

Do Roman Catholic and Reformed Celebrate True Communion? Worthy Reception of the Lord's Supper 1 Corinthians 11:27-29

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“Value” and “worth” are words that every American understands. If you have ever been to a flea market or dickered over the price of a car or someone’s used wares at a rummage sale, you have put that understanding into practice. In our culture we are very comfortable with ascribing differing values or worth to material possessions.

We are also quite comfortable assigning value and worth to services that people render. Spraying for insects around my house has less value to me than what a doctor does when he sets a broken bone. Even the level of service that I receive has a different worth to me. I reward a waitress who brings my meal in a timely manner and refills my water glass with a larger tip than I would someone who carries out those functions in a less efficient manner. I judge one service to be of greater value than another.

A judgment of value with which Americans are particularly uncomfortable is setting a value on people. In this country we fought a war of independence, a civil war and are now in the midst of a cultural war that suggests everyone is of the same value or worth. We treasure the Declaration of Independence which states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident... All men are created equal.”

From a Scriptural standpoint, we know that *[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*¹ and *The Lord [wants] everyone to come to repentance*.²

It is no surprise then that the agenda committee saw a need to talk about worthy or unworthy communicants. Because of our culture, some in our churches (pulpits?) are decidedly uncomfortable with upholding the answers to these questions precisely because they require a judgment of worth or value that seems un-American (un-Christian?). Throw in the ties of family and friends and the idea of worth becomes so emotional that many a seasoned minister has blinked in this regard.

Yet God makes it clear that not all communicants, not all communion practices, and not all communion belief is created equal. So what is a worthy communicant? Do all Christians celebrate true communion, or more precisely, do Roman Catholic and the Reformed celebrate true communion?

What Is True Communion?

Paul tells us: *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: 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.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.*³

¹ 1 Timothy 2:4

² 2 Peter 3:9

³ 1 Corinthians 11:23-29.

What do we believe Paul to mean when he writes these words? Another way of putting it is, “What is the sacrament of Holy Communion? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ together with the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink.”⁴ We have coined the term “real presence” to define what the Scriptures say about the Lord’s Supper.

The initial words spoken by Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper make this possible. Because his word is efficacious and because he commanded us to continue to celebrate his Supper in this way, the same body and blood which were present on that first Maundy Thursday are present for us today.

To have true communion, then, it is “imperative that the congregation unmistakably declare its intention to celebrate the Lord’s Supper.”⁵ A congregation does that by repeating what Jesus did. We call this the “words of institution.” This is also called the “consecration.” The consecration is the “act whereby bread and wine are detached from their ordinary use and appointed to the use in the Lord’s Supper... set apart to this end, that with the bread, according to Christ’s promise, the body of Christ and with the wine, according to Christ’s promise, the blood of Christ be received.”⁶ Without this intent and without these words, the communicants would receive no more than bread and wine. With these words the body and blood of Christ become really present in the bread and wine.

The Formula of Concord puts it this way,

For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ which He spake at the first institution were efficacious not only at the first Supper, but they endure, are valid, operate, and are still efficacious [their force, power, and efficacy endure and avail even to the present], so that in all places where the Supper is celebrated according to the institution of Christ, and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received, because of the power and efficacy of the words which Christ spake at the first Supper. For where His institution is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup [wine], and the consecrated bread and cup [wine] are distributed, Christ Himself, through the spoken words, is still efficacious by virtue of the first institution, through His word, which He wishes to be there repeated.⁷

What does the Roman Catholic Church Teach About Communion?

When these clear words are manipulated in a system of theology with all of its presuppositions, this clear teaching is removed. The Roman Catholic church is one of those groups who muddy these waters.

The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: “Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.”⁸

By consecration they mean using what we call the words of institution. In summary, it is the belief of Rome that bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, so that, in their view, a communicant receives only the body and blood of Christ. After the consecration, they believe that there is no more bread and wine. After communion is completed, they would say that all consecrated elements remain only as the body and blood of the Lord.

⁴ Kuske, David, *Luther’s Small Catechism*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982, p 13.

⁵ Pieper, F., *Christian Dogmatics Vol. III*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953, p. 366.

⁶ Pieper, F., *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁷ S.D., VII, 75; *Triglotta*, p 999.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1994, p. 347.

What do the Reformed Teach About Communion?

