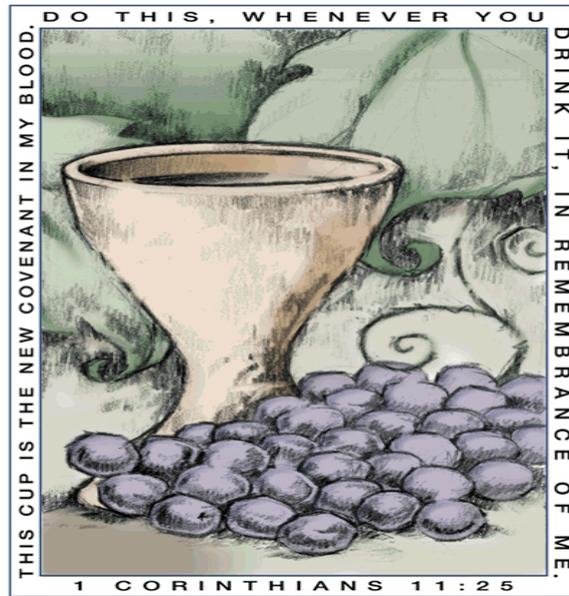


# Orcutt Christian Church

## Guidelines on Doing Communion Meditations



*The decisions we make about Communion have no small influence on others.*

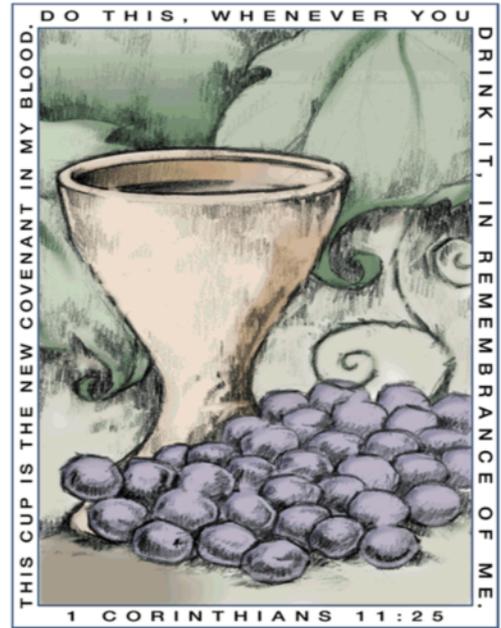
The Lord' Supper is a holy sacrament. You have volunteered to lead the congregation in a meditation on the Sacred and Holy communion. Communion should never becomes rote, just a repeated set of words or activities. Communion is relevant for our lives today because Jesus died for us. At Communion Jesus can soothe our painful memories, forgive us for our bitterness, or heal us of the wounds others have given us. Each time the church receives Communion, we should lead the congregation to understand what they are doing in terms that even an uninitiated person can readily understand.

These guidelines are to help you reflect on the Sacred and Holy sharing in the Body and Blood of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to the guidelines, beginning on page seven are several dozen meditations for your consideration and reflection. You will also find additional resources at <http://OrcuttChristian.Org>.

# Communion

## What IS IT

## ALL About?



Many people ask why we have communion every Lord's Day, and what it is all about. Here is a brief history that will tell you more about what Communion is and why it is so important to celebrate this special time in service every week. First let's begin with a brief history of communion.

**History:** In the Bible, Communion, or the Lord's Supper, first began when Jesus introduced this practice with his disciples at the last supper. In **Matthew 26:26-28** it says, "**Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'** Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, '**Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**'" Shortly after saying this to the disciples, Jesus died for our sins on the cross. We take communion every week as a remembrance of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

***• Communion is about Jesus and His incredible sacrifice for us. Communion takes us to the cross and leads us to focus on Jesus and remember His sacrifice for us. (Matthew 26:26-28)***

There are three groups of people in a Communion service: Christians who are communing, Christians who are not communing because they know they are holding on to certain sins, and non-Christians. All three groups need to be led spiritually about how to draw nearer to God during Communion. It's the Lord's Table and not ours. He's the One who made the bread and cup possible. Anyone who has a relationship with Jesus Christ can partake of Communion. If you don't have a relationship with Christ, partaking of Communion would be at best a meaningless exercise, and at worst it could be a kind of mockery or sacrilege. If

you don't yet have a relationship with the Lord, just be at ease, meditate, and wait to partake until you do.

“If you know not only that you are sinning but that you are planning to sin—if you know, for example, that you're doing something illegal or immoral and you're not going to change—then you should not participate. If you know not only that you are sinning but that you are planning to sin—if you know, for example, that you're doing something illegal or immoral and you're not going to change—then you should not participate. If you have sinned horribly, but you are repentant, then you need to come. Not to come because you feel unworthy is a denial of the gospel. What you're really saying is, Jesus Christ is not a sufficient offering to bring you into the presence of God. You feel you have to bring at least three good days with you, or a couple of weeks of decent behavior. That's a total denial of the gospel.”  
Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City.

“There are times when it's appropriate to take Communion contemplatively, with a deep sense of quiet reverence and awe. Other times it's appropriate for the family to be together around the table with a sense of release and joy, recognizing what Communion looks forward to and what it has done to paint our present differently. The one thing the Bible does say is we are never to do it frivolously.” Bob Shank, South Coast Community Church, Newport Beach, California.

- A weekly communion time allows us to thank Jesus for dying on the cross for us, and to remember that our righteousness before God is based on Jesus' sacrifice. It also allows us to continue the focus the early church had on **“the breaking of bread.” (Acts 2:42)**.
- Weekly communion reminds each of us, over and over until it really sinks in, that Jesus died on the cross for us. No one will ever attend one of our church services and leave without at some point seeing this reminder that Jesus had to die in order for us to live, and that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. **(Heb. 9:22)**
- Participating in communion every week trains us to take the focus off of ourselves and to place it squarely on Jesus, and then it trains us to trust in Jesus for our righteousness, and not in ourselves. In the hustle and bustle of contemporary life we need to slow down, for a few moments, and remember that the central reason that we are a Christian is that Jesus was willing to die in our place on the cross and that He rose again. **(Ephesians 2:8-9)**
- Here at Orcutt Christian Church, we take Communion every Sunday. You may know Communion as the Lord's Supper, or Mass, or Eucharist. You may come from a tradition where it was customary to be served one at a time or where everyone waits and eats at the same time. At Orcutt Christian Church when the tray comes to you, and if you are a Christ-follower, you are encouraged to take

part reflectively. As the loaf and cup are being distributed, spend time with the Lord in prayer. When the tray is passed to you take a piece of bread, and a cup of juice and thank God for what Jesus has done for you. Then pass the containers to the next communicant. If you choose not to participate for whatever reason, please feel free to simply pass the tray. Take the time to continue in quiet meditation. (Acts 20:7)

- Communion is a wonderful way to remember Jesus' sacrifice for you and your family and friends. (**Galatians 2:20**) You can say a simple prayer, like: "Thank you Jesus, for being crucified for me. Please help me live a crucified life for you this week. Amen."

- Parents are encouraged to discuss this with their children and explain what communion is about, and that when they come to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, that they too will be able to participate. (**Proverbs 22:6**)

Communion is a very important part of our Christian walk. It is a time of reflection and prayer and thanksgiving for what Jesus did for us, how much He loves us, and a very special moment of worship. May God touch your hearts as you remember Him through Communion each week.

## **Guidelines for the Communion Meditation**

- 1. It should be Christ centered**
- 2. It should be cross centered.**
- 3. It should be about Jesus Christ.**
- 4. It should lead us to Calvary.**

Start preparing about a week before your turn. Pray. Reflect. Let the words of your mouth, and the meditations of your heart, be acceptable to our crucified Christ.

Why do we do this? Because Christ said,  
**Luke 22:19 (NASB)**

**19 "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."**

If you are unable to provide the meditation, PLEASE arrange for someone to take your place. If you have questions, call Bro. Archie Miller at 478-8841.

### **How Long Should a Communion Meditation Be**

Since the Lord's Supper is the central element of our Lord's Day worship, we need to do our meditations in a way that captures and holds the thoughts of the Worshipers. We don't want it to be too short, and we don't want it too long.

Since our typical speech pattern is about 90 words a minute, think of honing your meditation into three minutes. 90 words per minute times three minutes gives us 270 words to help your fellow worshipers focus on the central theme.

