

What is 'Taking Communion'?

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn for a short time this evening to 1 Corinthians and chapter 10. 1 Corinthians chapter 10 and we're going to read at verse 14. We're going to focus our thoughts on verses 16 and 17. We'll just read from verse 14.

1 Corinthians 10 verse 14.

Partake of the one bread. As we're looking at some topical studies, picking some topics that we commonly refer to and trying to unfold some of the teaching of scripture in regard to these.

And we've been using as a basis of our thoughts some of the passages you find in the catechism or in the confession of faith. And we're going to follow that tonight because we're looking tonight at this topic of the Lord's Supper.

But we can put it in the form of a question we've been looking at in terms of questions. What is so and so or why do we do so and so? What is taking communion? What is taking communion?

[1 : 3 1] Because putting it that way takes in more than just what is the Lord's Supper itself in terms of what it stands for theologically. What it stands for as a sacrament.

And we want to actually look at that certainly. But it's also important to look at what we do in the Lord's Supper. The activities, the actions in the Lord's Supper that we engage in together.

And ask ourselves what does all that mean? And what does it mean therefore to take communion? Because that's how we often refer to it. So and so has taken communion.

And that's been a way of describing God's professing people for many, many years, many generations indeed. Going back, I'm sure, to the Gaelic as well.

Where it would be, Are they communicating or are they taking communion? So that's really what's before us. What do we mean by taking communion?

[2 : 3 3] And if we follow these verses there, you can see that there is a reference there to participating in the blood of Christ and participation in the body of Christ.

So that there's, in those verses, obviously, there's a reference to a connection with Christ in his death on the part of those who take this bread and take this cup.

And, of course, chapter 11 goes on to speak about that in terms of the way that Christ delivered this to his church, to his people, that Paul is reflecting back to.

Of course, 1 Corinthians, we're not going into the context as such, but here it's a context where he's dealing with separating from idolatry. And that some of the practices that the Corinthians were engaging in, out with their observance of the Lord's Supper, was, he really refers to it there very strongly, the table of devils, the table of demons, the things which have to do with idolatry and gross idolatrous practices.

He says you're separate from that. Your life is no longer connected to these things. The Lord's Supper is very distinct from and very different from these things. It is a sacramental meal.

[3 : 52] It is something in which there is an outward partaking of elements that ordinarily are food and drink, but they have a spiritual meaning in relation to partaking of Christ, connecting with Christ, taking from Christ the life that he gives to his people.

Now, the Confession of Faith puts it this way. I'm going to just look at two of the passages and then pick up some of the phrases that are used, because I think they're very helpful in actually telling us what it is we do in taking communion.

First of all, it says that the first paragraph of the chapter dealing with the Lord's Supper, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed, he instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper to be observed in the church and to the end of the world.

And it is for this reason, he says, for the perpetual ongoing, that is, remembrance of the sacrifice of himself and his death. For the sealing all benefits thereof and to true believers.

For their spiritual nourishment and growth in him. For their further engagement in and to all the duties which they owe to him. And to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him and with each other.

[5 : 12] There are five things mentioned there that we can say belong to the purpose for the Lord's Supper. The purpose that God has given us the Lord's Supper and for us to take communion in coming to the Lord's table, to the Lord's Supper to take the elements.

The first of these is for the remembrance, for the continuing remembrance of Christ's death. And of course that goes back to the words that he himself used when he instituted the supper, when he appointed the Lord's Supper, as we read in Matthew, this is what he said, Do this in remembrance of me.

And the wonderful thing is that the Lord very specifically and carefully chose the kind of things that we use in the Lord's Supper and the setting for the Lord's Supper and how we sit together and take off those elements of bread and of wine.

Because they are designed by God so that they and our way of using them themselves.

All of that itself is so appropriate for a remembering of something, especially the Lord's death. Remember, if you cast your mind back to the Passover in the Old Testament days.

[6 : 35] It began with that night in Egypt when the Lord said to them, This is what they were to do with the Passover lamb. They were to kill it. They were to put the blood on the lintels and on the doorposts.

Then they were to roast it in the fire and eat it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. And they were to do it as a people ready to travel, ready to leave that place and go out by the Lord's hand, by the Lord's power, out into the wilderness to leave Egypt behind.

But he instituted that Lord's Supper not just for that occasion, but to be something that was repeated down through the years of their Old Testament wanderings in the wilderness, but also after that too, right through up to the days of Christ's coming.

And that was what the Lord actually specified when he instituted the Passover. It was to be a memorial. It was to be something that they would use to bring something to their remembrance.

