

# “Presbyterian History 101: Communion”

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Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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On Communion Sunday it is fitting to consider how much our denomination's attitudes on this sacrament have changed. But to understand our Communion practice in the 19th century we need to go right back to the Reformation. In reaction to the ways of the Roman Catholic Church, the new reformed churches (like us) declared what they believed were the proper ways of the church, summed up in a set of principles called “The Marks of the Church”. They were: “pure preaching of the Gospel”, “the proper administration of the sacraments” and “church discipline.” The phrase “church discipline” meant that there was a right way to live a Christian life, and the church had a responsibility to help people stay on that path. You helped people stay on that path by disciplining them when they strayed.

The First & Second Book of Discipline guided Canadian Presbyterian congregations in these matters in the 19th century. It itemized the sins that warranted discipline: “drunkenness, excesse, fornication, oppressing of the poore, wanton words and licentious living, doe openly appertaine to the kirk of God to punish them.” The responsibility in this regard was vested with the Session, that was designated “to use diligent labours in this regard, that the kirks be kept in good order, to inquire diligently regarding naughtie and unruly persons, and travell to bring them into Christ's way againe, either by admonition or threatning of Gods judgements; or by correction.” In the 19th century the dominant role of the Session was to consider how well members were living the Christian life. If a member was deemed in need of correcting, the most common means was to bar that person from participating in Communion. In other words, one would be barred from taking Communion until that person changed their ways.

The administration of this business was serious. Communion only took place once per year. Weeks before the Communion service the Session met to assess how well each member was living in Christ's ways. Those members judged worthy to come to the table would be given a “Communion token”: a lead coin that was essentially your admission ticket to the service. If you had been judged not worthy to come to the table, you would not receive a token and not be allowed to attend. On Communion Sunday, you entered the church, handed in your token to an elder, and once everyone was there the doors of the church would be locked to prevent anyone else from entering. You could only take Communion in the congregation where you were a member (that's right: members of Knox Presbyterian could never take Communion at Grace Church, because at Grace Church they wouldn't know if you were under discipline or not).

There is the true story of one teen attending his first Communion. In that church the token was the same size as a six pence...which is what he accidentally gave to the elder. Worship was delayed. The Session met. Inquiries were made. As the young lad indeed had a token in his pocket and had mistakenly produced the wrong object, he was allowed to attend the service. "But this did not save him from being formally rebuked for his irreverent heedlessness, and admonished to be more careful in times to come." He did not get back his six pence.

These practices slowly faded away, disappearing by 1900. But reflection on whether one was worthy to come to the table continued well into the 20th century. Everyone took the sacrament seriously and approached each communion service with a solemn excitement. Early in the 20th century there were weeks of preparatory services during which Presbyterians were called to examine their own lives, to consider how worthy they were as recipients of Christ's benefits to us, earned by his death on the cross, which is represented in the act of Communion. Of course, none of us, ever, is worthy. That is one of the central points of the Gospel, captured succinctly in Romans 3, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." For many Presbyterians there was a sense of personal guilt and responsibility that they brought to the table. Hearing the words, "this is my body, broken for you...this is my blood shed for you..." could incite a sense of sorrow. So worthiness was not just a consideration for known sinners who would not be given a token in turn—every Presbyterian thought about their worthiness to come. In the church I grew up in in my youth, this was certainly the case. We had preparatory services, we were asked to consider our worthiness of Christ's sacrifice, and the communion service had a funereal feel.

This attitude towards Communion arose from how they read chapter 11 of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. The opening words of this passage are very familiar, commonly recalled at the beginning of the sacrament as its warrant: "For I received from the Lord what I also hand on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night that he was betrayed took bread..." Familiar words. But it was the verses after this warrant that shaped Presbyterian attitudes towards Communion. "Before sharing the bread and wine, examine yourselves" Paul wrote. If you don't, you eat and drink judgment on yourselves. You should not participate unworthily. Presbyterians thought that in taking the bread and wine one is most intimately confronted by what Christ has done for us...and then challenged to consider "what have I done for him?" "Am I living as Christ would have me live, as the beneficiary of his sacrifice?" Encountering Christ at the table, they believed, had inescapable moral and ethical implications. Of course, no one is worthy. But coming to the table prompted Presbyterians to wonder how they could reshape their lives in honour of the gift of grace the table represents.

This is a passage that is notorious in the challenge it presents to the reader, because it has been read in such different ways. The portion we heard today from 1st Corinthians I think is a whole section, so the whole passage is about how the rich Christians of the Corinthian church treated the poor ones. Here Paul is responding to the scuttlebutt he heard from Corinth, People, apparently, brought their own food

to the Lord's Supper: the wealthy bringing substantial meals and the poor bringing a repast far more meagre. And, we hear, some participants in the sacrament were getting drunk. So Paul chastised them. "Is this how you should be treating each other, with the wealthy not sharing their food with the poor? You are dividing yourself along class lines. When you come to this table as factions, you are eating and drinking condemnation on yourselves. Then Paul concludes this section of the letter with his practical encouragement: "so eat at home before you come to the Lord's table, so marking this sacrament will not be a point of division but of unity."

On its face, this is a very different reading of the passage, but in another way it is not so different. Both ways to read it reflect one essential attitude. What Christ has done for us on the cross is to change how we live our lives. The \$10 theological word for this is "sanctification." Sanctification is the process of growth in Christian love, growing in our conformity to the image of Christ aided by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Both ways of reading this passage points us to sanctification. The contemporary way of reading it focuses on one real-time example in the life of the Corinthian church. The wealthier members were not expressing free, self-giving, other-regarding love by sharing the food they brought to Communion with the poor who had little. The other way to read the passage is more general.

But either way the same point is being made. The passage draws our attention to this table, reminding us that it represents what Christ has done for you and me. As we take of the bread and the wine, we are desirous of Christ entering our lives. Here, we are asking him to fill us more with his grace. But as we remember what he has done for us...and continues to do for us...the act of participating begs the question: what do we do for him? How are we living for him? Our calling, as followers of Jesus, is an endeavour to follow him ever more closely. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit is our inspiration, our guide and our strength in doing so. It is the path we call sanctification.

I am VERY glad we no longer hand out communion tokens. And I can confidently say that the Session is very glad we no longer sit in judgment of our members regarding how they live the Christian life. It is a good thing that those practices are left in the dust of history. But I think we can all benefit from the faith-filled kernel that was at the center of those bygone controlling practices. That at this table, we confront not only Christ, but also ourselves. We can never be worthy of the grace that is represented here. When we come, the question raised is this: how can we honour the giver more fully as an expression of our gratitude for the gift we have received?