

This Do...But Should I, Lord?

The Recovering Alcoholic and Holy Communion

A Personal Statement

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by: *David Schottey*

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it and gave it to his disciples, and, said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you, *this do* in remembrance of me.’

After the same manner also he took the cup when he had supped, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Take, drink, *ye all* of it; this cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins; *this do*, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.”¹

How many times since sobriety became important in our lives has the topic of “the alcoholic’s attendance at the Lord’s Supper” come up at a local AA meeting? Have you ever discussed it at a meeting? Perhaps not. In the past eight years, I personally have never heard it discussed around the tables.² Why? Because probably to the average AA member (if there is such a one), the question of attending the Lord’s Supper is a relatively unimportant aspect in his new life. There is, to my knowledge, no reference made to it in either the “Big Book” or in the “12 and 12” whatsoever.³

Many coming in to AA have long since strayed from regular church attendance, if there had ever even been “church” in their lives before. Other churches place varying emphases on the importance of the Lord’s Supper and its place in a Christian’s life. So those who had even at one time attended church and had taken Communion, may have a somewhat indifferent attitude towards it, and its importance in the rebuilding of one’s spiritual life.

We, however, are somewhat different than they. Our God is the God of Holy Scripture. Our “higher power” is God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and *in his care*, and *at his direction* we seek to rebuild our once shattered spiritual lives. As we begin (again) to regularly attend services to hear the preaching of the Word, we may once again come to realize how great an importance our church does place on the Lord’s Supper. We will see it celebrated monthly, or even oftener. We will hear the words “This do” ‘spoken’ by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and His words are important to us. We will desire to grow spiritually stronger, even as we endeavor to grow stronger in our AA program. And soon, the question will arise by itself—Yes, Lord, I know I *should*, but should I, Lord?? And because the Lord’s Supper does involve the use of wine (alcohol), we must and should carefully and prayerfully evaluate our approach to it. Our sobriety and our faith are to a large extent intertwined. And they both are far too important for us to base our approach to the Lord’s Supper on our own personal opinion, or the opinion of one or two others.

Why Did Christ Institute the Lord’s Supper?

¹ Scriptural References for the Institution of the Lord’s Supper – Matt 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:1-20, I Cor. 11:17-34

² This may be routinely discussed at a Treatment or Detox. Center, but I have no experience in this area, so I can not say.

³ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd Ed. 1976., and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, copyright 1952-3. Both are from Alcoholic Anonymous World Services, Inc of New York and are “textbooks” of AA.

Simply put, Jesus gave us this gift shortly before he died to *strengthen faith by (through) the forgiveness of sins*. Luther, in his Small Catechism, “Christ gives and *seals into* each communicant *personally* the forgiveness of sins purchased for him on the cross”⁴ Even though we have the forgiveness of sins through the Word of God. God, in his wisdom, gave us another way, . . . a visible *guarantee*, . . . a tangible assurance that *we personally* and *individually* can receive.

It is true that we *hear* many times of the forgiveness of sins. We, together with all Christians, *hear it announced* to us every Sunday. In our regular service liturgy, we hear the minister say, “Almighty God, our Heavenly Father hath had mercy upon us, and for His sake *forgiveth us all our sins* . . .”⁵ Or, Communion Sundays, as the focus of our worship points us towards the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we hear it *said* in yet another way, as the minister says, “Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, *announce* the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead, and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I *forgive you all your sins* . . .”⁶

We *hear* again, and hopefully often, in our pastor’s sermon(s) that Christ *has* accomplished (past tense!) our reconciliation with God, that we *are* forgiven, God does forgive us and that there is *now no* more lingering fear or doubt.

And yet again when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we pray that our Father would so teach us to forgive others with that perfect kind of forgiveness as he *has* already bestowed on us.

When we read our Bibles at home we again “hear,” in yet another way, God say to us that we *are* forgiven. That’s because the central theme of the Word, whether preached, prayed, recited, or read, is and always will be, the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus, our Savior.

