

## On Communion Meditations

The Lord's Supper has always been important to the Churches of Christ. We take communion weekly. It's so important to us that we often offer communion on Sunday nights for those unable to take it that morning, and we often take communion to our shut in members so they can share in it despite being unable to come to church.

Weekly communion was unquestionably the practice of the early church. Quarterly communion did not begin until the Reformation. I think it's the proper practice, as well. But a weekly communion makes it difficult to keep the ceremony fresh and vital.

I've long wanted to compose a series of communion meditations to be delivered as part of the communion service, but before I put pen to paper, it's important to consider a few thoughts. You see, although the Churches of Christ have a very high view of communion, we often do it very badly.

Our services are in fact pointed toward the invitation, which serves as the climax of the service. This makes the communion an interruption in the flow of the service, rather than the point of the service, regardless of what our theology tells us is most important.

Also, we hire a professional to preach the sermon and perhaps to lead the singing, but we let the amateurs—like me—handle the Lord's Supper. The quality suffers as a result.

Services are always pressed for time. Preachers tend to go long. If things go well, there are responses to the invitation. Announcements tend to be lengthy. Prayers can often be downright longwinded, as though we could pray ourselves into heaven. As a result, we cut the time for the communion. After all, it's the least important part of the service—at least we treat it that way. Therefore, we bitterly complain when the communion leader goes long—"goes long" means speaks for more than 30 seconds. The preacher can do 10 minutes of stand up comedy, and it's just fine, but dare to actually focus on the communion, and people get angry.

The result is that the communion has become dead time in many of our services. We don't quite know how to make it work. It's competition for what the staff thinks is important—the part they get to do—and it's pretty much the same thing every week. No matter how well you do it, it's awfully hard to turn a communion service into something memorable.

Despite the lack of respect we give the Lord's Supper compared to the rest of the service, we tend to think of the communion as the most critical part of the service. Members will come late and leave early, but they'll be sure to be there for communion. Members who have to work Sunday morning will go to great lengths to take communion in the evening. When I was in college at David Lipscomb, many of the students would sleep through Sunday morning worship, but they'd dutifully show up for Sunday night service somewhere to take their crackers and grape juice.

Hence, while we place precious little emphasis on doing it well, we place great emphasis on doing it. I think the discrepancy is due to our having an under-developed theology of the communion. We don't really understand it. We know that it's plainly commanded. The commands on the Lord's Supper are plain enough—unlike many other commands and inferences we are taught. But we don't really appreciate what it's about. There seems to be something missing—something ineffable. It's a duty, not a privilege; a task, not a joy.

When people talk about their favorite services or favorite congregations, they rarely mention the communion services. And yet the Bible seems to point us in the direction that the Lord's Supper is a very, very important thing. It seems to be nearly central to the Christian experience.

The Lord's Supper seems somehow parallel to baptism, which is an ever bigger deal to those in the Churches of Christ. We truly enjoy and celebrate baptisms. We are a very baptism-focused community. But the other sacrament seems left out in the cold. It's time to give it back some of the respect it deserves.

I don't know the answer, but I have some preliminary thoughts.

- Try a few services that focus on communion. Put the sermon near the beginning and talk about the communion—or what the communion teaches, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Put the communion at the end. Build up to it. Let's at least match the Baptists and Presbyterians and have a high-quality communion service no less often than quarterly. Maybe even monthly.
- For reasons we'll discuss further in future postings, we need to get away from the communion-as-meditation mindset. There's no reason to suppose that Jesus meant for us to passively and pensively sit through the communion service. After all, we were called to gather to *commune*—to be in fellowship—not to take the communion alone. Meditation is essentially a private act. You can do it at home. Church is for doing things together.
- There's no reason at all to have the giving part of the service adjacent to the communion. Passing the plate is a dramatic change of subject and is often handled poorly. Sometimes let's do what we say—do the giving “separate and apart” from the Lord's Supper. I mean, it's just hard to truly celebrate the resurrection of our Savior while reaching for a checkbook. (It shouldn't be that way, of course. But we have to meet our members where they are in their spiritual walk.)
- Get the men out from the front of the auditorium! We shouldn't be looking at uncomfortable men trying to do a ritual. Our minds need to be on the service. Serve from the back. My church switched to this approach over a decade ago, and we'll never go back to the traditional approach. The men handling the elements can pass trays and give directions from the back without distracting the congregation. No one worries about whether they have nice suits or