### **How to give an effective Lord's Supper meditation**

Taking the Lord's Supper is a special component of our spiritual lives. Jesus instituted it as a reminder of the sacrifice He made for our sins and to give us hope as we walk the daily discipline of the life as a disciple. However, the communion time in our churches often loses part of its power when a communion meditation is not prepared properly. Let me share with you a few suggestions on how to give an effective Lord's Supper meditation.

#### ***Keep it pertinent***

A Lord's Supper meditation is about Jesus. Because of the familiarity with communion and the lack of specific passages in the Bible it is easy for a person to speak about a multitude of topics during the communion time other than Jesus. If you want your communion meditation to be effective, keep it on its central theme: the sacrifice and personhood of Jesus.

#### ***Keep it personal***

The number-one mistake that most people make when delivering a Lord's Supper meditation is to read some script out of a book. These books can be useful tools as a person begins to develop a model for communion

meditations. However, the most powerful and effective meditations communicate in a real way what Jesus means to that person. Communion is about a real person speaking about what a real Savior has done in their real life.

### ***Keep it in perspective***

Another pitfall in delivering communion meditations is to make them too long and disorganized. Communion meditations are not sermons, but simply a devotional thought to help us to “do this in remembrance of (Him).”

### ***Keep it powerful***

There is nothing as powerful as a person confronting his or her true self and revealing that true self to a Savior. This is what the Lord's Supper time was destined to be by God. Communion meditation presenters should never forget the sacredness of what takes place in those moments when the cup and bread are passed.

It is the presenter's job to bring people to a realization of what is happening in this part of worship. This can be done through tone, passion, and the words spoken. Each of these should be done in a powerful way to communicate the power of communion.

Though I have heard and given hundreds of Lord's Supper meditations there is one that is firmly fixed in my mind as the very effective. I don't recall where I heard this story about an elderly man who stood one Sunday to give his meditation. He slowly made his way to the pulpit, and then slowly spoke these words.

“When I was a younger man I thought when I would be aged that I would be done with sin. Now as an old man I realize that sin is more powerful to me today than ever before. That is why I need this cup and this bread. That is why I need Communion. That is why I need a Savior, and that is why I am thankful what my Savior has done.”

With those simple words that the man sat down and the congregation worshiped together in a time of communion.

## Sample Meditations

By Tom Ellsworth

One really can make a difference

It was a sweltering election afternoon in 1842 when Hoosier farmer Henry Shoemaker finally realized he hadn't voted yet. Shoemaker had personally promised state representative candidate Madison Marsh he would cast his vote for him, so he saddled his horse and hurried to Kendallville before the polls closed. When the votes were counted, Marsh and his opponent, Enos Beall, were tied. There was one contested ballot, and it was Shoemaker's. When his vote was finally admitted, the tie was broken, and Marsh was declared the winner . . . by one vote.

At that time, state legislators, not the populace, elected U.S. senators, so when the Indiana general assembly gathered for that responsibility, Edward Hannegan was elected by one vote. You guessed it; it was none other than Madison Marsh who changed his vote on the sixth ballot to give Hannegan the election.

Three years later a sharply divided U.S. Senate was debating the issue of war with Mexico. The vote was deadlocked until Sen. Hannegan of Indiana cast his vote in favor of declaring war.

And what did the U.S. get out of that war with our southern neighbor? For one thing, California, which was surrendered to the United States! Henry Shoemaker could never have imagined that day the chain of events he set in motion with one vote that would forever change American history.

The Scriptures are clear about the power of one. Paul, writing to the church at Rome, reminds us of that very truth: "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (Romans 5:15).

When we gather around the Lord's table, we remember his life-changing sacrifice. Only God understood the wonderful chain of events set in motion the day Jesus died. Jesus wasn't just one, he was the only One who could win the war for our souls and forever change spiritual history. His singular grace overflowed to us, the many.

One really did make all the difference!

Tom Ellsworth serves as senior minister with Sherwood Oaks Christian Church in Bloomington, Indiana.

By Steve Wyatt

The venerable apostle Paul was reminiscing about his ministry exploits in a letter to the believers at Galatia. He's nearing the close of his letter when

he suddenly states, rather matter-of-factly, “On my own body are scars that prove I belong to Christ Jesus” (Galatians 6:17).<sup>1</sup>

And that’s all he said. No additional embellishment, no “please feel sorry for me.” Just the facts—“I’ve got some scars.”

And yet, in the very same paragraph, Paul also said, “But I will never brag about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

You see, Paul had scars, but his only bragging rights were sourced in the cross.

Remember that scene in Jaws where the crusty old marine biologist and the crusty old captain start playing the “my scar’s bigger than your scar” game? One would show his scar and tell his story—then the other would show an even bigger scar and, as fishermen do, tell an even bigger story. They were bragging about their scars!

Do you have a scar you like to brag about?

I do. I’ve got seven scars on my left knee alone. It’s an old football injury from my college days. It’s not a great story, to be honest with you, but with every year that passes, it does seem to get better!

I’ve got another scar in the middle of my forehead! I took a rock there—which explains a lot about me.

You’ve got scars, too. Some are physical, others are emotional. You probably even have scars that nobody else can see, but they’re still there. And some of our scars happened even though we did the right thing! Just like Paul.

Paul said in another place, “I’ve been flogged more times than I care to remember. I’ve been beaten with rods. Stoned, shipwrecked” (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-25). I’m not one to brag, but it IS true: I’ve taken a lot of abuse for the sake of Christ.

But when we gather at the table of the Lord to examine scars, we don’t offer praise to an injured football player or even some crusty old missionary/apostle. Because this table isn’t about MY scars . . . it’s about HIS.

No matter what you may think of me—or even Paul, for that matter . . .

Don’t look at me.

Don’t be impressed by Paul.

Only look to Jesus.

And as you examine his storied scars, please remember: It is only by HIS scars—“by his cuts and bruises you [and I] are healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the Contemporary English Version of the Bible.

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Steve Wyatt is lead pastor at The Crossroads Church in Anthem, Arizona.

By Steve Wyatt

Some successful real estate developers gathered to discuss a possible joint venture. To their surprise, the group's leader began by describing his most embarrassing failure. He explained how his eagerness to make a killing caused him to overlook one important detail. He added, "I'm more careful now to get all the facts before moving out."

The person beside him admitted he hadn't always been a genius, either. He once purchased land for development that, unbeknownst to him, was sitting on solid bedrock.

But the youngest member was reluctant to share his big flub. Instead, he fumbled around till finally mumbling, "Well, everyone knows I've had many successes."

And that was all he intended to say.

The leader replied, "Come on, Charlie. Put your rock on the table. Because if you haven't failed, you can't be in this group."

I could say that same thing about the church. If this is your first time here, you might look around and think, This isn't MY crowd. Look at these people! They're perfect! Everybody has it together—except me!

WRONG! Christians may look otherwise, but here's the truth: The only qualification for membership in the church of Jesus is for you to admit that you're NOT qualified. That you've made mistakes. That you've got a pocket filled with rocks and you're not proud of any of them.

We've all got rocks. Some have a tote bag filled with rocks, others have a pickup filled with rocks, and still others have so many rocks they could open up their own quarry.

But that's OK, because rocks are why Jesus came. He didn't come for perfect people. He didn't build his church so nice people could sit around and talk about how we can be even more nice. He came "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

And that's what he did—when he died on the cross for our sins. When he was crucified, God made Jesus "who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). And when that happened, our Savior took all our rocks on his back. And then he used those rocks to build a forever pathway to Heaven.

Then he said, "I don't want you to forget what I went through to remove those rocks from you. So whenever you gather for worship, I want you to eat

a piece of bread to remember the pain my body went through. And I want you to drink a sip of juice to remember the blood it cost me to forgive you.

“I don’t want you to ever forget the one truth that unites every person who follows me: Every single one of us has rocks.”

Steve Wyatt is lead pastor at The Crossroads Church in Anthem, Arizona.

By Steve Wyatt

Bill was walking with his 10-year-old daughter and her small dog. Without warning, a neighbor’s pit bull rushed at his daughter’s dog. Bill quickly lifted his daughter and her pet to the roof of a nearby car, but the pit bull jumped onto the car’s hood and then onto its roof and savagely grabbed the smaller dog by its left hind leg.