But we, as recovering alcoholics, are still prone to the “I-am-Unique” syndrome that many of us felt when we were drinking. We may be even *more* prone to it now as we look around church at our fellow believers. After all, we are/were the most miserable sinner(s) in this congregation, weren’t we? Our past sins were *much* larger than their petty sins could ever be, aren’t they? After all, Lord, we “wallowed in alcoholism” and all the sins that came with it, didn’t we? Weren’t we the unfaithful spouses, the bad parents, the gross liars, cheaters and thieves? And on top of all of that, some of us did all that while loudly professing to be “good Christians” didn’t we? Can we really expect equal forgiveness for all that, Lord? I mean, we know that you forgive the ‘regular sinners’, but *us*, Lord??

It is for *precisely* this reason, and at this time that Jesus comes to us with his Lord’s Supper. We—just as other ‘regular sinners’ can and do become oppressed and depressed as we each, in our own way, view our past lives of sin. We all can, and sometimes do, doubt that God can forgive *us*, . . . everyone else, yes, of course, but not us, especially not me. Then Jesus comes to us, much as He did with His disciple Thomas. Thomas needed to see, touch, taste, handle, to believe that Christ had arisen. He had been shaken very deeply by the crucifixion. And we too, as with *all* other believers—when we are shaken to the point of doubting God’s love and forgiveness by the magnitude of our past sinful lives, we, too, need to see, hear, touch, taste and handle, just as he did. We too need that tangible, visible, able-to-be-sensed- by-our-senses assurance that *we* are truly and in fact, forgiven. And we alcoholics *especially*, who so often are so easily reminded of what we have done, lost, or thrown away because of our drinking—we perhaps more than any other ‘regular’ Christian sinner/saint (if there indeed are such) need the

⁴ Luther’s Small Catechism, page 223, question/answer #405

⁵ The Lutheran Hymnal, page 6

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 16

physical assurance and re-assurance again and again . . . and again in our lives that *we too are included* in God's Forgiveness.

And this brings us to another "purpose" of the Lord's Supper...a purpose that many all too often overlook, or undervalue. But to those of us who were either absent from the Lord's Table, or although physically present, felt self-excluded from the fellowship of believers, Christ comes to us in the Lord's Supper as an "exercise in Christian Unity of Faith and Confession."

It is important for us to realize that we *all* come to the Lord's Table for the same reason. We all come with the same need—the need for forgiveness (...”for *all* have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”-Romans 3:23, “.but the Scripture hath concluded *all* under sin..”-Galatians 3:22). Not only all members of our local congregation, nor even of just our Synod, but *all* Christians, throughout *all* Christendom, all over the world, *all* come *equally* in *need* and searching for the *same* benefit, the assurance of the forgiveness of *their* sin.

This can be especially important to us as recovering alcoholics. We have felt in the past, and sometimes even now, estranged from the *fellowship* of believers, and of our local churches. Perhaps we feel especially unworthy of that fellowship. Perhaps some of our more manifest past sins involved other church members or hurt them (for which we may owe some future amends). Or perhaps we can not help comparing our lack of Christian life with someone else's obviously exemplary life and character—with the result that we become filled with self-hatred and loathing, and begin to be plagued by an accusing conscience.

It is just then that we must realize that communion is open to *all* who confess their penitence and in faith look for the assurance of the forgiveness of their sins that is here offered. God does not open Holy Communion up to *only* those who have reached a certain level of sanctified life. He says, "Take, drink, ye *all*..", yes, *all* of you! Come! God does not 'grade' sinfulness (as you and I sometimes do). Very few of us could say that we ever felt "better" than those "others" who come to the Lord's Table. Rather, we have felt that we were the "worst" who came (if we did come) because we could not lick our alcoholism and kept repeating the same sinful behaviors over and over, and over again. But we must remember that *all* come for forgiveness. *All* are *equally* in need in God's sight. *All* come for the same assurance and the strengthening necessary to fight against sin (which is indeed the "disease" that infects us all).

It too may be just as important an exercise in the "unity of the fellowship by faith" for the other congregation members. Our past misdeeds may indeed have been very, very great, and very publicly *known*. And those Christians who observed our sinful behaviors over perhaps quite a period of time, can also do what God tells them *not* to do, . . .Don't Compare! Their comparing could lead to feelings of self-righteousness, "looking down their noses" at those they feel are "less sanctified" Christians. They may feel that because of the depths of sin to which the alcoholic plummeted, he/she has somehow forfeited the right to attend the Lord's Table as others do.

