

Communion

By Jim and Carolyn Murphy

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I was raised in a fundamental, Bible believing denomination. We observed communion often in our worship services. As I look back now, I realize that we practiced a ritual at best.

Early in the Charismatic Renewal beginning in the 1960's (while I still belonged to that denomination), I reluctantly agreed to attend worship services at a Charisma-tic Lutheran Church. During worship, the pastor served communion. I grasped my seat firmly and tried to hold on tenaciously to my narrow doctrine of "closed communion" (i.e., local church members only being allowed to take communion.) The Holy Spirit gently began to urge me to join the others and share in communion. Finally and fear-fully I went forward to receive communion.

Before that day I had partaken in communion hundreds of times, but for the first time in my life, I *experienced* communion! Never had the presence of the Lord been so manifest in communion. Never had the love of and for the Lord been so real to me. That experience happened nearly twenty-five years ago and I still vividly remember it. As I left the services that day, I wrote a note to myself which said, "Do a study on the Lutheran communion doctrine!" Of course I was still missing the point. The Holy Spirit didn't want me to study the "Lutheran communion doctrine." He wanted me to experience more of Jesus and more of the Holy Spirit's move in communion.

The Apostle Paul said these very powerful words:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (I Cor 11:23-26 NIV).

This passage of Paul's is probably one of the most familiar passages to us in all Scripture as well it should be. However, if we only look to the New Testament for our understanding of the communion service, we miss much of its meaning. When Christ instituted communion for His church, He built on the Jews' understanding of the holiness and power of the Passover celebration. Indeed, at the last supper, Jesus specifically referred to the Passover when He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." (Luke 22:15 NIV). I believe the Passover God established in Exodus, Chapter Twelve is a foreshadowing of Jesus' sacrificial death on Calvary. Each Passover instruction seems to speak of an aspect of the precious Lamb of God in His suffering and redemptive death.

Let's examine the Passover in detail and see what the Lord reveals to us.

The Passover Established

The Passover was established at the very end of the Egyptian captivity of Israel. Moses had pleaded repeatedly with

Pharaoh to set God's people free. Pharaoh stubbornly refused. Thus, God sent the last of the plagues to Egypt, the visitation of the death angel to all living first-born. But before He sent the plague, He instructed the Jews:

". . . This month is to be for you the first month, **the first month of your year**. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a **lamb for his family**, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to **take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door frames** of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, **along with bitter herbs**, and **bread made without yeast**. Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire--head, legs and inner parts. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD'S Passover.

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn--both men and animals--and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD--a lasting ordinance...." (Exodus 12:1-14 NIV).

There are several significant principles which God has set forth in this passage.

The First Month of Their New Year

First the Lord gave some very strange instructions...He changed the Jewish calendar so that the Passover began a new year. This meant the abandonment of the civil calendar used by everyone else. Why did God do this?

I believe He did this to signify, at least in part, that when we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior -- the true Passover Lamb -- *we have a new beginning in life* just as the Israelites did! Everything is new. The past is forgotten. Sin no longer has a hold over us. The slate is clean! For us it is, indeed, a whole new life, and the world's ways no longer apply to us! Paul wrote, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of

reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them...." (II Cor 5:17-19 NIV).

A Lamb for a Family

By providing a lamb for each family I believe the Lord wants us to understand that the true Lamb of God, Jesus, was sacrificed for our entire family. Most of us, including myself, can easily name members of our family who are not yet saved. Each time I take communion I re-mind myself and the Lord that He has promised "a Lamb for each family."

This principle, "a lamb for each family," is demonstrated for us in the Scripture in Paul's encounter with the Philippian jailer when Paul was in prison. When the jailer thought the prisoners had escaped because of the mighty earthquake, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.

But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved -- *you and your household*." (Acts 16:28-31 NIV).

And that's exactly what happened.

Understanding this principle, we must ask, "What is our part in this promise of family salvation?" Can we passively sit back and wait for God sovereignly to save all our family, or to send an earthquake to frighten them into salvation? Absolutely not! We are to lead a life that points to Christ...and we are to pray continually for their salvation. It's a joint effort; **as we do our part, the Lord does His part.**

The Blood of the Lamb

The death angel visited every home in all of Egypt that wasn't protected by the blood of the Passover lamb. Jesus, our Passover Lamb said, "...whoever lives and believes in me will never die..." (John 11:26 NIV). By this Jesus is saying that whomever He cleanses by His blood will never know *spiritual death*, i. e., eternal separation from God.

