

Toxic Faith (Part II - Messed Up Spirituality)

***“I Have To Be Good to Take
Communion”***

February 20, 2011

Would you pray with me?

God that drama is kind of funny because it paints some extremes about the way we look at communion. But the truth is that those extremes represent some very real thoughts and uncertainties and even fear. So, today, would you help us comprehend the truth as we try to understand what your scripture really teaches?

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

So ... can you remember the very first time

you participated in communion?

For me, I was a teenager at Grace Baptist Church in Bowie, MD and it was during a Sunday worship service. And I thought it was really cool. I'd never seen anything like it. Pastor Dean and the deacons of the church stood up front around a rectangular table that had been covered with a white sheet. He said a prayer, then they removed the cloth, revealing silver trays filled with little glass cups of grape juice and silver platters that had little wafers of bread on them.

Once the sheet was removed, two of the deacons folded it up kind of like they do with the flag at military funerals. No one said a word, it was very somber.

Then Pastor Dean took one of the juice trays and served each of the deacons individually. He repeated the same routine with the

bread. When that was finished, the chairman of deacons did the same for him – first the cups and then the bread.

Then, it was our turn. Each deacon took a tray of juice and, row by row, they passed it until everyone was served. Then the Pastor said a prayer and we all drank from our cups. Then they distributed the wafers and we all ate. The whole thing was very dramatic, I'd never seen anything like it.

How about you? Have any of you experienced a communion like that?

Maybe your experience was different because in a lot of churches people come forward and dip a wafer in the juice (kind of like we do here), or maybe some churches you've been in have actually had wine. Some churches pass a common cup and a whole loaf and people take a chunk out of

the bread and they'll all drink from the same cup.

There are lots of different ways that churches celebrate communion – all of them are legit because the Bible doesn't prescribe one "right way" to do it – there are lots of different ways that churches celebrate communion but *the one thing that is common to almost all of them ...* is an invitation for people to "examine themselves" before they participate. People are implicitly if not explicitly challenged to "look at your heart, look at your life and ask yourself: Am I really committed to Jesus? Am I really living the kind of life a Christian should live?" And if you can't answer yes to both of those questions, then the implication is, you need to get right with God or don't come to the table.

Have you ever experienced communion in

like way? I have. It makes you a little bit hesitant to participate, doesn't it?

It makes you think "I have to be good to take communion" ...

... or, at least, "if I'm not good – if I'm failing to live up to the standards of God, I'd better promise to try to clean up my act or I'd better not eat and drink."

"I have to be good to take communion" – that's the toxic belief we're going to look at today.

But before we get into why we believe it and why it's toxic I think it's worth it to remember what communion *is* and why we do it in the first place. It's very simple, really.

The celebration of communion is something Jesus asked his followers to do to remember his death until He returns.

That's it; that's the whole deal. And we read about that in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. And then the Apostle Paul also recounts the request in a letter to the church at Corinth. To that particular group of Christians, he writes:

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."

Then Paul adds ...

Whenever you eat this bread

*and drink this cup, you
proclaim the Lord's death
until he comes. 1
Corinthians 11:23-26 (NIV)*

And that's what communion is all about.

Why We Believe It

So, where do we get the idea that you have to be "good" or worthy – at some level – in order to participate? Why do we believe such a thing?

I think there are three reasons, and I as I go through them, see if any of these play into *your* thinking on the subject.

1. First of all, the "remembrance" of Jesus' death naturally raises consciousness of the sin in our life, which can lead us to feel unworthy (especially if we do not understand the Gospel).

If the purpose of communion is to remember that Jesus died for our shortcomings and failures, it only makes sense to *think* about those shortcomings and failures before you take communion; to tie what Jesus did on the cross with what's going on in your life. Otherwise, communion has very little meaning personally. It's just an empty religious ritual.

Of course, the problem is that once you realize – again – that you really are a sinner before a righteous and holy God, it's natural to question your worthiness to come to the table. “Who am I – as messed up as I am – to partake of something that is so holy?”