It is then that they need to be reminded that no matter how great *they* think our past sins have been...nor even how great we think they have been...God calls us to repent *now*, and through Holy Communion to seek Christ's help and strength to lead a new, (more) sanctified life in Him. This bond of fellowship—the same need for forgiveness—the same equal status of all persons before God (sinners),--the same need to repent—the same need for strengthening, is what God wants to encourage in *us all* through the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It unites us not only with all other members of our local congregation, or of our Synod world-wide, but with *all* true Christians throughout the whole world wherever the Lord's Supper is celebrated as it ought to be.

But even though we (recovering) alcoholics are just the same as all others at the Lord's Table—the same need as sinners to receive the assurance of forgiveness—we are “different” in one respect. We are “alcohol allergic”. We must carefully, deliberately, and reasonably consider our partaking of Holy Communion on that basis also, because it does involve (or can) the drinking of wine (alcohol).

Questions an Alcoholic Must Also Consider

Early on in A.A., I asked another member about going to Holy Communion, because it involved the drinking of wine. I had just begun ‘sobriety’ and wanted to know if I would be forever self-excluded from the regular public celebration of Communion in Church (and should I request private Communion with grape juice after the service as another member whom I knew was also an alcoholic had done). His reply was that “there’s a world of difference between ‘beverage’ alcohol and Holy Communion.” Though I was at first very pleased, saying to myself that that was of course true, later reflection told me that this was *his* opinion. We were no longer on Scriptural ground, and what may be right for him may have some serious ramifications for another.

After all, Scripture does not state, nor do we confess, that the wine changes *into* Christ's blood. We use the terms “in, with, and under”⁷ to express our belief that *both* are present, the wine, and the blood of Christ. And since wine is wine is wine, and wine contains the alcohol which did indeed and in fact make of us alcoholics, we must use our God-given and God-directed reason as we approach its possible usage and how it may affect us. (To state that Christ would not direct us to do anything that would harm us is in *this case* very over-simplistic and superstitious, as we shall see.)

Alcoholism As A Physical Addiction To, A Physical Allergy To Alcohol

There is much written about the psychological addiction to alcohol, and how alcoholism begins with many of us with alcoholic thinking patterns. But there is also the very actual, very real physical addiction/allergy to be considered. And to many this is a very important “core of the matter” issue.

Many members of our local A.A. group will use no cough syrup containing alcohol, nor certain mouthwash preparations, prescription pain killers (especially those with codeine, etc), nor any type of prescription decongestants or antihistamines. Why? Because their use can bring on the fears, the “jitters”, the alcoholic-type “highs” or “buzzes”, hangovers, and other symptoms just as when they were drinking. Many claim—and I have no justification to refute their claim—that their sensitivity is not *only* psychologically based, but also and most assuredly *physically* based. Therefore, *any* use of pain suppressants containing narcotics, or *any* preparation which contains a percentage of alcohol presents a clear and present danger to them, *physiologically* endangering their previous withdrawal from alcohol. These persons are even willing to readily endure the severe physical pains following such things as wisdom tooth extractions, post-surgical recoveries, and such like without any stronger pain-killers than common aspirin or Tylenol.

Others, myself included, have readily made use of injections of Demerol following surgery, Tylenol with codeine following tooth extractions, and have never had to check the labels on cough syrups or mouthwashes, nor have we suffered any ill effects or “slips” because

⁷ Luther's Small Catechism page 221, #399

we used them. And this *difference among alcoholics* points us to the first question or consideration—How *physically* sensitive to alcohol am I?—What was the length of my drinking “career”?—To what extent/depth did I become *physically* addicted to alcohol?—How sensitive is *my body* to other substances which contain a % of alcohol, and which are *not* made *primarily* for drinking or beverage purposes?

These questions must be thoroughly explored and answered on an individual basis.