If sprinkling a lamb's blood on the door posts of a house was powerful enough to cause the death angel to pass harmlessly over that house, how much more safe is the one on whom the blood of Jesus, the true Passover Lamb, is sprinkled? The writer of Hebrews certifies our safety!

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance -- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. (Heb 9:13-15 NIV).

The Significance of the Bitter Herbs

The church at Corinth didn't understand the meaning of the bitter herbs in the Passover Feast. The Apostle Paul admonished them for this. He wrote, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk." (I Cor 11:20-21 NIV). From this statement it appears that the Corinthian Church had made a worldly and self-indulging festival of the Lord's Supper.

The bitter herbs of the Passover meal are a reminder of Christ's death and our life at the foot of the cross. They remind us that Christ has not promised us a life free of trouble. Further, these bitter herbs remind us of the supreme price Christ and our loving Father jointly paid for our salvation. Reflecting on these "bitter herbs" produces a sober and subdued spirit - a spirit which is humble and contrite, and thus pleasing to our Lord.

Bread Made Without Yeast

Throughout the Scripture yeast (leaven) symbolizes sin. Why does God compare sin to yeast? I believe it is because they have similar qualities. In the beginning, when yeast is mixed into bread dough, you can't tell it is there. But, as time passes, the presence of the yeast becomes plain as the dough rises. As with the yeast in the dough, in the beginning we hardly notice the results of our sins. They appear to be very insignificant. But the ugly fruit of sin becomes plainly visible given sufficient time.

During the Passover meal, the Israelites were instructed to eat bread without yeast. Why is this significant? Because in so doing God is saying, "When you partake of the Passover Lamb, you are called to separate yourselves from sin!"

Thus, the Passover instructions are saying that *those who are under the covering of the blood are called to live a life apart from sin*. We don't hear much in our churches today about the meaning of "unleavened bread," - sinless living. Communion provides us with a reminder of our call to turn from sin.

Let me add one more thought regarding unleavened bread lest we become overly confident by living a clean, moral life. Please note that the death angel did not pass over them because they were "good" people; nor did the angel pass over each household because it contained un-leavened bread. He passed over them because of the *blood!* Our salvation is in no way dependent on our righteousness or freedom from sin. It rests solely in the fact that we are washed in the blood of the true Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ our Lord!

Jesus as the Passover Lamb, the Bread of Life

Jesus Himself very carefully and deliberately tied His sacrifice to the Passover. Coming to Jerusalem that last time He gave detailed instructions to His disciples about a large upper room which they were to prepare for the Passover.

They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the

cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you...." (Luke 22:13-20 NIV).

Jesus' instructions to His disciples were clear and revolutionary. He wanted them to understand that He was indeed the Passover Lamb, the "bread come down from heaven." As they were breaking the bread with Him, perhaps they remembered His earlier words when Jesus said:

..."I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:32-35 NIV).

How Then Should We Approach the Lord's Table?

Given Jesus' awesome declarations of these truths, how then should we approach communion? In my mind there are three principal points we need to remember as we come to the Lord's table:

First, Communion is a continual reminder of the costly price paid for our salvation. Remember Paul's words, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (I Cor 11:26 NIV). We must be ever mindful that we stand justified and spotless before God the Father as if we had never sinned. This standing is based solely on the sacrifice paid by Jesus' death on the cross.

Second, We must be fully aware of the severe consequences of partaking communion in an "unworthy manner." For this reason we must pause and ask the Holy Spirit to shine His light on any and all sin before we actually take communion. I think we should always set aside a period of time, however brief, in the communion process to allow for confession and repentance of sin.

Third, We need to come to the Lord's table with a contrite, humble spirit. Here we Protestants can learn from our Catholic brethren. At times we seem to approach the Lord's table as if it were cafeteria style! Devout Catholics know that they are to come to His table in fear and trembling which is far more biblical. The Lord said through Isaiah,

"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word...." (Isaiah 66:2 NIV).

Who May Partake of Communion?

Often the question arises, "Who may partake of communion?" Exodus, Chapter Twelve indicates that all who were under the blood were eligible to partake of the sacrificial lamb. So it is today. All who have been cleansed by the blood of the

Lamb may partake in communion. This means anyone who is both born again and who is present when communion is served qualifies to receive communion.