It was to be a ceremony and a meal associated with it, where brought to their remembrance especially was their deliverance from Egypt by the death of a lamb.

[7 : 49] And what they were doing in sharing together in that meal of the Passover lamb, accompanied by these things that God specified, that was itself such a beautiful way of bringing to their memory.

What could better actually bring back to their memory time after time during all of these years that was a picture of their memory, that was a symbol of what had happened all of these years ago in Egypt, as a symbol, as a memorial, as something that was illustrative of their redemption, of salvation by sacrifice to the shedding of blood.

And you can take that into the Lord's Supper. When we come to take the bread, and you take the cup, and you actually apply all of these things to yourself, and you, as we'll see in a minute, you actually take account of the actions by which you reach out and take them, and then you eat the bread and drink from the cup.

The wine itself, the bread itself that's broken, all of these things as you see them, and as you exercise your faith, it takes you back to the one thing that's represented, Christ in his death.

And it's such an appropriate way of illustrating what it is you remember. It's hardly possible for somebody who has faith to actually come to these elements of bread and wine and not immediately think of the death of Christ.

[9 : 39] They are a beautiful way of illustrating that. Although it's worth seeing more than an illustration. So it's for the continuing remembrance of Christ's death. Secondly, it's for the sealing of the benefits of Christ's death to us.

For the young ones, you know, the benefits of Christ's death are really the salvation that we come to know of as God gives us salvation. That includes the forgiveness of our sins, giving us Christ's righteousness.

All the things the Bible tells us belong to salvation. These are the benefits of Christ's death. Everything that's a positive good that comes to us in a spiritual way is from Christ's death.

He has actually obtained that for us. And the Lord's Supper, because of the way it sets things out and the way we come to take these elements and use them, it is, the confession says, for the sealing to us of the benefits of Christ's death.

Now, when you think of sealing something, this goes back to the old days when you had a document sealed, with a specific seal that had a mark on it that told you whose seal it is.

[10 : 58] For example, when a king or somebody important sent a letter, he would actually take, a queen would take the blob of wax, they would actually seal the letter with the blob of wax, and then with a ring or with some sort of similar thing with their own emblem on it, they would put that into the soft wax, and then when it went hard, it left that mark.

And everybody could say, that's the mark of so-and-so, that's the mark of the king. And as the person receiving the letter received the letter, all you needed to do was look at the seal and say, I know who this is from.

It's for me, it's addressed to me, but it's from the king, because that's his seal. And the confession uses that language about the Lord's Supper. It is a seal to us of the benefits of Christ's death.

It's not there to seal the truth of his death to us. We know that already. It's not there to seal the truth of our faith to us, though there may be assurance of faith that comes along with it.

What is there to seal is our right to the benefits of Christ's death. In other words, when you take the Lord's Supper, and when the Lord's Supper is a seal to you, what it's really saying to you is, God is saying to you, you have a right to this salvation.

[12 : 18] You have a right to the benefits that have come from this death that Christ himself died on the cross. And you might say in your mind, well, I don't have a right to that.

I'm unworthy of anything of that from God. And on that level, yes, none of us has a right to it. But the point of the Supper is saying is, God has given us the right to it.

God in Christ has made us his children. And children have a right to the rights of the family. And one of the rights of the family is that we actually partake of, that we actually enjoy, that we benefit from everything that Christ has done for us by his death on the cross.

Maybe put it another way for the younger ones, this might help them to understand the meaning of seal, and how it seals to us the benefits of Christ's death.

If somebody makes out a check to you, and you actually have the amount that's on the check, that check gives, when that check is signed, it gives you the right to go and cash it.

[13 : 35] If you get a check, and it's not signed, you go and try and cash it, and the bank will say to you, you can't do that. You've got no right to actually cash this check, because it's not signed.

Somebody needs to sign the check before you can cash it, before you can get the amount that it's worth given to you. And if you think of God's salvation, salvation, the benefits that come from Christ's death, what we're doing in the Lord's Supper, if you like, is going to God with that as our check that we've received from him.

And when you go to the Lord's Supper, you're asking to God, please sign this check again for me, make it a seal to me, make me aware again that I have a right to cash this check, to actually enjoy and possess the salvation that Christ has obtained by his death on the cross.

So you see, you're coming to the Lord's Supper, and you're thinking of it as a seal of the benefits. You're coming to it as your check made out except for the signature, and God is going to sign it again.

Every time we come to the Lord's Supper, it is a seal to us of the benefits of Christ's death and our right to them. That they are ours. That they are ours given by God's grace.

