



Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter
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Holy Communion

A Sermon Defining and Discussing the Sacrament of Holy Communion

For the past two weeks we have been considering the “Lord’s Own Teaching” given to the Apostles during period between the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead, and His Ascension into heaven forty days later. We have seen, by an examination of Acts, chapter one, that during the forty days of preparation, the Lord gave commandments to his Apostles and taught them the principles of the Kingdom of God. Even though these instructions are (for the most part) omitted from the text of the New Testament, we can tell what these commandments were by observing the words and deeds of the Apostles. We have seen how a fully developed theology and practice of several sacraments—Unction (Divine Healing), Holy Baptism, and Confirmation—are presented in the pages of the Bible, and that our own tradition, recorded in the *Book of Common Prayer*, agrees with the Apostolic doctrine and practice.

Today we examine the Lord’s own teaching about Holy Communion. There have been seemingly countless disagreements about the Lord’s Supper. Consider just the differing names for this sacrament: the Lord’s Supper, the Last Supper, the Breaking of Bread, the Holy Communion, the Mass, the Divine Liturgy, the Divine Service, the Holy Eucharist. Consider, too, the theories developed through the centuries to explain what happens at Holy Communion: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, memorialism, and mystery. There are contentions regarding its administration: unleavened Bread or Wafer? Should the laity receive the Cup? Should the Cup be administered from Wine in a chalice, or from grape juice in a small glass? Is Communion an individual act or a corporate one? Is it proper to bow or genuflect when the Blessed Sacrament is present on the Altar, or is this idolatrous and superstitious? No single act of the Church has been more thoroughly debated than this one, and no other dogma of the Church—other than the question of the Person of Jesus Christ Himself—has been more divisive to the Body of Christ than this one.

In order to unravel the mystery and debate about the Communion service, it is first necessary to examine how religious truth was taught in the first century Judea. Remember, St. Paul and many of the people associated with the early Church had been trained in the classical methods of religious instruction by the Rabbinical schools of

Judea, and traces of this instruction can be found in St. Paul's and other Epistles in the New Testament.

First, religious teaching was memorized. Sometimes formed into short, memorable phrases, truth was committed to memory in order that its dissemination was exact and accurate. Second, religious truth was taught orally, and repeated over and over. An example of this is found in St. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, 2:15: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."

This tells us several things. First, Apostolic doctrine is not wholly found in the written Scriptures. St. Paul often refers to his oral instruction, either already given, or that will be given, to Christians (1 Cor. 11: 34; 2 Cor. 10: 10, 11; Phil. 4: 9; etc.). Paul even makes the claim that his oral teaching and his written teaching have the same authority (2 Cor. 10: 11), and so the practice, seen in Fundamentalist groups, to limit the legitimate teaching of the Church to that found written in the Bible is contrary to the Apostles own claim, and in fact, cuts them off from the Holy Traditions of the Church (much less the truths contained in the Creeds!).

Paul says we are to "stand fast," "stand firm," "hold on to" the truths he taught by word and by letter. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the verb "hold," is the word *kat-ekh-o*, from which we get our word "catechism." A catechism is a memorized series of questions and answers. In the older and better days of the Church, children were required to memorize the entire Catechism of the Church before they received Confirmation. St. Paul is here telling the Church to remember the catechism—the oral teaching committed to memory.

Further, we are to hold the "traditions". This word, in the Greek, is *par-ad-ekh-om-ahee*, from which we get our word paradigm—an exact copy, example, or pattern. This Greek word is in turn from *par-ad-o-sis*, which is the word used by first century Rabbis to denote the Traditions of their religion, committed to memory by their students. Thus, St. Paul here is using a technical word to refer to the body of oral instruction committed to memory by the earliest Christians.

Where do you suppose that oral teaching came from? The answer is conveniently found in the Scripture itself—in a section that provides instruction about the Lord's Supper. Read 1 Corinthians 11: 23-32:

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh

unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

This Epistle was written before the gospels were composed, and so it is the earliest written witness to the Lord's own teaching on the Holy Communion. This is the heart of New Testament teaching on the Lord's Supper. But, St. Paul did not originate the ideas presented in these verses. Notice, he "received from the Lord" this teaching about the Lord's Supper, which he "delivered" or "passed on to" the church at Corinth. This "delivery" of the teaching was conducted orally by the Apostle during a prior visit of St. Paul to the city.