Bill saw the pit bull release its powerful jaws in an attempt snap at the neck of the smaller dog, so he reached into the pit bull’s mouth and grabbed its tongue. The dog bit down on Bill’s hand, but Bill stubbornly refused to let go, saying later, “I wasn’t about to let that beast kill my daughter’s dog!”

Finally, after a protracted struggle, the pit bull’s owner rushed in and dragged his vicious dog back home. Bill’s hand was injured, but he became an instant hero in his daughter’s eyes and a savior to that unsuspecting pup.

In that same way, Jesus Christ reached down the throat of evil itself on our behalf. In fact, that’s why he came here in the first place. The Bible says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8).

But didn’t Jesus say he had come to seek and to save?

Of course he did.

And didn’t they call him prince of peace?

You know they did.

And wasn’t his a healing ministry marked by compassion for harassed and helpless people?

It certainly was.

But to say Jesus came to save assumes that something was holding us captive. To say he came to bring peace suggests that chaos ruled the day. And to say he came to heal implies that a sickness was ravaging mankind—a disease Jesus came to extract.

It’s true. Jesus came to bring liberation. But before freedom, there needed to be destruction. And that’s why Jesus reached down evil’s throat—not just temporarily subduing it, but forever destroying it. In Jesus’ brutal death and powerful resurrection, our Lord forever defeated the forces of evil.

Remember when the demons asked Jesus if he had come to destroy them (Mark 1:24)?

The answer was so obvious Jesus didn't even bother to reply. Of course he had! Instead, Jesus said, "Be quiet!" Then, "Come out of him!" (Mark 1:25).

Jesus died on the cross to redeem us and forgive our sin, but he also came to forever break the back of evil. And that's why we who are in Christ are no longer under evil's dominion. Because Jesus "gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4).

Steve Wyatt is lead pastor at The Crossroads Church in Anthem, Arizona.

By Steve Wyatt

It was winter in West Virginia. Snow had freshly fallen and I, a 9-year-old geek if there ever was one, was wearing my cotton-flannel Zorro PJs and a brand-new pair of monster feet slippers.

Something happened that was not to my liking (I can't remember what it was), so I announced I was leaving. Moving out. Running away.

No sooner had those words exited my mouth than Dad leaped out of his chair, grabbed a medium-sized suitcase, and proceeded to pack my bag.

In less than three minutes, I was standing all alone on the front porch in my cotton-flannel PJs and my monster feet slippers, with a hastily packed suitcase in hand.

So much for my dramatic exit. As the cold quickly overtook those cheesy slippers, I remember thinking, You didn't think this through so well, did you?

I walked three and one-half blocks before my rebel spirit was broken. So I turned toward home, and all I could think was, What's Dad going to say? Will he have already rented out my room? Or will he be glad that his five-minute rebel has finally come home?"

Sure enough, my dad was standing on the front porch, smiling. It's like he knew I'd come back. And then he ran out to meet me and wrapped those big, burly arms around me, and lifted me into the air! And my monster feet slippers? They helplessly dropped to the ground.

The Bible tells us that sometimes our heavenly Father will release us to our rebellion, too. Knowing that our rebel heart will never be content until it is broken—he lets us walk away. But even as we leave, he's waiting for our return. And in the moment he sees us, he runs to greet us and to welcome us home.

And then he invites us to share a meal at his table. A little bit of bread, a tiny sip of juice, but it's God's forever reminder to everyone who wanders—there is still a place for you.

So kick off those soggy slippers and unpack that bag filled with regret. And come—take your place. Because in the moment you take that first step toward him, the Father will come running to meet you there.

Steve Wyatt serves as lead pastor with The Crossroads Church in Anthem, Arizona.

By Daniel Schantz

“I . . . am like a sparrow alone on a housetop” (Psalm 102:7).

The city can be a lonely place, and on this Sunday morning you are utterly solo. Your husband is on the road, and the kids are at grandma’s house. You are a worship widow.

You take a seat near the front of the auditorium, looking around to see if there is a familiar face, but you recognize no one.

The lights in the auditorium dim, and the video screen flashes to life with lovely nature scenes—a yellow field of wheat against a blue sky, and green vineyards heavy with purple clusters of grapes. Then shots of a farmhouse where a grandmother is baking bread, then scenes of children picking grapes from an arbor and lugging the heavy buckets to the house, where they will be made into juice and jelly. You can almost smell the grapes. Finally, the video switches to scenes from the life of Christ—the feeding of the five thousand, the turning of water to wine, the last supper, ending with a shot of Judas reaching for bread.

There is a moment of silence, then the sound of children singing. You swivel your head to see beautiful, sweet children skipping down the aisle, waving white streamers as they go. They circle a large table at the front, which has been set with loaves of unleavened bread and little white cups of juice. The children stand behind the table and sing, “Come . . . now is the time to worship. . . .”

Row-by-row, members stand up and move forward to the table, where they break off pieces of the bread to eat, and lift the cups of juice to their lips. They meditate for a moment, then move to the side, forming a circle around the auditorium, all of them holding hands and singing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me . . . .”

On their way back to their seats, members stop to chat and embrace. Suddenly a familiar face appears, an old friend, just passing through town. She hugs you. “May I sit with you,” she begs, and you nod, happy to have some company for the rest of the service.

The rest of the service is a blur. Like naughty schoolgirls, the two of you whisper your reactions to the sermon, and sometimes stifle a laugh. Your loneliness vanishes like a bad dream, and during the closing prayer you find yourself overflowing with thanksgiving. “Lord, thank you for your amazing

grace that understands my loneliness, and thank you for bringing us all together in this place.”

Daniel D. Schantz is professor emeritus with Central Christian College of the Bible in Moberly, Missouri.

By Daniel Schantz

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you” (John 14:27, New King James Version).

You arrive late at the little country church that is surrounded by lime green sycamore trees. Late, because you had a tiff with your wife at breakfast.

The pianist is playing “The Old Rugged Cross” on a piano that is slightly out of tune, just like you. Just as you and your wife take a seat, several farmers stand up and make their way to the back of the auditorium. Their faces are red from sun labors, except for their foreheads that are white where their hats covered them. They wear short-sleeve shirts and have arms that are strong, solid, furry. Slowly they march down the center aisle, their leather boots making a pleasant, squeaking sound, and the wooden floor rising and falling to their cadence.

The men stop in front of a massive, wooden Communion table that probably was carved by Michelangelo himself from an olive tree that grew in the Garden of Gethsemane. The words, “This Do in Remembrance of Me” stand out in relief. The table is covered with a crocheted ivory cloth, made long ago by an elder’s wife. The bronze Communion trays were salvaged from the old building that was destroyed by fire 50 years ago.

The oldest farmer opens his heavy, worn Bible, adjusts his thick glasses, and reads the text in a deep, rich voice, then closes his Bible and offers a simple, honest prayer, the same one he has prayed for the past 42 years, and you are comforted by its familiarity.

Weathered, calloused hands distribute the trays, row-by-row, then old men and women shade their eyes with their hands to meditate. Young couples hold hands. You can almost see the prayers rising like incense from the pews—prayers of confession and regret, prayers for children and grandchildren, anxious prayers for rain and good crops.

The air has a fruity fragrance, and the clicking of little glass cups in the bronze trays is soothing. The two of you serve each other the Communion, and your eyes meet for just a moment, as you check each other for anger, but the anger is gone. Your wife places her hand on top of yours, and you can feel your eyes beginning to overflow. You squeeze her hand in response.

The farmers carry the trays back to the table, and the pianist begins to play a sprightly tune, in preparation for the offering.

You glance at your watch and note that the Communion service lasted only seven minutes, but it was long enough to bring you deep peace.

“Thank you, Lord,” you pray, “for holding us all together.”

Daniel D. Schantz is professor emeritus with Central Christian College of the Bible in Moberly, Missouri.

By Daniel Schantz

“The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David . . .” (1 Samuel 18:1).

The word communion means “to share” or “to have something in common.” Although it is more than just a feeling, the feeling is rather nice.

Communion is what you feel the first time you fall in love, and she loves you back. You can almost read her mind, and when she goes away, your heart breaks.

Communion is what you feel in the middle of the night when your wife is trembling from a nightmare and, gently, you wake her from it. She thanks you with a hug for saving her from the terrors of the nighttime.

Communion is what you feel when you are really, really down, and a friend drops by for a visit. For two hours you trade woes, and when you are done, you are both laughing like schoolkids, and the world looks bright.