There is yet a third view of the Lord's Supper which is expressed by the vast majority of Protestants today. The Southern Baptist Convention makes the following claims about their beliefs:

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.⁹

A classic definition of the faith of many of the Reformed is found in what they call the Heidelberg Catechism. It serves virtually the same purpose for the Reformed that Luther's Small Catechism serves for us. This is from the Heidelberg Catechism:

78. Q. Are then the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ?

A. No. Just as the water of baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ and is not the washing away of sins itself but is simply God's sign and pledge, so also the bread in the Lord's supper does not become the body of Christ itself, although it is called Christ's body in keeping with the nature and usage of sacraments.¹⁰

In summary, those who follow the Reformed (Calvin¹¹) believe in "representation." They go so far as to say that in the consecration, "the Lord's Supper has to do only with persons and not with the sacramental elements."¹² They do not believe that a communicant receives the true body and blood of the Lord, but merely a symbol in the bread and wine.

When we talk about the "Reformed," we usually lump all of Christianity that is not Catholic or Lutheran into their camp. That is as accurate as saying that all Lutherans are the same. Today more American Protestants are followers of Jacob Arminius¹³ than John Calvin. Although their belief on Communion is the same as that of John Calvin, I believe it appropriate to show you that with all of the differences between Calvin and Arminius, they are in complete agreement when it comes to Communion.

II. We define it thus: The Lord's supper is a sacrament of the New Testament immediately instituted by Christ for the use of the church to the end of time, in which, by the legitimate external distribution, taking, and enjoyment of bread and wine, the Lord's death is announced, and the inward receiving and enjoyment of the body and blood of Christ are signified; and that most intimate and close union or fellowship, by which we

⁹ *The Baptist Faith and Message*, Adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention June 14, 2000. www.utm.edu/martinarea/fbc/bfm.html.

¹⁰ *Heidelberg Catechism*. This version authorized by the Canadian and American Reformed Churches, www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html.

¹¹ John Calvin's beliefs are summed up in the following five doctrines (**TULIP**): **T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible Grace, **P**erseverance of the Saints. According to Calvin salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the Triune God. The Father chose a people, the Son died for them, the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus God, not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.

¹² Pieper, F., *Ibid.* p. 366.

¹³ In direct contrast to Calvin, Arminius promoted the following five doctrines: Free Will, Conditional Election, General Atonement, The Holy Spirit Can Be Effectually Resisted, Falling from Grace. According to Arminius, salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond) – man's response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, "choose" to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. At the crucial point, man's will plays a decisive role; thus man, not God, determines who will be recipients of the gift of salvation.

are joined to Christ our Head, is sealed and confirmed on account of the institution of Christ, and the analogical relation of the sign to the thing signified. But by this, believers profess their gratitude and obligation to God, communion among themselves, and a marked difference from all other persons...

- IV. The matter is, bread and wine; which, with regard to their essence, are not changed, but remain what they previously were; neither are they, with regard to place, joined together with the body or blood, so that the body is either in, under, or with the bread, &c.; nor in the use of the Lord's Supper can the bread and wine be separated, that, when the bread is held out to the laity, the cup be not denied to them.¹⁴

You may have noticed that although there is a strong emphasis on the institution by Christ, there is no emphasis whatsoever on consecration. Reformed and Arminians believe that they are receiving only bread and wine and do so only as a matter of obedience to the command of (ordinance) or obligation to God.

What Is Worthy Reception?

Having been reminded of the main beliefs on the Lord's Supper, it is only right to ask, "Are these differences important?" "Does it really matter or is this nothing more than the word-smithing of theologians whose arguments are far above the understanding and concern of the common Christian?"

According to Paul we cannot simply ignore these differences, because of the potential spiritual disaster that faces all those who receive the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. *Therefore, 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.*¹⁵

Defining a worthy and an unworthy communicant is even more important when we consider that verse. It should be very clear that without proper consecration the bread and wine are received as nothing more than bread and wine, just as baptism is no more than just water without the word of God used with it. But used in connection with the words and promises of God bread and wine, body and blood are received by everyone who takes the Lord's Supper, both believer and unbeliever, worthy and unworthy alike.

The Formula of Concord says:

The true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are truly and essentially present in the Supper, are distributed with the bread and wine and received orally by all those who use this sacrament, irrespective of whether they are worthy or unworthy, good or evil, believing or unbelieving.¹⁶

So what is being "unworthy?" The Greek word¹⁷ used here is an adverb which means to do something "in an unworthy or careless manner." This is the only place in the New Testament where this adverb occurs. In contrast to that, the opposite "worthy"¹⁸ occurs 53 times in the New Testament. It means to be fit, proper, equal. If it is possible to be fit, then it is also possible to be unfit. Specifically, it is possible to be unfit to take the Lord's Supper. So when is that? Paul 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. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

¹⁴ Arminius, Jacob, *Works of Arminius*, Disputation LXIV, On the Lord's Supper. www.godrules.net/library/arminius.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:27

¹⁶ S.D., VII, 75; *Triglotta*, p 809.