[15 : 03] And they belong to us, these benefits. Thirdly, it's for, the confession says, for our nourishment and growth in Christ.

Our nourishment and growth in Christ. And it's important that we see both of these together, and they are always together in the teaching of the Bible. Our spiritual feeding or our nourishment, the nutrients, the spiritual nutrients that we get, they are for our growth.

It would be very strange, wouldn't it, if somebody was eating very healthily, but actually not showing any signs of growth. And that's the same spiritually as well.

Somebody who says that they are a Christian, that they actually have a very healthy spiritual appetite, but they're not showing any signs of growth at all in their lives. There's something wrong in that person's life.

I don't know if you've come across some of these adverts. I'm not at all praising them and not suggesting you go and actually take up what they're offering. But you get all these adverts nowadays for different kinds of supplements and nutrients and stuff like that.

[16 : 17] And I came across one the other day that offered two things. One was a muscle builder and you had to take along with it a fat burner. Muscle builder and fat burner.

And what it was saying was if you're over 50 and you start using these, well you can start looking like somebody is 25 or 30. But I don't really want that. Because if I'm 60 then I want to look 60-ish.

not going back to looking like a teenager. But the point is that's what was being offered. Muscle building, putting on weight, muscle weight, but at the same time losing the fat.

Now seriously, that is what God is giving us in the means of grace which includes the Lord's Supper. Because what the Lord is saying is you need to put on spiritual weight.

You need to actually build up your spiritual muscles. And the Lord's Supper being what it is and given the way that we use it as we've said is a help towards doing that very thing.

[17 : 28] You build up your spiritual muscles because there in the Lord's Supper as you handle these elements the broken body of Christ represented in the bread. The shed blood of Christ represented in the cup.

As you actually relate to these things by faith and as you as we'll see in a minute as you see Christ himself spiritually represented in that well that hits your soul in such a way that your love is affected your hope is affected your faith itself is affected your commitment to Christ is affected but so too is your sorrow for sin.

So too is the side of our spiritual experience that mourns over sin that repents of sin that comes to actually mortify sin as Romans 8 puts it for us killing it putting it to death and mourning over the fact that it's still there that we find ourselves doing it and bringing it to God that's the fat burner that's the sin burner if you like it takes away the excess which is just as important to our growth as building up the spiritual muscles of love and of hope and of faith and the Lord's Supper is designed to do that for us because when you come to it it's not just a matter of thinking of the love of Christ of the death he died the sufferings and all the rest of it but there's also the other side of it that regards your sins having been behind all of that and the reason why he died to save you from your sins and you put it then to yourself as you still find sin with you and to use a phrase from the great theologian

John Owen has Christ died and shall sin live that's what we bring to the Lord's Supper that's what you take from the Lord's Supper a strengthening of that resolve to live a holy life positively and to mortify sin and to put sin to death because from the Lord's Supper you're taking this conclusion Christ has died and sin must not live he died for sin the living son of God came into the world and in our nature he died and he died not so that sin would live in my life and yours but that sin would die and that we would put it to death so it's for our nourishment and it's for our growth in Christ our growth positively in all these things that we mentioned love faith hope and it's also for our growth too in putting sin to death in dealing with that shady side of our life the flesh the workings of our own hearts so it's continuing remembrance it's the sealing of the benefits of his death to us it's for nourishment and growth for three the confession says it's for engaging in Christ's service to further engage us or employ us in Christ's service now that's a very interesting one and it's one perhaps we don't think of as often as we should that that is one of the reasons why

God has given us the Lord's Supper of course we have to remember that this goes back to our baptism as well and our catechism and confessions remind us of that that one of the features in being baptized is that we actually as baptized people are pledged by that to serve the Lord and therefore we should see the two sacraments connected and not think of having a gap of many many years between them it should be the case that we take from the Bible's teaching for ourselves as well as what we put to people in time to explain this to them that as baptized people we should be thinking about coming to the Lord's table and that itself should make us think about our relationship to God now don't misunderstand me I'm not saying that everyone who's baptized should then immediately next week come to the Lord's table that's not what I'm saying but what we're saying is that the Bible tells us that what is signified in our baptism ought to make us think that our place should be at the Lord's table and that that's what we should aspire to and that that's what we should have as a name in our lives and we have to present that to people and not leave them with the impression that it's right for them just to go on as baptized people and just be quite happy with spending the rest of their time even without going to the