I can't count the number of people over the years who've said that kind of thing to me.

- “I just don't feel very close to God right now” ...

- “I’m struggling with this particular issue or this particular sin in my life” ...
- “I’m having a hard time believing that God is really there for me ...
- “I’m just not doing very well God-wise right now ...

... so I don’t feel like I should take communion.”

The remembrance of communion, the remembrance that Jesus died for our sins, naturally raises the consciousness of sin in our life, which can lead us to feel unworthy, especially if we don’t understand the Gospel. That’s reason number one.

I think a second factor in why we believe that we have to be “good” in order to take communion is ...

2. The Roman Catholic Church’s denial of

communion to certain politicians.

Now, just to be clear: I'm not into bashing Catholics or the Catholic Church and so I debated even putting this on the list.

But, in recent years, quite a few politicians have been asked by high-ranking officials in the Catholic Church to refrain from taking communion because of their pro-choice stance on abortion: for example, Patrick Kennedy (son of the late Teddy Kennedy) and Kathleen Sebelius (former governor of Kansas). And who can forget the uproar when the archbishop of St. Louis said he would deny communion to John Kerry while Kerry was campaigning in Missouri during the 2004 election?ⁱ Recently, I read the story of a public official who was denied communion in 2008 for endorsing Barack Obama for president.ⁱⁱ

So, when those kinds of things receive national news coverage, even people who never go to church or read the Bible get the impression that communion is somehow reserved for people who are living up to some particular level of "goodness" as defined, in this case, by the Roman Catholic Church.

But there's one more reason a lot of us believe as we do concerning communion and this one is probably the most significant:

3. An unfortunate phrasing in the translation of a key passage in the King James Version of the Bible.

You may not know this, but up until the last 50 years or so, the KJV was pretty much the *only* version available in English-speaking churches all over the world. So, the result is, you have multitudes of Christians who have been influenced by decades of preaching

and teaching based on this particular version. In fact, when I first started memorizing scripture as a teenager, the King James Version was all I had. So, even today, whenever verses come to my mind a lot of times they're in the King James Version.

Now, just to be clear, I'm not saying that the KJV is wrong, or a bad translation. It's just that the way things are phrased can sometimes communicate a different meaning from what the author (in this case the Apostle Paul) meant to say. I should also add that the fact that many Christians, including pastors and teachers, tend to read scripture in isolation – without proper regard to context – compounds the problem, as we'll see in just a few minutes.

But, first here's the passage in question. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, recounting for them Jesus' request that they

remember his death through this celebration of communion. But his purpose in doing so isn't to just pass along theological data to them. His purpose is to give them a warning.

And this is how his warning reads, according to the KJV:

Whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 11:27 (KJV)

... which means "guilty in the same way as the people who put Jesus to death are guilty."

That's pretty heavy.

Therefore, he continues ...

Let a man examine himself,

and then let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup.

1 Corinthians 11:28 (KJV)

For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 1 Corinthians 11:29 (KJV)

For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep [i.e. they're dead]. 1 Corinthians 11:30 (KJV)

Now, when you hear all of this, what's the first thought that goes through your mind? I tell you what goes through mine: "I sure don't want to eat of the bread or drink of the cup if I'm unworthy because *bad things are going to happen* to me."

And, of course, the fact that, in a typical time of communion, I'm focusing on Jesus' death for my sin only adds to that feeling. "Yikes! I *am* an unworthy sinner, so I'd better not take this deal too lightly. In fact, maybe I'd better take a pass."

And that makes sense ... except for the fact that it's *not* the reaction Paul was looking for from the Corinthians when he wrote his letter! And I suspect he would be mortified to know that anyone else – including you and including me – would come to that kind of conclusion from what he had written.

A Better Translation

So, let's take a look at a more modern translation and see if we can discover what Paul *is* trying to communicate to the Corinthians and to us.