¹⁷ a) naci/wj

¹⁸ a@cioj

A worthy communicant is a disciple (*someone who can remember the Lord's death*), who is repentant (*ought to examine himself*) and who believes in the promise that Jesus made about this bread and wine (*recognizing the body of the Lord*).

It is somewhat surprising that with the distinct differences throughout Christendom when it comes to teaching about the Lord's Supper that there is a general consensus that a communicant needs to be repentant and that the Supper is only for believers. Luther said:

First, those who openly live in sin or who willfully harbor evil thoughts, such as of hatred, of uncleanness, and the like, shall not receive the sacrament. Until they shun these sins, the church's precept is not meant for them. It is better to obey God's command [Acts 5:29]. It is better to refrain from receiving the sacrament than to receive it and thereby sin against God's commandment, which forbids the holy sacrament to such sinners.¹⁹

The Roman Catholic Catechism says:

To respond to this invitation we must prepare ourselves for so great and so holy a moment. St. Paul urges us to examine our conscience... Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion.... To prepare for worthy reception of this sacrament, the faithful should observe the fast required in their Church. Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest.²⁰

For the Reformed, the Heidelberg Catechism says:

81. Q. Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

A. Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

82. Q. Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation. Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.²¹

It is plain from these witnesses that there is general agreement that worthy communicants are repentant disciples.

So what about recognizing the body and blood of the Lord? As we have already seen, there is a great difference in belief. It might be tempting to suggest that there is no harm, no foul if people simply don't believe. But that's what unworthy means. *Therefore, 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.*²²

¹⁹ *Luther's Works, Vol. 42.* "Sermon On The Worthy Reception of The Sacrament." Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, p. 171.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*, p. 350.

²¹ *Heidelberg Catechism. Ibid.*

²² 1 Corinthians 11:27

The Reformed have a problem with the word “unworthy” in this regard. On the one hand they say that those who receive the Lord’s Supper should be repentant disciples. They also say that determination of whether they receive the Lord’s Supper worthily is based solely on the faith of the one receiving it. On the other hand – and there is the inconsistency – they also say that the one who does not believe, yet comes to the Lord’s table, does not receive the Lord’s Supper anyway because they claim that worthy reception is based on the faith of the individual rather than on the objective consecration of the elements. In other words, in their view there is a worthy reception (if someone is a repentant disciple), but there is not an unworthy reception (for an unbeliever). Our confessions directly contradict that notion:

For that not only the godly, pious, and believing Christians, but also unworthy, godless hypocrites, as Judas and his ilk, who have no spiritual communion with Christ, and go to the Table of the Lord without true repentance and conversion to God, also receive orally in the Sacrament the true body and [true] blood of Christ, and by their unworthy eating and drinking grievously sin against the body and blood of Christ, St. Paul teaches expressly. For he says, 1 Cor. 11, 27: *Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily*, sins not merely against the bread and wine, not merely against the signs or symbols and emblems of the body and blood, but *shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ*, which, as there [in the Holy Supper] present, he dishonors, abuses, and disgraces, as the Jews, who in very deed violated the body of Christ and killed Him; just as the ancient Christian Fathers and church teachers unanimously have understood and explained this passage.²³

To be a worthy communicant one must receive the Lord’s Supper believing in the body and blood of the Lord. Those who don’t believe still receive the body and blood whether they believe it or not. The difference is that all those who discern the body and blood of the Lord are blessed through their reception. Those who do not discern it are unworthy communicants and receive the Lord’s Supper to their judgment.

7. We believe, teach, and confess that not only the true believers [in Christ] and the worthy, but also the unworthy and unbelievers, receive the true body and blood of Christ; however, not for life and consolation, but for judgment and condemnation, if they are not converted and do not repent, 1 Cor. 11, 27. 29.²⁴

Are the Catholics and Reformed Communing in an Unworthy Manner?

It is entirely fair to say that Rome and the Reformed do not celebrate communion in a way that is pleasing to Jesus. This is one of the lacking marks of the orthodox Christian church that leads us to avoid them as heterodox.

With that being said, however, the basis for the unbelief of those who commune in these different churches is very different from each other. The Roman Catholic church has a proper consecration according to what Scripture says. We cannot deny that their consecration practice is exactly what Jesus commanded in the original institution of the Lord’s Supper. What they say about it is the problem. The Catholic church’s insistence on calling the Lord’s Supper a sacrifice (among other abuses), and yet still using the words of institution, prevent anyone who believes and receives Communion in a Catholic church from ever being a worthy communicant at the Lord’s altar. It is good to see their insistence on repentance for all disciples who come to commune in their church, but as long as this beautiful gift of God’s grace is demeaned into work righteousness, no one will ever be able to receive the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner.