Many have the human tendency to decline communion because of a sense of unworthiness. This is especially true when we pause and realize our own sinfulness and worldly nature. This is understandable because in one sense we are totally unworthy. But Moses didn't set minimum standards which the Israelites were to meet in order to partake of the Passover. There was no hint of a need for personal worthiness.

Remember, there is also someone else who wants to keep us from communion. His name is Satan. He knows full well that there is an impartation of spiritual strength to the one who receives communion. He wants to keep us in a weakened condition in order to gain and/or maintain mastery over us.

In my travels I am often in churches located in areas of the world dominated by the Muslims, Hindus, and so on. In such cultural surroundings, converts to Christianity will often receive Jesus as their Savior, but be unwilling to receive water baptism due to adverse social pressures from friends and family. I have found church leaders who refuse to allow such converts to partake of communion until they receive water baptism.

While I understand these pastors wanting to provide incentive towards water baptism, it seems to me there are no Scriptural grounds for this position. Such new converts need spiritual strength to enter this full commitment as declared by water baptism. I believe that the spiritual strength supplied through communion may be just the strength needed to make the commitment of water baptism. After all, the Israelites received strength for their baptism," the crossing of the Red Sea, by partaking of the body of the Passover lamb.

Regarding the invitation to take communion, the best example I have ever seen was the invitation to communion extended by a Methodist chaplain when I was in the U. S. Marines. He carefully set the bread and the wine on the communion table. Then he stepped to one side, and, turning to the congregation, he said these liberating words:

"This is the Lord's table. If you have an invitation from the Lord Jesus you are free to receive His communion. I am but a servant of this table. Servants do not dictate whom the Lord invites. Servants wait on the table and serve. Therefore, those of you whom the Lord has invited, come."

Yes, we all need the spiritual strength gained through communion. I believe the Lord intended it so.

What About Christians Living in Sin?

Here I want to distinguish between a Christian who sins occasionally and one who is leading a lifestyle of sin. All of us sin from time to time, no matter how hard we try to live a sin free life. But there are Christians who actively, continually live in sin - without repentance, without sorrow, without regret. This is not the time or place to discuss the consequences of such a lifestyle of sin, but it is the place to discuss the consequences of taking communion in such a state.

While I believe that the Christian who occasionally sins is perfectly free to partake in communion, (or else none of us could qualify) the Scripture makes clear there are grave conse-

quences for the unrepentant, sinning Christian who takes communion. Paul writes,

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself. *That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.* (I Cor 11:27-30 NIV emphasis added).

God's judgment on those who partake unworthily is sickness, disease and even death! This is a very serious matter. For this reason many churches exclude everyone from communion except those known, or perceived to be, free from sin. It is this awareness that is the basis of the doctrine known as "closed communion."

In my view Scripture does not support this kind of closed communion. The Bible says, "A man ought to *examine himself...*" (verse 28, emphasis added). The Scripture didn't say that the church leaders should examine him. It is therefore wise to remind everyone of Paul's admonition against partaking while in sin, but at the same time, opening communion to all who are born again. Furthermore, excluding born-again people from communion divides the body of Christ. Christ does not want His church to be divided. He prayed that we might be *one*. (See John 17:23).

So if a believer finds himself in the position of living in a state of sin and is present at the Lord's communion table, he has

three choices: 1) he may repent of his sin and confess it privately to the Lord, and take communion -- the best choice, 2) he may partake "in an unworthy manner and be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (v.27 NIV), or, 3) he may refrain from partaking of communion -- a very wise choice given the circumstances of his state of wilful and ongoing sin.

Conclusion

I believe communion is one of the most beautiful and sacred acts that we as the Church of Jesus Christ are privileged to share. Christ instituted communion for us as one of His very last acts on earth. It should be a time of extreme humility, reverence, and awe in the heart and spirit of every believer present.

It is an act we can share with fellow followers of Jesus around the world. It is an act which has joined believers together for the last two thousand years and shall continue to do so until the Lord returns.

"Lord, help us to more fully understand your love and supreme sacrifice each and every time we gather at your table. Help us to be aware of your presence as we turn our hearts to remembrance of your sacrificial death in order that we may have eternal life. As we are joined with you in communion, pour into us your strength - strength to rise above sin and to do your will. And grant us, Lord, the will and means to be pleasing in your sight."

HUNDREDFOLD MINISTRIES, INTERNATIONAL

P. O. Box 625
Blue Jay, CA 92317

Telephone 909/336-9701

E-mail: jim.murphy@hundredfold.org Web site: www.hundredfold.org

Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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