Communion is what you feel when you are striding down the walking trail with God’s sun on your face, the wind in your hair, and the birds cheering you on.

Communion is what you feel at the funeral of a godly friend. You are relieved that his sufferings are over, and you feel that if he is in Heaven, then Heaven will be a pretty nice place to be.

Communion is what you feel when you have had a brutal war of words with your husband, and it was entirely your fault, but he puts his arms around you and says, “I’m sorry, it was all my fault.”

Communion is what you feel when a neighbor calls to say, “We lost our son in the war,” and you lost your own son in the war last year.

And communion is what you feel when you are sitting in church, feeling lower than a lizard because of careless and stupid choices you made when confronted by terrible temptations.

Suddenly the worship team begins to sing, “Lord Jesus I long to be perfectly whole. I want thee forever to live in my soul. Break down every idol, cast out every foe, now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.”

Reluctantly you reach for the unleavened bread, wondering if God can really forgive you yet again. You rinse the bread down with the blood of the vine, and your eyes are moist with relief. You can almost hear your Savior say, “It’s OK, I understand. I was tempted too, remember? And I overcame

temptation just so I could help you in times like this. I forgive you for everything, and I'm giving you a new, unspoiled week. Call on me whenever things get tough."

Daniel D. Schantz is professor emeritus with Central Christian College of the Bible in Moberly, Missouri.

By Daniel Schantz

"For this reason many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:30).

Church services are well underway in a smalltown church of a hundred souls, when a little girl of 10 meanders down the center aisle, looking for a seat. She looks confused, as if she has never been inside a church before and she doesn't know where to sit. Her bony shoulders are draped with a rag of a dress and her hair is matted and greasy. Her fingers and arms are gray with ground-in dirt, and she looks starved. At last she takes a seat on the front row.

The deacons finish their Communion prayers, then the older, heavier server steps over to the first pew and offers the bread tray to the little waif. The tray contains a single, whole cracker. Many churches used to present the bread this way, believing that everyone should break the bread for himself.

The girl looks at the cracker and her eyes widen. Suddenly she grabs the whole cracker and thrusts it into her mouth, and she gobbles it like a starved animal.

At first the deacon starts to stop her, but then he sizes up the situation and holds his peace. Without a word, he turns and steps through a side door and into the kitchen, and soon he comes back with another cracker in the tray, which he passes to the rest of the audience.

The child's actions are completely forgivable, in light of her hunger and her newness to worship services.

We understand the painful effects of hunger. Everything is harder when you are famished. Miss a couple meals and you become irritable, short-tempered. You snap at your husband or wife. You drive like you are drunk. Your thinking gets fuzzy, and you find it hard to do the simplest task, like reading a book, and all because your mind is preoccupied with one thought: food, glorious food!

The effects of spiritual hunger are just as real, but they are not always obvious or urgent. Like tooth decay, spiritual decay can go on for a long time before you notice any pain. Suddenly you find yourself unable to get along with a coworker or to stand up to a mild temptation, and then you realize you are spiritually famished.

Here, at the Lord's Supper, you can fill up on the rich offerings of grace. You can savor the thick steak of God's Word and the buttery bread of God's

love, and you can finish off with the sweet desserts of Christian fellowship. Everything is better after a good meal.

Daniel D. Schantz is professor emeritus with Central Christian College of the Bible in Moberly, Missouri.

By Daniel Schantz

“The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Sixteenth-century England was the era of the “divine right of kings,” when kings believed they were appointed by God and could do no wrong. During this time, the king alone was allowed to discipline his own son, the prince, but kings were often busy or out of town. Even when they were available, kings tended to be indulgent, and thus princes were often spoiled.

The solution was to hire a “whipping boy,” someone to take the beatings the prince really deserved. This boy would be about the same age as the prince and would live with him. In time the two boys would become very close, like brothers.

Whenever the prince misbehaved, the whipping boy would receive a beating. The prince was required to witness these thrashings, which were usually substantial. The whipping boy would be stripped to the waist and caned to the point of bleeding.

At first the prince was more than happy to have someone take his punishment, but as the two boys became close friends, it began to grieve the prince to see his friend suffering. Gradually the prince decided to grow up and behave himself, in order to spare his companion much anguish.

The system worked well, perhaps even better than if the prince himself had been caned, because no one likes to see someone he loves suffering for his own failures.

It was a great honor to be a whipping boy to the prince, and when the whipping boy grew up, he would be rewarded for his sacrifice with a title or a wife, a territory, or a statue of himself displayed on the palace grounds.

Jesus was our whipping boy, and because of his sufferings he has been honored. “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9).

Here at the Lord’s table, we reflect on the punishments we deserve and renew our vow to grow up and behave ourselves like the spiritual royalty that we are through Christ’s death on our behalf.

Daniel Schantz is professor emeritus with Central Christian College of the Bible, Moberly, Missouri..

By Mandy Smith

For many Christians, singing hymns in a group is still a meaningful experience. An a cappella version of “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” can induce goose bumps, especially when those harmonies chime in on the “A-men.”

While we don’t usually dissect the meaning of this practice, there are reasons why singing as a group is powerful. The simple act of singing old songs about God to God with each other reinforces three things that are central to our faith:

We are devoted to God through Christ,

We are devoted to him together, and

We are devoted to him together with the millions who have gone before us.

We could simply make these three statements every Sunday, but they’re a little dry compared with the experience of singing together, and so we communicate them metaphorically through music.

All of Scripture reinforces these themes, but one moment that sings it most clearly is Jesus’ summary of “all the Law and Prophets”:

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-40). Here is the same threefold refrain: We are devoted to God, we are devoted to him together and—by connecting it to the ancient Law and Prophets—Jesus is adding, “And this is nothing new.”

Communion takes up the same theme. Whether by singing hymns together, reading Jesus’ words from Matthew, or taking Communion together, we repeat these same truths, reminding ourselves of the anthem that hums along behind all we do. Communion has been celebrated throughout the centuries and across the nations since the first century. Its symbols remind us of Christ and our reliance on him. By taking it together we remember that we rely on him together. So in this simple act of together lifting a morsel of cracker and tiny sip of juice to our mouths, we join this ancient chorus:

We are devoted to God through Christ,

We are devoted to him together and

We are devoted to him together with the millions who have gone before us.

Mandy Smith, originally from Australia, serves as pastor at University Christian Church, Cincinnati, Ohio ([www.universitychristianchurch.net](http://www.universitychristianchurch.net)). She is the author of *Making a Mess and Meeting God: Unruly Ideas and Everyday Experiments for Worship* (Standard Publishing) and of *The Vulnerable*

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We know Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover feast, which Jews have celebrated for generations. Passover is an annual festival remembering God's salvation of his people from slavery in Egypt. Like all celebrations of annual holidays, it takes much preparation and is a turning point of the calendar. So, as good Jews, Jesus and his disciples prepared and celebrated this feast together. But Jesus knew this Passover would be different from all he'd celebrated before, because he knew his death was imminent.

The food is a central part of the Passover feast, but so are the words. When Moses established this tradition, it included teaching children the meaning of the meal (Exodus 12:26, 27). It was not only an opportunity to eat symbolic food together, but to tell the story of how God saved his people.

As at all Passover meals, this ancient story undoubtedly was retold at Jesus' last supper, and perhaps it was so customary to those in attendance that it almost went unheard. But if any in the room were lulled into daydreams by the familiar words, new words from Jesus snapped them out of their stupor.

His version of the tale is different. Jesus tells his friends not only to use this feast as a reminder of an old story, but also of a story that is about to happen. And he tells them to no longer save the story for an annual event but to tell it as often as they meet.

And so, in his usual, transformative way, Jesus takes an old habit and creates something fresh. He reshapes a climactic, annual event into something almost mundane. In doing so, he invites us to make sacred things common in their frequency without making them common in value.

It must have seemed strange to first-century Jewish ears to observe an annual, sacred holiday on a weekly, or even daily basis, like if we suddenly celebrated Christmas every Tuesday. But Jesus was good at making the spiritual things ordinary and the commonplace things spiritual.

He didn't want his sacrifice to become a distant memory or a vague concept to be dusted off once a year, then tucked away for next time. He wanted future generations to live it. And so, he asked us to tell this story as often as we meet—to have Easter every Sunday—because this is not an annual reminder of God's faithfulness in the distant past. This is a reminder of his ongoing faithfulness, his ongoing salvation every week, every day.