matching ties. There's no time lost watching men march from the back. And they can sit with their families throughout the service. Only the speaker stands in the front. The men passing the elements leave one or two songs before communion, get organized, and pass the trays from the back. This way, the men are just servants of the church, not performers.

- Make some clear rules for the speaker, the communion meditation leader:
  - Any meditation that begins with “When John called me Friday night and asked me to lead the communion service, I didn't know what to say, but then while I was driving I saw ...” is grounds for stoning on the spot. God will exact unspeakable punish for such talks! Nobody cares what your thought process was to get your lesson up. Nobody cares what day you got called. Just give your lesson and shut up.
  - It's not necessary to talk before each element. It's not necessary to talk at all. Silence can work very well. More than once, when the song service or a prayer set the perfect mood, I've left my notes in my Bible and just led a short prayer. I'll get another chance to show off my rhetorical skills. If your goal is to set a mood, when the mood is right already, shut up.
  - Clichés are strictly forbidden. Never say “separate and apart” before the contribution. I never have understood the point, anyway.
  - Speaking of clichés, don't talk about transubstantiation or consubstantiation. Don't say it's just a symbol. There are very likely no Lutherans or Catholics in the audience, and showing off your vocabulary is unattractive. Don't tell us what it *isn't*—tell us what it's about. Talk about Jesus. This is not a good time to sound negative—or to insult our audience if they just happen to be Lutherans or Catholics.
  - Short prayers are better than long prayers. Jesus specifically criticized long prayers in the Sermon on the Mount. Many of your listeners have short attention spans. Some are children. Some are mothers wrestling with children. Keep it short.
  - Short meditations are generally much better than long meditations, unless it's a service pointed to the communion. Even so, I think the song service is often a better lead in for communion than a talk. It may be better to have a song or two between the meditation and the communion. Now, although I think we unduly de-emphasize the communion service, until we radically rethink our services, there's just no point in competing with the sermon. The preacher's a better talker, and he's got more time. Nobody drove across town to hear you.

- Your audience won't listen to you for long. So every word needs to count. One off-subject sentence, and you've lost them. Be brief to the point of abruptness. No one will mind a two-sentence meditation. Go five minutes, and you won't be asked to speak again.
- Don't put frustrated preachers up there. Guys who are desperate for a chance to talk will talk too long and say too little. This is not a sop for the member looking for an audience. It's about the sacrifice of Jesus. Pick someone who sees that as more important than a chance to be on stage.
- But then again, do find a speaker who is capable of doing a decent job. If you just toss any willing volunteer up there, you fail to treat the service with the respect it deserves. Let the preacher or the youth minister speak some of the time. Be sure everyone else occasionally sees how do to do a 60-second talk very well.
- Sing. Some people just freak over singing during communion, but singing it one of the most appropriate things we can do. It's a corporate activity—we do it together. Harmony and beautiful melodies suit the service well. But don't sing every time.
- In the right congregation, it's a great idea to have the praise team or even a soloist or duet sing during while the elements are being taken. It's a great chance to meditate on the meaning of it all while sharing an experience that can only be gained in an assembly.

In short, take the time to think about the communion service. Don't just call a guy the night before and slot him in just like you did that last 300 Saturday nights. Make it important. Add some variety. Get out of the rut. Be creative. Find a way to let the talents God has given your church be used in God's service.

Some people will complain, and so you should take the time to teach them better. Deal patiently with those who hate change just because. God made some of us that way. Give the communion the careful planning and attention it deserves.

And don't let anyone ever begin, "When John called me Friday night ..."