Here's the passage in the NIV. And by the way, if you don't have a Bible of your own, this version is one of the most accurate and most readable translations you can buy. And I highly recommend it.

Here's how the NIV phrases what Paul wrote:

*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.
1 Corinthians 11:27 (NIV)*

Now, do you see the difference between that translation and the KJV? The King James said, "Whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily shall be guilty."

In the KJV, the focus seems to be on *the worthiness of the person* receiving

communion. But the more accurate NIV focuses more on *the manner in which the communion is received* – a huge difference with huge implications.

Apparently, it's not "people who aren't right with God" taking communion that's got Paul all riled up; *it's a way of participating in the Lord's Supper that's not right*; a way that can lead to judgement. *That's what Paul is warning them about. That's what Paul tells them to look at when they examine themselves* – the manner in which they go about communion.

And we'll talk more about what this "unworthy manner" is in just a few minutes, but I want to just let this sit for minute. So let me say it again ...

**The issue is not "oh no, am I unworthy?"
It's "is the way in which am I participating
in communion unworthy?"**

And the reason I want to let this sit for a minute ... actually, the reason I want to hammer this point is that some of us dread whenever we have communion here at NHCC because we worry that we're not good enough. We worry that we're not worthy enough.

Well guess what? No one is worthy. That's the point of the whole deal. If you were worthy you wouldn't need a savior in the first place and Jesus wouldn't have had to go the cross and communion wouldn't even exist! The fact that you believe you aren't worthy is an indication that you still believe that you need to prove yourself in some way to be forgiven and accepted by God. That's the real danger for you, that you believe *that*, not that you're eating wafers and drinking grape juice as an unworthy person.

Why It's Toxic

And that's one of the reasons why this belief of "I have to be good to take communion" is so toxic.

1. It undermines the very Gospel that's represented by communion!

In fact, if you come to the table thinking "Whew! This is a good week. I didn't do anything really bad. So it's ok, I'm good enough this time" then you don't understand what communion is all about and you need to go back to square one.

And by "square one" I mean admit you're a sinner with no hope of ever being worthy before God on your own merits; a sinner whose only hope is in the fact that Jesus lived the perfect life you should have lived and died the death you deserved to die – and

God, somehow in a way I don't understand, is able to credit both of those to you by faith, when you trust in him.

And if that's not clear to you, I would suggest you listen to the message from two weeks ago. It's one of the best talks I've ever given on the subject of what it means to be forgiven and accepted by God. It will help you understand.

But there's another reason why this belief is so toxic.

2. It makes people fear coming to God when the Bible tells us to feel the exact opposite!

The Bible says in Hebrews chapter 4 that we have a high High Priest, referring to Jesus, who understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin.

Then it says, because you have this kind of a high priest:

let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. Hebrews 4:16 (NLT)

I told you all a couple weeks ago that we got a new dog (because our other dog wandered off and we don't know what happened to him), and the new dog's name is Trey, because he is our third American Eskimo. For some reason – and this bugs the heck out of me – that dog is afraid of me! (Apparently, he has some kind of emotional baggage towards short hairy men).

In any case, my dog is afraid of me. When I say "come, Trey" he looks around like, "OK,

so what bad thing is going to happen to me if I do." And, even if I have a treat, he still slinks up to me instead of coming boldly and receiving what I freely want to give to him. That's what fear does.

That's why a lot of Christians act the same way when it comes to communion. People who believe they aren't good enough to take communion don't come boldly. They come in slinking in fear – if they come at all.

Now, I'm not saying that communion needs to be some kind of frivolous or jolly experience. What I'm saying is that the thought that you might be unworthy is no reason to fear, because you are unworthy; more unworthy than you can even know. But the Cross that's represented by communion says you are more loved and accepted, more forgiven than you can ever imagine. You are forgiven totally, completely and

absolutely – for every sin you have ever committed and every sin you will commit. There is no reason to fear ...

