words that have become part of our own communion liturgy:


For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

—1 Corinthians 11:23–26


From Paul's witness we can see that the Lord's Supper was established as a central practice of the church during his lifetime, in the first decades of the life of the church.

Luke also attests to the sharing of a common meal among the first Christians. As part of his account of Pentecost, he describes Peter's sermon, in which he tells his listeners of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Peter urges them to be baptized, promising that their sins will be forgiven and that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. About three thousand were baptized that day, and all those who were baptized "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Sharing a eucharistic meal is both a sign and enactment of the unity we share as the body of Christ. As Paul wrote, "we who are many are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17). As the Directory for Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) attests:



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When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites us with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world. (W3.0409)

The faces around the communion table may look different. The songs we sing around the table may sound different. Loaves of bread may be round or flat or dark or light, and the fruit of the vine may vary. When we eat and drink of the body and blood of Christ, however, we remember not only his bodily life, death, and resurrection; we are also reminded that we are baptized into his body, the one body of Christ.

BE FED

When we gather for the Lord's Supper, we enjoy communion with one another. We also enjoy communion with the triune God. After John tells the story of the feeding of the multitudes, he recounts how the crowds followed Jesus, even after he sailed to the other side of the sea to find rest. Jesus began to teach the people about the bread that comes from God. It was not Moses who gave their ancestors manna in the desert, he says, but God. "Sir," the people say, "give us this bread always." Then Jesus replies, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:34–35). Indeed, Jesus feeds us with his own body, his very self, whenever we partake of the Lord's Supper. In ways we cannot fully understand, Jesus nourishes us. We are given bread for the journey of discipleship and strengthened to face the challenges of living the Christian life. We taste the wine of gladness and are prompted to give thanks and praise even in the bleakest of times. And when we cannot even form the words for prayer, or can no longer believe the promises of God, when we feel we have lost our hope, the simple act of eating and drinking sustains us.

I once knew a woman whose husband was undergoing treatment for cancer. She got to the point where she could no longer pray or sing; she could not hear words of encouragement or profess her faith. But the one thing she could do—the one thing she did do—was come to the table. She could not hear the proclamation of the gospel, but she could taste it. She could not speak of hope, but she could inhale the aroma of grace. The Lord's Supper fed her when nothing else could.

Scripture is full of stories of God feeding us when we are in dire need. When the Israelites are seeking a new land after escaping lives of enslavement, and they are hungry and hopeless, God feeds them with manna and quail (Exodus 16). When Elijah flees Jezebel and despairs in the wilderness, he asks God to let him die, then lies down and goes to sleep. But an angel awakens him and tells him to eat; before him is a warm cake and water (1 Kings 19:1–8).

At one time or another, we also despair. We also may find ourselves without hope. And God comes to us. Christ sets a table for us in the presence of our enemies (Psalm 23). The Spirit prays for us in sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26), and we are fed. Coming to the Lord's Table is like the smell of your favorite food cooking in the kitchen when you are so hungry you want to cry. Coming to the Lord's Table is like a comforting embrace after you have been carrying around your sorrow all day. It is like



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the first warm day after a long and lonely winter. In this simple meal of bread and wine, we are fed. Through eating and drinking, we remember that we are not alone: we have been baptized into a community. Through the smell of bread, we remember that grace is unending. Through the taste of wine, we are assured that, though weeping may remain for a night, joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). As Sylvia Dunstan's hymn "All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly" invites us, echoing Psalm 34:8, "Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good" (*Glory to God*, #509).

FEED OTHERS

My family once worshiped at a church that baked bread in machines all around the sanctuary whenever we celebrated communion. Even before it was time to gather at Christ's table, we could smell the aroma of the bread of life. Often there was bread left over after worship and, on one blessed Sunday, I got to take a loaf of it home.

This was a perfect loaf of bread—sweet, lightly browned, crusty on the outside, soft on the inside—and still warm. Someone put it in a bag for me, and I carried it to my car like it was a baby. I was so hungry, and this bread was going to be so good.

I got to my car and considered buckling that precious loaf of bread into the front seat. Then I started to make my way home. After a couple of turns, I looked ahead to see, sitting on the sidewalk, two men, one younger, one older. They had nothing—no sleeping bags, no pieces of cardboard, no backpacks. I knew I was going to have to give up my sweet loaf of bread, for clearly, they needed it more than I did.


Reluctantly, I eased over to the curb and came to a stop. I motioned to the younger man, who leapt up and came over to the car. "Here," I said, handing him the still-warm loaf. "This is for you and that gentleman to share." He took the bread and said thank you and quickly made his way to the other man. Then, like a priest, he leaned down, broke the bread, and gave half away.

Take. Bless. Break. Give.


Right before my very eyes, these two men acted out the Lord's Supper all over again, on a gritty sidewalk in the middle of the city.

When Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me," he didn't break the bread and then feed himself. He fed others. To celebrate communion in remembrance of Jesus is not only to remember the night of his death, it is to make present the ministry of feeding. It is to remember the meals he shared with his disciples after he was raised and to share meals with others in the name of the risen Christ. To celebrate communion is to give thanks for the way Christ feeds us and nourishes us, even while we practice taking, blessing, breaking, and giving at his table and wherever we go. And in doing so, we are rehearsing for the coming reign of God, where everyone is welcomed and fed.

Whenever we feed others—whenever we seek to treat others as we would like to be treated, to love others as we love ourselves—we act out the eucharistic feast. As Jesus told his disciples, whenever we give food to those who are hungry or drink to those who are thirsty, whenever we welcome a stranger, it is as if we did the same to Christ himself (Matthew 25:34–45). And, indeed, it is just what Christ does for us. "God is revealed when we love one another. We are the body of Christ, *Somos el cuerpo de Cristo*," we sing ("*Somos el cuerpo de Cristo* / We Are the Body of Christ," *Glory to God*, #768).



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To celebrate communion is to proclaim hope. When we eat at Christ's table, we remember not only the past but also the future. "I'm gonna eat at the welcome table," we sing with our siblings in Christ. "Here all the world will find a welcome" ("I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table," *Glory to God*, #770). Until Christ comes again in his reign of justice and peace, we will share a simple meal of bread and wine, to give thanks, to be united with one another, to be fed, and to feed others. Until that day when all shall be made well, we will gather at Christ's table so that "God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy, compassion and peace" ("For Everyone Born," *Glory to God*, #769).



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