[22 : 30] Lord's table at all anyway that's not the point I'm making but we are engaged to Christ's service and the Lord's supper brings us again repeatedly to an engagement to be the Lord's if you like to think of it again it might help the younger ones you know what it's like when you have a contract for work you're given a contract you sign a contract the terms of the contract are there and it's usually for a certain time and at the end of that time it's reviewed and maybe your contract is renewed or maybe not but the contract we have with God with the Lord Jesus Christ himself as our saviour is a contract where he promises and of course he will always keep his promise perfectly he promises to be our Lord and God in fact is in the Bible presented to us as saying this in the great covenant statements of the Bible think of

Jeremiah 31 the new covenant which anticipates the coming of Christ and the Lord's Supper and all that's involved in that I will be a God to you and you shall be my people that's the crux of the covenant relationship between God and his people I pledge to be a God to you I will be everything that God should be to you I will be everything that God himself can be to you in covenant relationship I will be all of that to me to you you will not find anything that should be on God's side of the covenant that he is not and at the same time along with that he says and you shall be my people you shall be pledged to be my people to live as my people to serve me as my people to be my willing servants as well as my children and that's really what the confession is saying is picking up those great strands of the Bible's teaching and it's saying that we are engaged in Christ's service when you come to the Lord's

Supper you're coming for your contract to be renewed you're seeking that the Lord will actually confirm to you again that he is pledged to be your God and you're coming on your side of the contract to say Lord I'm here to sign the contract on my part to pledge to be yours which is why the apostle elsewhere reminded the Corinthians that they were not actually their own but they had been bought with a price therefore they were to serve God both in terms of their spiritual service but also their entire service body and in spirit they were the Lord's and there's one thing finally the purpose for the Lord's Supper the confession says for confirming our communion with him and with each other why is it called a communion we began by asking the question what is it to take communion well when you take communion you're actually taking elements that represent a communion and the communion is a communion with Christ but also with each other not just with each other and not just with

Christ it's both it's with Christ first that's where the relationship begins of course without which we wouldn't have that communion with each other but what is that communion what does the word actually mean well communion really in the teaching of the New Testament it has very much to do with what's in that version the two verses we have here in 1 Corinthians 10 it's to partake of or to participate in the blood of Christ and a participation in the body of Christ that means his death of course the blood and the body together really another way of saying his death and we participate in his death because we are joined to him and because we are joined to him we participate in all that his death has achieved for his people it's a partaking it's not just a we tend to think of fellowship as just enjoying each other's company and that's only part of what the word fellowship means the word fellowship communion actually means to share together in something and indeed to have an equal share in things is what you think of when you think of the salvation that God has given us in

Christ together we share in that you can have as much of it as you like it's there in its fullness and it doesn't matter how much anybody actually takes of that salvation and enjoys it the next person can take just as much if not more it's there for everybody to enjoy to the full and as you come to the Lord's supper it is a confirming of your sharing together with him in the redemption that he has himself obtained for us and there is a wonderful emphasis in that because it's not just our sharing together in what Christ has achieved it's sharing together with him in what he has achieved in other words from Christ's side of it he enjoys sharing with us the things that we enjoy that he has got for us we mustn't think that

[28 : 48] Christ is just static that there's no activity at all on his side of the relationship that is simply all on our side as we share together in the things of salvation Christ himself is active in communion with us in fellowship with us in delighting in us as his people in sharing out these blessings they come from him through his spirit you can just picture the thing and the supper of course is again so wonderfully designed to illustrate this what is a family meal there's the head of the table and the family around the table but it's just one family there isn't although there's a distinction between the head and the rest of the family in terms of authority or whatever else there's no distinction in terms of it being the one family and it's the same with Christ and his people they are as

Corinthians here says they are in fact one bread they are one body partaking of the one bread you don't think of yourselves as the body of Christ detached from Christ as the head you don't think of Christ as the head existing separately but from a distance kind of keeping life flowing to us through the means of grace spiritually there's only one body and he is part of it he is the head and you are the members the various parts of that body spiritually that oneness is so important and as you come to the Lord's supper as you take your place at the Lord's table you're there sharing with others in that commonality of sharing together in Christ's redemption with one another and with himself way better do you see it than a spiritual family physically gathered together as whereas spiritually sharing the same elements as they pass it around amongst each other one to the next till they have all taken it equally and that is itself a wonderful way of representing and portraying and actually conveying to us a sense of communion with Christ with each other so that's the purpose for the Lord's supper