As an example, one of my daughters is allergic to milk. The ingestion of milk will bring on *physical* symptoms. However, she can tolerate an occasional glass of chocolate milk, and appears to have no sensitivity whatsoever to cheese, cottage cheese, or to ice cream, which she can and does freely indulge in and enjoy.

What each of us must know and consider is this: Will even a small sip of wine ingested in Church at Holy Communion cause a *physical* reaction within my system and endanger my sobriety?

(As an aside, we might also take a moment and ask ourselves about our psychological addiction. What is my attitude as I approach the Lord’s Supper? Is there a fear that this sip of wine could cause me to slip? Or do I come in trust and belief, knowing that it will not *in my case*?)

Since *all* alcoholics are different, each with a different degree of physical and psychological addition, each with a different length of sobriety, different growth in the AA program and in faith, I propose the following as:

Some Sensible Guidelines

Please understand that these are *carefully evaluated opinions only*

1. Explore and Understand your various *options*. There are some.
 - A. Regular Communion, in Church, with wine
 - B. Private Communion with Grape Juice
 - C. Churches which use individual cups could make arrange to fill one or more with grape juice.
 - D. A drop of wine may be placed in larger amount (1 oz) of water to dilute it.

It is important to remember and know that even when Communion is taken with grape juice, this is *still* Holy Communion. As Luther reminds us, the power is in the *Word*, not in the wine (the element)⁸. To receive it either way, you are affirming our Church’s confessional stand, not denying it. Most pastors will/do understand. However you may find one or two who don’t, and you will have to educate *him*, carefully and prayerfully.

2. If you were in a Detox./Treatment center
 - A. Give AA a chance to sink in. Much is said about 90 meetings in 90 days, and it is this author’s considered opinion that at least 3 months of abstinence should be attained before Holy Communion participation needs to be considered.

⁸ Luther’s *Small Catechism*, p. 224, # 407

- B. Discuss the matter with your Pastor *Beforehand*, and discuss it *thoroughly*. Let him know that this is very important to you, and he will listen.
 - C. *If in doubt, don't at this time*. There is no time limit, and if the fear of the wine's effect does not pass in time, remember, there are the other options.
 - D. If the use of wine causes a "reaction" upon the first occasion, *stop*. Exercise your option to use grape juice, rather than endanger your sobriety.
3. Talk with your pastor
- A. Use this issue to open up and further your relationship with him. He is the key to your growing spiritually in your local congregation. *You* may be the key to *his* growth in understanding what "alcoholism" is and is not. It has been this writer's experience that many of our Synod's best trained and most faithful pastors are woefully ignorant and untrained when it comes to alcoholism and AA.
 - B. Makes sure that he understands your anonymity as an AA member. He has no right to violate that.
 - C. Make sure that he understands that if you choose to take Holy Communion in church with wine that it does *not* mean that you're "cured", or that you've returned to drinking again.
 - D. And finally, Make sure that *both* of you understand that if you do decide that *your needs* require the use of grape juice for Holy Communion, you are not "less of a Christian",
4. If you have a Sponsor; *talk this over with him*
- A. He may have some other helpful ideas, or suggestions.
 - B. If Holy Communion with wine causes a reaction, you'll be calling on him anyway, won't you?

In closing, let me say again that each of us as a Christian recovering alcoholic is a different (person) individual. What may bother me, may not bother another. There are at least two of us in my home congregation. One of us partakes of Holy Communion with wine in the congregational setting, the other with grape juice privately, after the service. Both of us celebrate the Lord's Supper; both of us need and receive the blessings of it.

I can not, nor can anyone, *tell* you what you should do. No one can judge you or second-guess you about whichever way *you* choose as best for you. It must be your individual decision, based upon your faith and your Christian common sense, well advised. Remember, even the "Twelve Steps of AA" are a *suggested* program of recovery. I can offer no more than that here.

But that does *not* mean that I leave the *attending* of the Lord's Table as a matter of personal decision. Jesus said, "This do." Should I, Lord? Absolutely yes! There are far too many blessings for me to receive from it for me to miss out on by not partaking of this most wonderful gift.

But should I...with wine?? You must make that decision as the Lord leads you and when the time is right. God be with you.