

Take, Eat the Bread of Heaven & Drink the Cup of Salvation

by Fr Chris Borah

He took bread. He blessed it. “Take, eat,” Jesus said. “This is my body.”

And then he took a cup. After giving thanks, he said, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant.”

Along with the command to baptize (Mt 28:19), these are the ordinances of Jesus—he said, “Do this, do this, do this.” The bread, the wine, and the water, three physical acts, two “visible signs of grace.” These are the Sacraments ordained by Jesus, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. Article XXV of our 39 Articles of Religion explains our Sacraments like this:

“Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men’s profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God’s good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.” (BCP, p. 781)

Sacraments are not about what *we* do, they are about what *God* has done to us and for us. They are not our “badges” or simply “tokens of [our] profession.” They are grace. Gifts given to us by God. Sacraments give physical strength. Sacraments “confirm” our capital “F” Faith in Jesus.

An Extravagant Show

Article XXV later goes on to say that the Sacraments are not empty rituals intended to be “gazed upon” or “carried about,” clearly referring to the “superstitious” use of the Lord’s Supper in the late middle ages. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The Mass had become a daily performance, when wicked ministers of the gospel flaunted the bread and the wine before the watching laity.

And very often, that’s all the laity did—they watched. “Look, don’t touch.” By the sixteenth century, it had become common practice for lay persons to receive only a morsel of bread (*cf* 1 Cor 11:21). And all too often, they were not allowed to drink from the common cup. But even amidst this idolatrous pageantry, anyone

who came to the Supper with faith and repentance were nourished by God (see Article XXVI).

Physical and Spiritual Eating

The Lord's Supper was given that "we should duly *use*" it, not to be gazed upon or carried about.

"The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner... [it is eaten by] Faith." (XXVIII, BCP, p. 783)

Every Sunday, we give thanks to God for the "spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood" that we have just consumed. The Anglican Church has long recognized that the doctrine of "transubstantiation... is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture" (BCP, p. 783), but "spiritual food" must be *physically* eaten.

Following the Church Fathers, Bishop Thomas Cranmer describes the mystery of the bread and wine that we eat becoming... *us*! As Fr Ben Sharpe always says, "We are what we eat!" Through the miracle of digestion, bread molecules become a part of *me*, wine is joined to my body.

"[T]he bread and wine which we do eat be turned into our flesh and blood and be made our very flesh and our very blood, and so be joined and mixed with our flesh and blood that they be made one whole body together, even so be all faithful Christians spiritually turned into the body of Christ, and so be joined unto Christ, and also together among themselves." (Bp Thomas Cranmer, quoted from, Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers*, p. 213)

Martin Luther said that Christ "is not digested or transformed but ceaselessly he transforms us." Luther continues: "[T]he mouth, the throat, the body, which eats Christ's body, will also have its benefit in that it will live forever and arise on the Last Day to eternal salvation. This is the secret power and benefit which flows from the body of Christ in the Supper into our body."

With characteristic pastoral sensitivity, John Calvin writes, "[T]his mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible, he shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity... For this very familiar comparison penetrates into even the dullest minds: just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so are souls fed by Christ." (Kreglinger, *The Spirituality of Wine*, p. 69)

As St. Paul said, when we eat from the “one bread” and we drink from the “one cup,” we become “one body” (1 Cor 10:16-21). This is spiritual. This is physical. It is mystical. Bp Cranmer concludes,

“[O]ne loaf is given among many men... likewise one cup of wine is distributed unto many persons, whereof every one is partaker, even so our Saviour Christ (whose flesh and blood be represented by the mystical bread and wine of the Lord’s supper) doth give Himself unto all His true members, spiritually to feed them, nourish them, and to give them continual life by Him. And as the branches of a tree or members of a body, if they be dead or cut off, they neither live nor receive any nourishment or sustenance of the body or tree.” (Hughes, *Ibid.*, p. 213)

Why Bread *and* Wine?