I'm just going to finish with our partaking of the Lord's supper secondly because the confession goes on to say this worthy receivers worthy receivers meaning people who are by God's grace made suitably equipped worthy in that sense outwardly partaking of the visible elements in the sacrament do then also inwardly by faith really and indeed feed upon Christ spiritually receiving and feeding upon him and him crucified and all the benefits of his death the body and blood of Christ being not corporally or physically present but yet really but spiritually present to the faith of believers we're just going to pick up a couple of points from that which are important for us just to round off the study our partaking of the Lord's supper confession reminds us there's an outward side to it and there's an inward the outward one is easy enough to follow you break bread you take the bread to yourself you take the cup you eat the bread you drink the cup you share it out amongst each other all of these things that you see with your eyes the physical side of things that's the outward side that's what the confession says is outward partaking you partake of these things in a physical sense but you see the confession isn't just saying that the important thing is the inward because what it's saying is that what you're doing outwardly represents what is inward and spiritual when you reach out and take the cup you're actually reaching out spiritually in your soul and taking

Christ again to yourself when you reach out to take the bread and the cup as representing his death what you're really saying is I am glad again to receive the benefits that this death has obtained for me and when you taste of the bread and of the wine in your mouth you're using your senses as well as looking at it and seeing it and handling it and touching it you're tasting it you're letting it into your body and as it goes into your body you're tasting of these elements that have their own particular taste and all of that is designed by God to represent what you're doing spiritually you are tasting again and seeing that the Lord is good you're receiving and you're taking willingly the things that he has obtained like forgiveness of sin fellowship with God acceptance in his righteousness all of that is there for you but it is important that we realize how Christ is present in the sacrament now when I say that it's also important to realize that not everything that happens in the Lord's

Supper is explainable in human terms it's impossible to explain how it is that a piece of bread and a cup with wine are made spiritually beneficial by God to people who receive them by faith we know that it happens we know that that's the teaching of the Bible we know that that's what comes across to us as the confession summarizes for that teaching of the Bible we know we actually partake of it but to actually explain how exactly that happens in our souls only God knows that and that's one of the reasons why we believe that the Lord's Supper is a special thing because if we could explain all the details of it it would lose a great deal of its specialness and efficacy but how is the body and blood of Christ present well this is what the confession says let me just read it once again the body and blood of Christ are really but spiritually present to the faith of believers now that's against the

[36 : 09] Roman Catholic teaching and the Lutheran teaching that says Christ's body is actually present in the Lord's Supper the priest changes the bread into the physical body of Christ which the reformers found as an abhorrent teaching something which was verging on being blasphemous if not in fact blasphemous so they vehemently denied such a thing happened and they vehemently protested against that understanding of what scripture says that's why the confession is so strong and so careful in the language that's used the body and blood of Christ is present not corporally or carnally or physically in with or under the bread yet it is really present spiritually to the faith of believers when you look at that bread and you look at that wine what you're saying is this is bread and wine but your faith is saying

I am seeing spiritually Christ in his death he and his body is present in heaven his body doesn't come from heaven to be with us in the Lord's supper but the body of Christ Christ in his death the blood that was shed to your faith the confession says it is present in the Lord's supper because it's represented in the elements used so Christ is present but he's present to your faith and he's present because your faith sees spiritually something which your eyes cannot physically and yet your physical sight helps your spiritual one that's the wonder of the Lord's supper part of it and that's why the confession says that it is as really present to the faith of believers as the elements themselves are to their outward senses

Christ's death is as real to your faith as the bread and the cup are to your eyes that's what it says that's what proves that you have faith and that your faith is real because your faith sees Christ in his death just as surely as your eyes see bread and a cup of wine if you didn't have faith you wouldn't see it it wouldn't be present to you and that of course is where we find the great divide and the great distinction what the worldly person and especially the atheist and the humanist and the secular object so vehemently to you actually triumph in what the humanist or secular object to is that you believe something you can't see what you say in response is not only do

I believe it but I rejoice in it I triumph in it I see it with my soul and until you have faith you cannot but when you have faith you cannot but let's go Lord our gracious God help us we pray to be thankful for the simplicity of the supper and yet for its great mystery too we bless you that you gave us such simple elements and such simple actions to partake of as we come to the Lord's supper and yet we thank you oh Lord for the rich and complex spiritual things that are represented in it especially your own death on the cross and the wonderful salvation in all its elements that you have procured for your people grant us Lord as we anticipate remembering you once again in the

Lord's supper that we may do so in a way that is thankful and receptive that we may once again come to have our faith stamped by your own assurance and that we may come to have the benefits of your redemption sealed to us and our communion with you and with each other made even more precious receive our thanks for Jesus sake Amen