... *except* for the possibility of taking communion not as an unworthy *person* but in an unworthy *manner*. We almost forgot about *that* ... which is actually the final reason why this belief is so toxic!

3. It leads us to become so concerned with personal worthiness that we overlook the unworthy manner Paul was so upset about!

Isn't *that* ironic? Paul wants to warn us about something very important but we completely miss it because we're so attached to this toxic belief. And because of that – not our unworthiness or lack of goodness – we potentially put ourselves in danger when we come to the Lord's table.

The “Unworthy Manner”

So, let’s look at what it means to take communion as an unworthy person (which is OK, because that’s reality - you and I are always going to be unworthy) in an unworthy manner (which is *not* OK and which is where the danger lies).

And to understand what that means, we need to do what good Bible students always do: read the scripture in context of what has come just before it.

So far, what we’ve read is this:

V23-26 The purpose of
communion: to remember Jesus died for
our sins

V27-29 Warning about taking
communion in an unworthy manner.

The question, then, is “what comes just before these verses?”

Let’s find out.

In verse 17 Paul writes:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 1 Corinthians 11:17-18 (NIV)

Whatever the unworthy manner is, it has something to do with divisions and with their meetings.

And then Paul, as he sometimes does, throws in this really satirical remark.

No doubt there have to be

*differences among you to
show which of you have
God's approval! 1
Corinthians 11:19 (NIV)*

Apparently, there were some pretty well-off people in that church who were going around saying "God's blessing me more than you because he is more pleased with my life than He is with yours." Paul's satire is saying, "Yeah, I'm sure that's how it is ... you're better than everyone else. NOT."

Now, keep that idea of divisions and "spiritual one-upmanship" attitude in mind ...

... as he continues:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As

*a result, one person remains
hungry and another gets
drunk. 1 Corinthians
11:20-21 (NIV)*

Now, to understand what Paul is saying here, you also have to know that communion in those days was observed as part of a full meal together. In other words, there was a potluck dinner for the whole church and then they did communion. But the well-off people weren't sharing their meals. They were gorging themselves; even getting drunk while other Christians in the same building, at the same meeting at the same table went hungry!

And in those days, it wasn't like it is in our day. Hunger wasn't "oh, I haven't had anything to eat since 5 minutes ago" - it was a big deal. It was widespread. It was life threatening.

So, Paul continues:

Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those among you who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter! 1 Corinthians 11:22 (NIV)

And that brings us to verse 23, the explanation of why we even do communion and then the warning about the unworthy manner. That's the context.

So now let's read that warning again with this crazy scene of divisions and arrogance and gluttony and hunger in mind – what Paul calls “despising the church of God.” Let's read that again.

Here is what it says:

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.
1 Corinthians 11:27 (NIV)

So, what's the unworthy manner? It's doing it in a way that despises the church of God. It's engaging in a holy ceremony and acting like that's so wonderful ... at the same time as you are divided from others in the church; at the same time as you arrogantly think more highly of yourself than them; at the same time as you neglect the less fortunate brother or sister right next to you.

And when Paul says:

Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. *1 Corinthians 11:28*

(NIV)

That's what he's saying we ought to look for before participating.

*For those who eat and drink
without discerning the body
of Christ eat and drink
judgment on themselves. 1
Corinthians 11:29 (NIV)*

Those who don't understand the connection between the Lord's Body at the communion table and the Lord's Body sitting around us (remember, the church – specifically, the people of the church – is also the Body of Christ) ... those who don't understand the connection between the Lord's Body at the communion table and the Lord's Body sitting around us, standing in front of us, living with us, doing ministry with us and think that it's ok to honor this one but not the other ... they're the ones who have something to fear

when it comes to communion.”

*That is why [Paul says],
many among you are weak
and sick, and a number of
you have fallen asleep.
[Some of you have died!] 1
Corinthians 11:30 (NIV)*

Do you see this?