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The old Sunday school song goes, “Since Jesus came within and cleansed my soul from sin, I’m inright, outright, upright, downright happy all the time.” But very few Christians could honestly say they feel happy all the time. While we may retain an undisturbed, deep joy, it’s normal for any Christian to have moments of spiritual high and spiritual low, to feel close to God and far from God at various times, to have times of great faith and times of great doubt.

One helpful practice that allows us to survive the darker times is to overlook our doubts and feelings and soldier on, regardless. We tell ourselves all is not as it seems, that we are the winners, although we seem to be the losers. We remind ourselves that what we believe is true, even if we’re not sure we believe. We call this endurance, perseverance, and long-suffering.

A second practice, which we could add to the first, and which is often overlooked, is to turn to the traditions of our faith—a kind of practical perseverance. While self-talk is helpful to keep us faithful, could we also find some reassurance in the familiar routines of our Christian life?

When the people of Israel fled from captivity in Egypt, they did not yet have a temple or homeland. They were tied together by their common ancestry but had not yet established themselves as a nation. And so God didn’t wait long to create the weekly observance of the Sabbath, a practice that made them unique (Exodus 20:8-11; Nehemiah 9:13, 14). They may have been a ragtag bunch, wandering through the wilderness, but they were defined by their tradition. God understood his people need regular routines to remind them who they are, to draw them together and to himself.

And so Jesus created this regular feast to be celebrated “as often as we meet together.” Like those runaway slaves of ancient times, we may feel homeless, but this bread and cup are our constant in the midst of a wilderness. Although we wander in a dry land, we are bound to each other, to Christ, and to thousands of believers who have joined this celebration over the centuries. This tiny meal is able to sustain us through wanderings and droughts and to provide us hope of the comfort and bounty to come.

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By Mandy Smith

Mountaineer Joe Simpson tells his chilling story in the book and movie *Touching the Void*.

Thousands of feet up the side of the 20,814-foot Siula Grande mountain, Joe’s safety line was cut, leaving him to slide, with a broken leg, into a deep crevasse. After several desperate attempts to climb up and out of the crevasse, he realized his injury made that impossible. And so, against all survival instinct, he made the excruciating choice to lower himself deeper into the crevasse, in the hope that there would be other exits further down.

All the time he was wondering, Am I lowering myself to freedom or deeper into the belly of the earth? Does a ray of sunlight await me in the pit, showing a way out into day or is it only more darkness and slow death? With every inch he lowered himself, he was edging further from what seemed the obvious way to freedom. And there was no way back up.

How are we like that mountain climber? When we sense how far we are from what we should be, do we desperately try to make ourselves better? Or is there some strange way we can stop scrambling long enough to make the counterintuitive choice to empty ourselves?

Paul’s thorn in the flesh placed him in a similar situation. When God chose not to remove it, and there was nothing Paul could do to help himself, he had no choice but to live in God’s answer to his prayers: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). This kind of perfection is about fullness, completeness. For God’s power to be full, we need to be empty, to give him more room to fill.

When we find ourselves limited by our circumstances and crippled by our weakness, will we keep scrambling to fix it ourselves? Whether our need is for courage in suffering, perseverance in our work, or help to overcome our own sinfulness, will we keep working to be enough? Or will we look down and be willing to lower ourselves, to empty ourselves, and give God space to fill with his power?

In his death, Jesus modeled that kind of sacrifice, that kind of lowering. And we saw how God was able to reveal his power in it. How could God have shown his resurrection power if Jesus were not willing to lower himself to death? We celebrate and remember Jesus' lowering and God's resurrection power here in this Communion. And we live it every time we trust God to be enough.

Mandy Smith, originally from Australia, serves as pastor at University Christian Church, Cincinnati, Ohio ([www.universitychristianchurch.net](http://www.universitychristianchurch.net)). She is the author of *Making a Mess and Meeting God: Unruly Ideas and Everyday Experiments for Worship* (Standard Publishing) and of *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry* (IVP, slated for release in October). This Communion meditation is adapted from that book.

By Neal Windham

Garrison Keillor tells the story of how Clarence Bunson (at least, I think it was Clarence), a mainstay in Keillor's fictional town of Lake Wobegon, lay cruciform, frozen to the roof of his Minnesota home in the thick of winter.

Bunson had gone out to clean the snow off his roof and, tired from his work, had fallen asleep. Meanwhile, his wet clothing bonded to the frozen roof, rendering him immobile.

Neighbors asked whether anything was wrong, and with characteristic Norwegian restraint he responded again and again, "No, I'm fine." We know his character well, don't we? We're all just fine, thank you.

But the cross tells quite another story. Its cruciform victim had taken the cold, hard blows of iron on iron, piercing flesh, severing tendons, cutting into veins and nerves, into spirit and soul, into life itself. Impaled on a tree of his own making, Jesus struggled both for breath and voice. For breath, because the urge to live is a strong one, summoning every last physical reserve available. And for voice, because he had important things to say, among them, "Today you will be with me in paradise" and "Father, forgive them; they don't have a clue."

At the heart of Jesus' work lay a settled commitment to endure the horrors of the cross until all was accomplished. The one who had healed so many with words of mercy and miracles of love would himself now provide

ultimate healing for humanity, not by acts of brute force, but by a determined will born of courage and resolve to take what was given him, painful and unfair as it was.

Jesus could well have demonstrated to Pilate that he was no real threat to society, that he was not bent on destruction or murder or an imperial coup. In fact, church history tells us the grandchildren of Jude, Jesus' own brother, when summoned by Emperor Domitian because they were descended from David, did just this. They testified to the simplicity of their lives, to their hard work, and to the loving nature of Jesus' heavenly kingdom. On the basis of their defense, the emperor ended a season of persecution.<sup>1</sup>

But Jesus himself had to die. "On all counts," says Tom Wright, "he had to die." And this is why we remember him today, not because we have ambitious plans for our churches or because we have established untold programs, not because we have baptized hundreds or built buildings costing millions, not because we have done anything, but because he, arms stretched out and hands held tight, has accomplished everything God ever deemed necessary for our deliverance.

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<sup>1</sup>Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.19, 20.

Neal Windham is professor of spiritual formation with Lincoln (Illinois) Christian University.

By Neal Windham

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners . . . to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion (Isaiah 61:1-3).

Jesus loved Isaiah. Again and again, our Lord turned to the trusted old prophet to help orient his disciples in the compassionate ways of the kingdom. For example, he began the Sermon on the Mount with the words, "How blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And he continued, "How blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Both were echoes of Isaiah.

When John asked from prison whether Jesus was the one who was to come, the Lord replied, "The good news is preached to the poor." Another echo of Isaiah.

And when in the synagogue Jesus was asked to read from the scroll of the prophet, he announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Still another echo of Isaiah.

Surely Jesus saw himself standing at the end of Israel's lengthy spiritual drought. He had come to alleviate her painful captivity, not so much to nations as to notions. Notions of military conquest and world spectacle. Notions of somehow pleasing God if only she could get the Sabbath and the tithe and the temple right this time. Notions that God would judge the wicked Gentiles, but not Israel. She was, after all, exempt by virtue of her election, or so tradition had it. Notions not grounded in spiritual truth so much as human endeavor and a distorted perception of her privileged position with God.

"To comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:2) was central to Jesus' mission. And he had come to bring this comfort to none other than Israel, "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19). Some embraced these gifts; many others rejected both them and, ultimately, the one who brought them.

Surely, it is tragic when people targeted for love, people chosen to be comforted and delivered, say no. If this table means anything at all, it surely means we have been loved, remembered, and comforted by the one who saw himself in Isaiah's inspired vision. Today, the world is again filled with anxiety and despair. Turning inside, and thus upon itself, the only real way forward is to go back; to believe, unswervingly, that Jesus came to comfort not some, but all, who mourn.

Neal Windham is professor of spiritual formation with Lincoln (Illinois) Christian University.

By Neal Windham

Jesus' last supper was almost surely some sort of Passover meal. It was eaten at night while in Jerusalem, as custom would have it. Our Lord likely explained the meal's key features, much as Jewish fathers would have done for their own children, though in Jesus' case the symbolism was developed in new and astonishing ways. "This is my body," he said, "my blood." More than this, Jesus ended the meal with a hymn, as was also customary at Passover, and celebrated it with his new "family," the disciples, a Passover tradition dating to the time of the exodus. In view of so many and such clear parallels, surely Jesus' use of Passover to introduce the Lord's Supper is more than a coincidence.