In the Christian West, it has long been articulated that Christ cannot be divided in the Sacrament. We receive *all* of Christ in the bread. We receive *all* of Christ in the wine. The Sacrament is not half and half—it’s whole and whole. For pastoral reasons (such as gluten allergies or alcoholism), the Church said that communicants who only received in one kind (either only bread or only wine) received the whole Christ (this is the doctrine of *concomitance*).

But, as so often happens in the history of the church, this theological distinction quickly became a justification for foolish practice. Along with the rest of the Magisterial Reformers, Bp Cranmer gave special attention to the common practice of withholding the Cup of the Lord from the laity in his day.

“The Cup of the Lord is not to be denied to the Lay-people: for both the parts of the Lord’s Sacrament, by Christ’s ordinance and commandment, ought to be ministered to all Christian men alike.” (Article XXX, BCP, p. 784)

“Because Jesus said so.” Underneath the authority of Holy Scripture, Bp Cranmer requires that all baptized followers of Jesus be offered both bread to eat and wine to drink. Bread and wine emphasize different and complementary aspects of the gospel.

Eating the bread by Faith, eating the Body of Christ, brings together so much of the story of redemption accomplished in Christ. The fields of grain in the Garden, the bread of Melchizedek, the manna in the wilderness, Jesus the living bread that comes down from heaven, the one loaf is broken, just as Jesus’ body was

broken for us. All of this rich biblical imagery and fulfillment in Christ (and so much more) is digested as we eat the bread.

Drink The Cup of the Lord

Likewise, the wine that we bless, the Cup of Salvation that we drink brings together even more of Christ's redemptive work on our behalf.

The fruit of the Garden (in both feasting and judgment), Noah's vineyard and his drunkenness, and Melchizedek's feast with Abram of bread and wine. Wine recalls the "blood of the grape" (Gen 49:11; *cf* Deut 32:14), Pharaoh's blood-red river, the Passover lamb's blood over the doorpost, the countless blood sacrifices in the wilderness tabernacle, and the dried blood caked upon the corners of the altar in the temple.

Wine brings together joy and feasting (Ps 104:15) with sacrifice and atonement. The Nazarite vow in Numbers 6—where both men and women were invited to separate themselves to the Lord—this vow brings these two themes of sacrifice and joy together beautifully.

"Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins." (Numbers 6:2-4)

First, the Lord says, "Don't drink wine." Then the Lord gave Moses instructions for the Nazarite to not cut his hair, not go near a dead body, and then detailed instructions for bringing his sacrifice to the tent of meeting: a blood sacrifice, a bread sacrifice, and a wine sacrifice. First, the Nazarite brings his firstfruits to the Lord, and after the rite is complete... the Lord gives wine back to him so that he can feast and give thanks!

"They are a holy portion for the priest, together with the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed. And after that the Nazirite may drink wine." (Numbers 6:20)

Esther's Purim "feasts of wine" (Esther 5:6, 7:8) overthrow Ahasuerus' banquet (1:7-8). In the ancient world, the cup represented the authority of a king and his judgment. Kings pour out their cup in judgment. Drinking Pharaoh's cup

was damnation. Drinking unjust Ahasuerus' cup brought judgment upon you. His wine of *un*-righteousness intoxicates and makes you stumble (Prov 31:2-9). Unjust kings judge with a cup in their hand. But the Lord judges *justly* when he pours out his cup. Peter Leithart explains, according to Jeremiah (49:12), that all these pagan kings “will not be acquitted, but you will certainly drink’ from Yahweh’s cup” (Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry*, p. 105). This is the “cup of the wine of wrath” of God’s righteous judgment against rebellious sinners (Jer 25:27-28). We either drink the cup of Babylon’s judgment and die (Rev 18), or we drink the cup of the Lamb’s judgment and live (Rev 19).

Jesus, the Nazarene, came to fast and then to feast. He came to die and then to rise again. “When I am with you, we feast!” He drank the cup of the righteous judgment and wrath of God for us, and after he made atonement for sins once for all upon the cross, then he gives us His Cup.