²³ S.D. VII, 60. *Triglotta*, p. 993

²⁴ Epitome, VII, 16. *Triglotta*, p. 813

For the Reformed, it would seem that a similar condemnation is in order. But there are significant differences in their problems. Their consecration of the Lord's supper is *not* according to Christ's direction. They have no intention whatsoever of celebrating the Lord's Supper as our Lord desired. Because their teaching and their practice are incorrect, we cannot condemn them for being unworthy at the Lord's table in their own churches because they are not celebrating the Lord's Supper.

Because the Reformed publicly declare that they do not have the intention of celebrating the Supper with the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood, but pronounce such a sacrament an abomination, they are in fact not celebrating the Supper Christ gave to his Church. The Reformed doctrine is an actual disavowal and renunciation of Christ's words of institution. Hence they have no word of God for their Supper; He did not institute a Supper in which bread and wine are distributed and received as symbols of the absent body and blood of Christ.²⁵

The Formula of Concord recognized this also in a quote from Martin Luther:

After this protestation, Doctor Luther, of blessed memory, presents, among other articles, this also: In the same manner I also speak and confess (he says) concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, that there the body and blood of Christ are in truth orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even though the priests [ministers] who administer it [the Lord's Supper], or those who receive it, should not believe or otherwise misuse it. For it does not depend upon the faith or unbelief of men, but upon God's Word and ordinance, unless they first change God's Word and ordinance and interpret it otherwise, as the enemies of the Sacrament do at the present day, who, of course, have nothing but bread and wine; for they also do not have the words and appointed ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own [false] notion.²⁶

In a sense, the Lord's supper for the Reformed is much like Baptism in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is for Latter Day Saints. The Latter Day Saints may use the words, but they are not baptizing in the name of the triune God. They are baptizing in the name of gods. As a result we do not recognize LDS baptism. Any former LDS member who becomes WELS is baptized in the name of the triune God. We correctly say that they were never baptized properly in the first place because they have "perverted and changed" the trinitarian formula "according to their own [false] notion."

Certainly the Reformed Lord's Supper is not as crass or idolatrous as the baptism of the Latter Day Saints, but the basic principle is still the same. They do not receive the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner because they are not celebrating the Lord's Supper according to Christ's institution.

Conclusion

Some of these conclusions may be self-evident at this point. For Catholics who come to our churches it is important that they be thoroughly instructed about Communion so that none of this unworthiness remains when they finally are admitted to our Tables. It is perhaps even more true for those who may come to us from Reformed backgrounds. A thorough instruction which emphasizes the sacramental nature and the grace of God will be necessary lest they eventually come to Communion in our churches and receive the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. Although they may not be unworthy communicants within their churches, they certainly would be if they were admitted to our Communion table without prior instruction.

²⁵ Pieper, F., *Ibid.* p. 371.

²⁶ S.D. VII, 32. *Triglotta*, p. 983.

One can't help but also be concerned for the members of our own congregations who may well be tempted to receive the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. The important concept is to promote preparation. I think there are a number of things we can do to accomplish this aim, but at the same time, we must remember that enhanced procedures don't guarantee better examination. We as pastors can help this situation by making announcements the week before Communion about the importance of proper preparation. Giving our people a refresher course on proper examination and what the Lord's Supper is all about wouldn't hurt either. What about alerting the members of the congregation to the Christian Questions on page 320 of the revised Kuske Catechism which Luther wrote with this specific purpose in mind? Directing them to page 156 at the front of Christian Worship could accomplish the same end. Offering private examination might be good too.

Finally, maybe we can use those special communion services like Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, New Year's Eve, etc. to stress the distinction between the Lord's Supper and an ordinary supper. In looking over some of the pericopes, I found that communion texts are, for the most part, limited to Maundy Thursday. Surely the Lord's Supper has more importance than one sermon for one midweek service per year!

Our communion service faithfully follows the command of Christ. Our instruction faithfully teaches people the truth of God's Word. I think WELS members are fairly faithful when it comes to the Lord's Supper. That is exactly the reason we must keep on striving to improve – to make sure that our communicants remain worthy communicants. As we remain faithful and keep on educating, look at the great blessings we will reap – the very body and blood of the Lord is to assure us of the forgiveness of our sins. Maybe it is best said in a communion hymn by Thomas Aquinas from the Middle Ages that never found its way into our hymnal:

<i>Sumunt boni, sumunt mali,</i>	Godly men and godless eat it,
<i>Sorte tamen inaequali</i>	But the way in which they treat
<i>Vitae et interitus.</i>	it
<i>Mors est malis, vita bonis,</i>	Brings upon them bliss or
<i>Vide, paris sumptionis</i>	bane.
<i>Quam sit dispar exitus.</i>	Death the godless are
	receiving,
	Life is there for the believing –
	Equal food, unequal gain. ²⁷

²⁷ Hoenecke, A., *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics IV*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, p. 143.