In truth, God has always been in the business of delivering his people. Whether we speak of Israel's first exodus from Egypt or her new exodus through King Jesus, the message is always the same: God comes to his people when they need him most.

During this Passover, our Lord's disciples heard him retelling the old reassuring story of certain freedom from forces hostile to God and his

children. But they also heard something new, something more, for Jesus now claimed that he was entering into the story, taking on the role of deliverer, ushering in the climax of the long-awaited kingdom promised so long ago through the prophets.

And this is precisely why we have gathered to remember him today: the deliverer, Jesus, first remembered us in an upper room, furnished and ready. We've been freed from sin's impressive, but limited, grip, rescued from death's ugly reign of terror over us, delivered from Satan, as our Lord once taught us to pray, and ultimately banished from Hell's enduring flames. What more could we possibly ask of God? What more could we somehow expect of him?

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took the bread and cup, proclaiming them his own body and blood. In this way, he fulfilled the promise of the ages, heralded the end of evil's powerful grip over human hearts, and ushered in a bold new era of forgiveness. Israel's long, hard exile was over; her much anticipated return home had finally begun. Soon there would be a fledgling church, comprised not only of Israel's remnant, but of all God's children living among the nations.

So great a body in such little bread! So large a story in so small a cup! Just what deliverance are we proclaiming as we ingest this little meal? What freedom are we sharing with the world?

Neal Windham is professor of spiritual formation with Lincoln (Illinois) Christian University.

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Corinth is a beautiful city. Set on an isthmus dividing the Adriatic and Aegean seas, it was frequented by mariners avoiding the more treacherous waters of the Mediterranean in Paul's day. As a result, it was a popular destination, well populated, and with a thriving economy. Remains of its stunning temple to Apollo stand in ruins to this very day, silently testifying to a distinctively pagan past.

Little wonder that Paul had such a tough time with this church. It seems they were attempting to make the break with pagan society as slight as they possibly could. Factions, cliques, believers taking each other into pagan law courts, a man living with his stepmother, sexual promiscuity, difficulties with marriage and divorce, continuing affiliations with the pagan temple, gorging and drunkenness, the selfish exercise of spiritual gifts, and even serious doubts about the resurrection—all of these problems plagued a people called by God but lured by a full menu of lusty compromise.

Even when the Corinthians gathered to remember Christ's death, they struggled for sanctity. The poor went hungry, while the wealthy met in what

was known as the triclinium, a dining room in the host's home, with tables on three sides and a fourth for serving. Here, the elite ate all they wanted and drank themselves into a stupor. "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep," concluded the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 11:30). A very serious offense, this abuse of the Lord's table.

Making the break with pagan society has always been difficult for God's people. Israel forsook him for the Baals and Asherahs. The churches of Asia Minor struggled with magic and apathy. Monks were driven into the deserts by the varied sins of their corrupted cities. And Satan continues to seduce the people of God today with hypocrisy, distraction, and lies.

As we gather to break bread and drink this cup today, we gather for cleansing, through and through. We gather because many of us are still struggling to make the break with the alluring passions of pagan society, because many of us have repeatedly been seduced. And so it is we need some spiritual reference point, some story, that is so compelling and truthful and pure that all of our worst thoughts, words, and deeds are driven into oblivion by its stunning victory over evil.

This table tells that story. This table is that reference point. Please respect it. Gaze deeply into its life-giving mysteries. And by all means, examine yourselves, Paul says. This world is a very corrupt place. It is high time for a clean break with sin!

Neal Windham is professor of spiritual formation with Lincoln (Illinois) Christian University.

By Neal Windham

When asked what's missing when churches marginalize the Lord's Supper by breaking bread casually and infrequently, Eugene Peterson replied, "Mystery." He wasn't talking about cheap novels or detective shows. No, he spoke of a mystery that runs so much deeper, a plot hatched in eternity, hidden for long ages, thoroughly misunderstood, often misrepresented, but, in the end, designed for our good, for our "glory," as Paul put it. Peterson spoke of a narrative fit for God.

The word mystery comes from *muo*, a Greek verb that means to close or shut. Our word mute shares this root. Paul often spoke of mystery. But, unlike others who talked about religious mysteries, he seemed to know something they had missed.

For Paul, the cat was out of the bag. God had disclosed the powerful secret. What had remained obscure and unknown for so long was now the grand wisdom of God's people for the ages. Jesus, Messiah, had come and, with him, salvation. The apostle put it like this, "We declare God's wisdom, a

mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began” (1 Corinthians 2:7).

As we return to the table of our Lord, week after week, we enter ever-increasingly and deeply into this sacred mystery, a mystery incapable of anything resembling full comprehension, and yet, easily the single most life-giving event of the week. “If God is not present at this table, I don’t know where he is,” a friend so aptly put it.

Here, all the doubts and fears we shoulder are met with God’s stubborn determination to save us.

Here, our sins pale in the light of God’s outrageous, extravagant forgiveness.

Here, broken relationships in the body of Christ come clean as we pray for and with estranged brothers and sisters with whom we share this little meal.

And here, more than anywhere, God’s pardon and release meet us in a fragrant bouquet of mercy.

Again and again, they meet us here. Such a mystery, this table, this enduring memory of God’s relentless love.

Neal Windham serves as professor of spiritual formation with Lincoln (Illinois) Christian University.

By Robert F. Hull Jr.

“Seeing is believing,” we say, but in the logic of the Gospel of John, it works the other way around: Believing is seeing. It is true Peter and John did not believe Jesus had risen from the dead until they entered the tomb and saw the abandoned grave clothes (John 20:6-8). It is also true Mary Magdalene and 10 of the disciples were permitted to see the risen Lord. But was this a privilege all disciples should have?

Thomas seemed to think so. He wanted the same experience the other disciples had, or an even greater one: not only to see the wounds of Jesus, but to touch them. Otherwise, said he, “I will not (not I cannot, but I will not) believe.” Jesus gave his blessing to Thomas, but he promised an even greater blessing to “those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29, Revised Standard Version).

That promise echoes down the generations to embrace all of us who do not have the luxury of seeing and touching the wounds of Jesus, but who are willing to believe in him and commit ourselves to his way. As 1 Peter 1:8 says: “Without having seen him, you love him; though you do not see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy” (RSV).

The story of Thomas reminds us of the two men walking to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32), who were joined by the risen Lord. Even though they

walked and talked with Jesus for some time, they did not recognize him. Jesus later said they were “foolish, and slow of heart to believe” what the Scriptures had taught. But when they sat together at the table and Jesus broke and blessed the bread “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (24:31).

An old Communion hymn says, “Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face. Here would I touch and handle things unseen.” In our breaking of the bread we do not really see Jesus face-to-face, but we know his presence is among us. Perhaps we see him “faith-to-face,” but that’s enough.

Prayer: Almighty God, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for the great joy that comes to us through trusting in him. We ask now your blessing on this loaf and this cup that, as we take them in faith, our eyes may be opened to the living presence of Jesus in our midst. To him be all glory and praise. Amen.

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could-you-not-watch

By Robert F. Hull Jr.

In a powerful sermon, Fred Craddock points out that only the reader of Mark’s Gospel really sees Jesus in Gethsemane lying prostrate on the ground and hears him praying for the hour to pass from him (Mark 14:35, 36). Peter, James, and John are all asleep, and because we are awake and reading, we are tempted to be very hard on these three. How could they have fallen asleep, when all Jesus asked of them was to stay awake for a little time while he went away to pray? We can be unforgiving when we are granted the power to see more clearly than the characters in the story can see.

But sometimes the hardest thing is just to stay awake. Staying awake—keeping watch—isn’t really doing much of anything. It’s just not falling asleep. It’s just paying attention when we’re too tired even to care. It’s just being faithful to promises made so long ago we can barely remember what we said. It’s just hanging around to turn off the lights and lock the doors after everybody else has clocked out and gone home. But sometimes the hardest thing is just to stay awake.