“[T]he drinking of wine in the Lord’s Supper draws us into the world of sacrifice... As we sip from the eucharistic cup, we remember that Christ took upon himself God’s judgment on the world. He stepped into the divine winepress and bore the sins and injustices of the world in order that all people might be reconciled with God.” (Kreglinger, *Ibid.*, p. 75)

Why line up and eat from one plate of food? What is the deal with drinking from a cup?

Jesus said, “Eat.”

Jesus said, “Drink.”

We *eat* because Jesus told us to eat. Likewise, we *drink* because he told us to drink. These *two* separate actions (in the *one* Sacrament of Holy Communion) bring together the fullness of what Jesus accomplished for his beloved. Every Lord’s Day, you are invited to eat and to drink, *because* Jesus invites us to eat and to drink. Before we come to the table, we pray in the Prayer for Humble Access, that eating “the flesh” of our dear Jesus makes “our sinful bodies... clean by his body.” And we “drink his blood,” so that “our souls [are] washed through his most precious blood.” Bodies made whole by eating. Souls made clean by drinking.

We invite all baptized followers to come and eat and drink. But the Sacrament of Unity is not life-giving for us because “we do it right.”

Everyone who comes forward to receive *only* the bread, *or* they eat bread and drink wine, *or* they *only* drink the wine, *or* they come to receive the Body dipped into the Blood (intinction) – everyone who comes with faith and repentance receives all of God’s grace in the Sacrament. ***Whether you sip or you dip***, sinful bodies are made clean by eating bread, and dirty souls are washed by drinking his precious blood. All of God’s grace is available to those who come with faith and repentance. We dwell in him and he in us. There are no class distinctions. We are all on level ground at the foot of the cross.

Leithart perfectly describes the redemption of Christ that we are invited to participate in when we come to the Cup of the Lord.

“We can rise from the table either gladdened or staggering. And we would all fall but for the fact that Jesus Himself has drunk His Father’s cup to its dregs: “If possible, let this cup pass from Me.” But it was not possible, and so He took your portion, staggered, and fell. He drained the cup that the King had given to us and now gives us to drink of His cup, a cup of joy.” (Leithart, *Ibid.*, p. 106)

“Jesus Bread is for Bad Guys”

In the famous words of our five year old saint Barnabas, “Jesus bread is for bad guys.” We must come to the table. If we come *without* humility, the cup that we drink will bring condemnation, division, and death. But if we come *with* humility, the cup that we drink will bring judgment—the judgment of Jesus’s righteousness for our sin, his purity for our filth, his holiness for our disordered loves. Redemption and unity can only be found in Christ, where branches are grafted into the vine—married, redeemed, restored together to feast with everlasting joy.

“The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” With these words, the celebrant has the great joy of offering bread to eat. “The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.” The deacon has the honor to offer the wine to drink. Every part of the story of God comes together at the table. Every broken member is healed together in one body. Every staggering soul is washed in the blood.

I have loved writing these Eucharistic reflections. With every book I've read and re-read, with every prayer, with every story and every theme that I have traced through Holy Scripture, with every conversation with all of *you*—in all these things I have been nourished. But every word still feels “feeble and insufficient” (Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, p. 209).

Union with Christ is an unsearchable mystery. The grace of the Sacrament of Unity is as deep as the ocean. Because of the cross of Christ, we can find life in Him, we can ascend with Him into heavenly places, and we can share the *koinonia* of our King on earth as it is in heaven. But we can never simply *know* all of this. We must *eat* it. We must *drink* it to the dregs.

“Though the Eucharist does not bypass the mind and conscious reflection, the effect it has is more in the realm of acquiring a skill than in the realm of learning a new set of facts; the effect is more a matter of “training” than “teaching.” At the Supper, we eat bread and drink wine together with thanksgiving not merely to *show* the way things really ought to be but to *practice* the way things really ought to be.” (Leithart, *Ibid.*, p. 184)

“Jesus bread is for bad guys.” All baptized followers of our Lord Jesus Christ who come with faith in Jesus and repentance for sin is welcome at His Table. Don't delay. Gather on the Lord's Day to feast. Everlasting joy, purchased by blood, is prepared for you. Come to the table. Come and eat. Come and drink, and live. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**