Observing Communion

I hope so, because I have to tell you when I began to understand this, it totally changed my outlook on communion. I don't have to be "good enough" to take communion because the truth is that in this life I am never going to be as I ought to be and Jesus already knows that and Jesus has already forgiven me for that.

What I have to do when I observe

communion is two things. What you have to do when you take communion is two things.

1. Honor the Body of Christ that is both on the table and gathered around us.

That's what Paul is saying here. So what does it mean to honor the Body of Christ gathered around us?

I think it means to put away divisions that exist in the church. I think it means to stop thinking and complaining and griping "when young people are on the stage – who can understand their music, it's too loud" or "when those old people are on stage – they're stuck in the 90s..." I think that kind of division is hurtful to the people who lead.

I think it means to stop breaking off into your own little group, pursuing your own little agenda within the church, as if your group is more spiritual than all the others.

I think it means to stop spending every stinking penny of your income on *yourself* and start contributing to this church so that we as a congregation have the resources to take care of some of the less fortunate members of this body.

I think it means to stop thinking that because you don't have their problems, somehow God thinks more highly of you than he does them because of your superior intellect and discipline.

I think it means treating your spouse and your kids and your parents with the same honor when you drive out of here as you do when you're in front of all these "nice church people."

I think you get the idea.

“How can you say you love God who you haven’t seen, and hate your brother who you have seen?” the Apostle John asks. You can’t. That’s the point. You have to love and honor them both. And nowhere is that issue more apparent than when we approach the communion table.

Honor the Body of Christ that is both on the table and gathered around us ... that’s the first thing we need to do.

Here’s the second:

2. Rejoice in the worthiness of Jesus instead of worrying about our own.

In Martin Luther's Large Catechism, he addressed this issue of feeling unworthy in receiving communion (and this is a paraphrase of the translation from German).

I am tempted to feel the same way,

which is a carry-over from our former situation under the Pope. There, we tortured ourselves with efforts to become so totally pure that God might not find the least flaw in us; as a result we all became so timid that we easily took fright and would say, "O how unfit I am for the communion table."

But he who really wants grace and consolation should push himself into going and should let no one make him shy away. What he should say is, "I would really like to be worthy, but I come not on the basis of any worthiness in me but on account of Your Word, because You commanded it, and no matter what the state of my worthiness, I want to be a follower of Yours."ⁱⁱⁱ

COMMUNION

So, this morning, as we close this service, let's do these two things. Let's take communion together and let's honor the Body of Christ that is both on the table and gathered around us. If there is someone here you need to forgive, do it, and you may even say it to them. If there is someone here you've hurt or offended, make it right. And if it is too much to do in the short time we have, make a commitment to God and yourself that you will do it before we gather again as a church. Maybe even say to the person, "hey we need to talk when this is over."

If there is someone you're looking down on, repent of that. If you are doing something to cause division in this church, make a commitment to stop.

Honor the Body of Christ that is both on the table and gathered around you.

And then as you come to the table, rejoice in the worthiness of Jesus instead of worrying about your own. Jesus lived the perfect life you should have lived and Jesus died the death you should have died. That's what grace means.

Now, our band is going to get in place to lead us. And as they do the first song, take a minute to reflect; to talk with someone else if you need to and then come rejoicing in the graciousness of God and receive communion.

When we're done with that, we'll stand and sing together and our service will be done.

Endnotes

ⁱ Read more at Suite101: [Catholic Bishop Tobin, Kennedy Clash on Abortion: Catholic Church and Pro-choice Politicians Disagree on](#)

Moral Issue <http://www.suite101.com/content/catholic-bishop-tobin-kennedy-clash-on-abortion-a173499#ixzz1ERmyNBwy>

ⁱⁱ <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/09/the-day-i-was-denied-communion.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ from Pastor Paul Wigtil Word of Life Free Lutheran Church Mankato, MN at

http://www.answers2prayer.org/bible_questions/Answers/communion/mad.html