And we are devastated with guilt when we fail our spouse, our child, our friend, our Lord—as the disciples must surely have been grief-stricken when they failed, not once, but three times, to keep awake. That was only the beginning of their failures. According to Mark, immediately after Jesus was arrested, “they all forsook him, and fled” (Mark 14: 50, Revised Standard Version). Did they later wonder if Jesus would forgive them? Do we wonder if he will forgive us?

This table is the place to come to when you have fallen asleep in your faith, forgotten your promises, failed yourself, your loved ones, your Lord. If we ask in repentance and faith, he forgives.

Prayer: Most merciful God, who removes our sins as far as the east is from the west, forgive us when we have failed to keep faith with you and with those who look to us to keep watch during their times of grief, pain, and forsakenness. May this loaf and cup nourish us with your living presence and strengthen us for tomorrow's trials. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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### remember-your-baptism

By Robert F. Hull Jr.

Sometimes we do not see the wealth of our own church practices until we worship with people whose practices differ from ours. From Easter to Pentecost you will hear in many churches, especially those in the Anglican, Lutheran, and Catholic traditions, the words "remember your baptism." If you were to worship in some of these churches, you would even see a large vessel of water brought in as a visual reminder of baptism.

It is especially during the season when we focus on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus that the baptistery and the table seem so close. We remember that Jesus once asked his disciples, James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38, Revised Standard Version). To "drink the cup" in this sense meant to undergo suffering, and certainly when we drink the cup we remember the Lord's death. We remember also the words of Paul: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4, RSV).

Ours is the fellowship of those who have died and been raised with Christ, those who have been cleansed and invited to sit at the table with our risen Lord. Fortunately, we do not need a large bowl of water brought into our churches; we already have a whole tank of water standing by. In the church where I worship, the baptistery and the Lord's table stand close together. In our hearts and minds, they should never be far apart.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, in your love you made us for yourself, and when we sinned you sent your Son to redeem us and reconcile us to yourself. We celebrate now the memorial of our redemption. Gratefully, we remember our baptisms, in which we died to an old way of life and were raised to a new life.

Thank you for these gifts of the bread and cup that recall to us Jesus' death and resurrection. Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit that they may be for us the holy food and drink of new and unending life in Christ, through whom we pray. Amen.

Robert F. Hull Jr. serves as professor emeritus of New Testament with Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Johnson City, Tennessee.

By Robert F. Hull Jr.

According to the Gospel of John, it was at his last meal with the disciples that Jesus offered them the gift of his peace and told them not to be afraid (John 14:27). But that was before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

A few days later they were huddled in a room with the door locked, very much afraid and not at peace. Suddenly the risen Jesus stood before them and said to them, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19). He showed them his hands and his side, and said again, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (v. 21).

That's a commission to the disciples. Call it "the peace commission." That is, if you want to be truly at peace with God as a follower of Jesus, you need to consider what Jesus did as an emissary from his Father: what he taught and how he taught it; how he brought the good news of God's love and healing to all kinds of people. It is the commission of the church to be for the world what Jesus was to Israel—a bringer of light, a pointer to the future God has for the world when people are reconciled to God and each other.

We don't feel adequate for such a commission; neither did the disciples. Maybe that's why Jesus then breathed upon them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 22) and told them it was within their power either to offer forgiveness of sins or to withhold this message.

*Sobering commission, isn't it? When Jesus offered his peace yet once more, this time to Thomas, he showed his wounded hands and side to Thomas. At this table, we remember those wounds, the cost of the peace we so freely offer each other every Lord's Day, "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).*

*Prayer:* O God, who, by the death of your Son on the cross, brought peace, hope, and love to a world of dead ends, empower us through the Holy Spirit to embody the love of Christ in our lives. To this end, bless to their intended purposes this loaf and cup we now receive. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Robert F. Hull Jr. serves as professor emeritus of New Testament with Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Johnson City, Tennessee.

By David Ray

When you were little and getting ready to take your seat at the family dinner table, did your mom ask, “Have you washed your hands?” If you had, you probably proudly held them up to show her. But on those rare occasions when she caught you “dirty-handed,” you’d sheepishly have to slip away to put soap and water to work.

As often as we were reminded, we should have remembered to wash our hands every time. But since we are creatures of forgetfulness, or just too preoccupied with other things, that getting ready for the table often got lost in the shuffle. Then, too, there were times we knew our hands were dirty, but we came to the table anyway!

Some in the early church developed a bad habit of coming to the table—the Communion table—without “clean hands.” The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, said, “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28, author emphasis).

It’s important to point out that Paul was not demanding perfection, but calling for preparation. Some of these early believers were coming to the table with indifference or even arrogance. What was supposed to be a reverent and holy gathering was being tainted by hands and hearts unready to handle anything holy.

What about your hands? How are you coming to the table? With a life that’s gone unexamined? Paul told the Corinthians that coming with “dirty hands” invited judgment—not just the stern word of a mother who might send you off to the sink, but of a God whose judgment is a far more serious reckoning.

The Communion table is all about our being forgiven by God, so Paul is not saying all the cleaning up is the product of our own labor. God is the one who makes it possible for us to have clean hands and hearts. But if we treat the sacrifice of Christ with indifference, if we fail to live lives that honor what the cleansing brings, we soil the hands that he died to make clean.

So an important question needs to be asked before you eat the bread and drink from the cup today: How clean are your hands? It can be a deadly thing to come to God with unexamined lives. If you’ve forgotten that all-important truth, you might want to take a prayerful moment, before we all sit down to eat . . . and “wash your hands.”

David Ray is dean of the graduate seminary at Cincinnati Christian University and professor of practical ministries at Cincinnati Christian University.

By David Ray

Rising to an elevation of more than 9,000 feet, Mount Hermon is a commanding presence at the northern edge of Israel. Its towering summits are usually snowcapped throughout the winter. In fact, today these mountains are home to Israel's only ski resort. The melting snows help feed the Sea of Galilee and Jordan River valley far below. A psalmist poetically describes it as "the dew of Hermon" (Psalm 133:3) that falls toward Mount Zion.

Mount Hermon stands in the distance.

Snow is fairly rare in most of Israel. Jerusalem and its environs receive an occasional dusting, but seldom is there any real accumulation. Only Mount Hermon displays a winterlong covering. So King David must have gained his image of a snow-covered earth by gazing up toward this rugged northern range: Mountains masked under the glistening white of winter. Jagged edges smoothed over by freshly fallen snow.

At a time in David's life when the stark presence of sin became so overwhelming that he longed to have the ugliness hidden, he wrote one of his most memorable psalms. It opens with a passionate plea. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:1-3).

Have you ever become so painfully aware of the sin in your own life that you longed for similar mercy? Sin is a spirit-crushing presence when it is openly brought onto view.

Later in the psalm, David writes with hope, "Cleanser me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7, author emphasis).

Around the Lord's table, we celebrate the way Christ's sacrifice erases our transgressions and cleanses us from our sin. As white as Mount Hermon's snow—that's how David longed, centuries before the cross, for God's grace to cover the ugly prominence of his sin-marred soul.

The ski slopes in Israel may, or may not, be open today; but God's grace is always in ample supply. When it comes to sin, we can all come to the Communion table, gratefully singing the lines of another song: "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!"

David Ray serves as dean of Cincinnati (Ohio) Bible Seminary and professor of practical ministries at Cincinnati Christian University.

by David Ray

When Jim Elliot was in high school, he studied architectural drawing, played on the football team, got elected president of his senior class, and was

such a talented actor that several of his teachers urged him to consider a professional career in theater.

I guess you could say he was on a fast track to “success” in life.

Growing up in a religious home, though, Elliot headed off to a Christian college and eventually sensed a calling to work with a remote tribe of Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador. They were a people who not only had never heard of Christ, but had never had friendly contact with clean hands and hearts. But if we treat the sacrifice of Christ with indifference, if we fail to live lives that honor what the cleansing brings, we soil the hands that he died to make clean.

So an important question needs to be asked before you eat the bread and drink from the cup today: How clean are your hands? It can be a deadly thing to come to God with unexamined lives. If you’ve forgotten that all-important truth, you might want to take a prayerful moment, before we all sit down to eat . . . and “wash your hands.”

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Growing up in a religious home, though, Elliot headed off to a Christian college and eventually sensed a calling to work with a remote tribe of Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador. They were a people who not only had never heard of Christ, but had never had friendly contact with the outside world. But Elliot, along with a group of fellow workers who shared a similar passion for spreading the gospel, slowly worked toward making contact.

It was a difficult and risky undertaking. And at just the point when the team thought they were about to make a dramatic breakthrough, they were ambushed by a fierce group of Auca tribesmen who viciously mutilated their bodies with spears and machetes.

An entry in Elliot’s personal journal, made about six years before his death, has become a memorable testimony to how he valued his mission more than his life. He wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

All of us know someone who has experienced significant losses. And some of us have lost much ourselves. It’s only natural that we grieve. But a life like Elliot’s lends perspective.

When all is said and done, does the sum of life consist of how much we possess, or how much we are willing to give? Is it all about how safe and secure we find ourselves, or about greater purpose and eternal security?

I'm not suggesting that our present troubles shouldn't create concern. But it does make you stop and think when you consider someone like Elliot—a promising young man who, though capable of “making it big” in life, gave it all up for something of greater value.

Elliot was in good company, though. Jesus pointed out that he didn't have a place where he could even lay his head. When his soldier executioners at the cross took inventory of what he left behind, the only thing they saw of any value was the simple, peasant cloak he had worn.

Paul once said that Christ “for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). The Lord's Supper offers a time for us to weigh eternal things. When you die, it's not about how much you have in this life that matters. It's about what you gained that you cannot lose forever.

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By David Ray

It's March, when college basketball takes center stage and provokes spirited debate about who will make it into tournament play. Team records wrangle for attention, brackets are set, and fierce competition begins.

We get very passionate about who wins and loses. Winning brings bragging rights for fans, revenue for schools, and even professional signing opportunities for the greatest players. For a coach, however, losing badly can mean forfeiting an extended contract or finding a moving van parked in the driveway.

Who wants to be last? The disciples of Jesus certainly didn't! Once, after a long day, Jesus asked them: “What were you arguing about on the road?” (Mark 9:33). The next verse says they “kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.” Then, “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all’” (Mark 9:35). “For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest” (Luke 9:48).

You would think the disciples eventually would have learned this lesson, since it was repeated and modeled so often by Christ. But as the Twelve gathered for a last supper in Jerusalem, a spirit of competition elbowed its way in once again—even after Jesus humbly washed their feet and told them he was about to die for them. With the taste of the bread and wine still fresh on their lips, Luke records, “A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest” (Luke 22:24).

Jesus, once more, had to set matters straight. He told them, “The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:26). Then he added, “I am among you as one who serves” (v. 27).

We argue about our place in life, too, don’t we? Sometimes we even bring that attitude to this table around which we are now gathered—just like the first disciples did. We look around and compare ourselves to each other. We even wonder which ones Jesus might love the most, while all along he wishes we would learn the all-important lesson that it’s not about clamoring to be first, but choosing to be last. It’s not about who wins, but who willingly loses.

It’s true that being last won’t get you a cushy coaching job or a place in “The Final Four,” but the kingdom of God has never been about competition, but about a cross. It’s not about a greatest win, but a greatest sacrifice.

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By C. Robert Wetzel

“We believe that Jesus died and rose again” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

In a very real sense, participating in the Lord’s Supper is preaching. Preaching is proclamation. The apostle Paul tells us, “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). And thus we are proclaiming to the world what we first confessed when we came to Christ, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

There are at least three ways the Lord’s Supper may be proclamation.

It may be a reaffirmation of our own faith. There are likely times when we come to the Lord’s table with doubts and fears. It may have been one of those weeks in which nothing seemed to go right or make sense. Then we come to the Lord’s table and we hear the words, “This is my body given for you.” And we hear the proclamation anew that first penetrated our hearts when we came to Christ: “God became flesh in Jesus Christ and gave himself for my salvation.” We hear the words, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” Once again we realize that through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ we are a part of the body of Christ. And then as we eat the bread and drink the cup we affirm anew, “Yes, I do believe that Jesus is the Christ. It is he who makes sense of the difficulties and confusions that confront me.”

There is also proclamation to the body of believers who gather together to participate in the Lord’s Supper. It happens when we hear the words, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all

partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17). I am reminded that as much as Communion may be an individual experience between God and me, it is also a community activity; it is an affirmation of my participation in the whole body of Christ. Not only do I believe that Jesus is “my personal Savior,” I believe I am a part of the whole body of Christ, the church, wherever and whenever it gathers.

Nonbelievers have often found the church’s participation in the Lord’s Supper curious if not downright strange. And yet every time the church gathers for this sacred occasion we proclaim to the unbelieving world the message of salvation: “God’s love was revealed to you through the sacrificial death of his Son, Jesus Christ.” We are saying, “We believe! Come join us in this faith that leads to life and life eternal.”

Hence when I say at the Lord’s table, “I believe,” I am saying it to myself, and as a congregation we are saying it to each other, while all the time we are proclaiming our faith to the world.

C. Robert Wetzel is chancellor at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Johnson City, Tennessee.

By C. Robert Wetzel

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16, King James Version).

There are so many rich meanings and experiences in the Lord’s Supper! When the apostle Paul spoke of the “cup of blessing” he used a term that had a special meaning for those who understood Jewish dinner tradition. At the end of a Jewish meal the most honored guest at the table took the cup, lifted it up, and said the benediction. Today when we talk of the benediction we probably think of the “closing prayer” to an occasion of worship. But, of course, the English word benediction is simply derived from the Latin word meaning “blessing.”

It is a powerful picture. When we come to the Lord’s table a prayer of blessing is prayed for the cup that we are about to drink. But at the same time we know we are going to be blessed in our drinking of the cup—that somehow we are communing with or participating in the blood of Christ.

I am reminded once again that his blood was shed for me, and that somehow I must be willing to participate in his ongoing sacrifice. It may be as simple as being reminded that some of the difficulties I am experiencing are not occasions of self-pity or resentment. Rather, they are a part of what it means to serve Christ. His blood not only saves me from my past sins, it sustains me in the service I give him. And therefore, rather than being drained by the service I give, I am blessed.

The notion of blessing also carries with it an act of thanksgiving. Hence some translations of 1 Corinthians 10:16 speak of “the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks.” It is from this understanding that some Christian traditions refer to the Lord’s Supper as the Eucharist, an English word that is derived from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” We give thanks for the cup because it is a constant reminder of what Christ has done for us.

We have often been reminded at Easter that for Christians every Lord’s Day is an occasion to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We could also say that every Lord’s Day is Thanksgiving. It is an occasion to give thanks and be thankful. It is an occasion to bless and be blessed. And this is why it is a benediction, a blessing that sends us back to our daily responsibilities with a renewed sense of being a part of the body of Christ.

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By C. Robert Wetzel

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12).

How strange it must have seemed to pagans when Christians described Jesus as the Lamb of God! This would be especially true when they heard Jesus described as the Word who was with God and who was God and who became flesh in Jesus Christ. God, a lamb? If the pagan were to use an animal metaphor to describe God, he would certainly choose some powerful animal whose image would strike terror in its worshipers.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the English skeptic, was only along the road to faith when he wrote *Jesus Rediscovered*. He tells about spending time at a Cistercian abbey. After a Communion service he went for a walk on a hill above the abbey. It was lambing season, and as he saw the young lambs frisking about he thought,

. . . words I had just heard—Agnus Dei—echoed in my mind. What a terrific moment in history that was, I reflected, when men first saw their God in the likeness of the weakest, mildest, and most defenseless of all living creatures!

I dare say that when he came to recognize Jesus was in fact God incarnate, he might have put it differently. After all, the historical event was God revealing himself, not humans discovering him. But the wonder is still there in his recognition. It was a terrific time in history when God revealed himself in the likeness of the weakest, mildest, and most defenseless of all living creatures: a lamb. Yes, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!

Although Jesus' countrymen would have understood the imagery of the sacrificial lamb, they did not seem to associate their understanding of the promised Messiah with a lamb. Rather he was to be the Lion of Judah, the military chieftain who would restore Israel to the independence and glory of the reigns of David and Solomon.

As it turned out Jesus was paradoxically both the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah. In his death he would be the sacrificial Lamb that takes away our sin, and in his resurrection he would be the Lion King who conquers death and who rules as head of the church until all things come under submission to him.

In the Lord's Supper we celebrate both the forgiveness we have received through the sacrificial death of Christ and our new citizenship as members of his body, the church, the redeemed of God who will reign with him for ever and ever. Amen!

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