St. Paul is not making the claim that he received this teaching directly from Jesus by way of special revelation, but rather that he was catechized by the other Apostles during his time with them in Jerusalem. This Apostolic doctrine came not from them, but from the Lord Himself. Jesus Christ is the author and originator of our Faith. It was the Lord's own teaching, in the form of a memorized religious instruction, which the Apostle Paul "delivered" to Corinth. This again is a form of the word *paradosis*—the Holy Tradition of the Church.

What follows therefore is a word-for-word description of the institution of the Holy Communion: the Lord Jesus took bread; He gave thanks; He broke the bread; He distributed it to His Apostles, calling it His Body, broken for the world. Then He took a cup of wine; He gave thanks; He distributed it to His Apostles, calling it His Blood of the New Covenant, for the forgiveness of sin. The synoptic gospels, of course, also record this sacred Act: and the words used are virtually the same in each case (Matt. 26: 26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22: 14-20). This is the Lord's Own Teaching—the Holy Tradition taught to the Apostles when they were catechized into the principles of the of the Kingdom of God (Acts 1: 2, 3).

Thus the practice of Holy Communion in the early church is clear. What of its meaning? First, we can understand at the outset that this is much more than a memorial meal. The command "Do this in remembrance of me" in the Greek literally means, "Do this in order to set forth the benefits of My Death again." In Matthew's gospel (26: 28) we see that the partaking of the elements—especially of the Cup—is for the remission of sin: "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." It is also the way by which we receive the life of our Lord in a "heavenly and spiritual manner" (Article 28, page 608 *BCP*). In St. John 6: 48-58 we are taught the essential connection between Holy Communion, the remission of sin, and the resurrection of the dead:

I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give

us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

That this eating of Christ's flesh and the drinking of His blood is commemorated in the Holy Communion is confirmed for us by the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10: 16: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" Plainly, there is far more to the Lord's Supper than mere remembrance of His death. What great harm has come to Christendom from dishonoring the Lord's Body in his Supper! "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." (1 Cor. 11: 27- 29)

Yet the Church has also erred on the other side: making of the elements of Communion a virtual idol in itself. The elements of the Communion *are* the Body and the Body of the Lord, but they are such in a way that cannot be defined: it is a Holy Mystery. The Western compulsion to put every sacred Act under scrutiny to our logical minds has produced great confusion and error. The teaching of transubstantiation was bad theology based upon bad science: an attempt to define an ineffable Mystery by the erroneous scientific notions current in the Middle Ages.

The nature of the Body and Blood of the Holy Communion were clearly understood by the early Church, however: Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, who lived AD 120-202, wrote Christ:

...took that created thing, bread, and gave thanks, and said, "This is My Body." And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we belong, He confessed to be His Blood, and taught the new oblation of the new covenant; which the Church receiving from the Apostles, offers to God throughout all the world... our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and the Spirit. For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of resurrection to eternity.

Thus, the Church truly teaches the bread is the body, the cup is the blood: materially one thing, mystically another. By its faithful reception, the Lord's own life is imparted to us, as He taught; we receive remission of our sins and all other benefits of His Passion; and we are given thereby the seal of our own resurrection from the dead.

Now it remains to be seen if Prayer Book worship agrees with the Lord's own teaching. We see from the language of the Communion service itself that at each celebration, we repeat the very words of institution of the sacrament. Further, Prayer Book doctrine is exactly taught in The Exhortations (pages 85-89, *BCP*), wherein is the truth that our Lord died "that he might make us the children of God, and exalt us to everlasting life... [and that] he hath instituted and ordained holy mysteries, as pledges of his love and for a continual remembrance of his death." It is further written that the Communion is the sacrament "whereby alone we obtain remission of our sins, and are made partakers of the kingdom of heaven." The Prayer Book doctrine is taught catechistically in the Offices of Instruction (page 293 *BCP*).

We can also be confident of the fact that our Liturgy—alone of those in popular use today—includes the confession of sin and an absolution, that we are given the opportunity to judge ourselves, "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged", as St. Paul says (1 Cor. 11 31).

Finally, we have found many names for this sacrament, not only in the Scriptures themselves, but also in the writings of the early Church. The Anglican tradition however is easily seen in the *Book of Common Prayer* itself, on the title page of the service (page 67): in our Church, it is properly called The Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. In the very first Book of Common Prayer, these terms were ended with the phrase, "commonly called the Mass."

The Apostolic doctrine, which is the Lord's own teaching, committed to memory, handed down orally to Christians in the first days of the Church, and witnessed in the Scriptures, was dogmatically set forth by both the Anglican and Orthodox Communions in 1931:

- (i) *At the Last Supper, our Lord Jesus Christ anticipated the sacrifice of His death by giving Himself to the Apostles in the form of bread blessed by Him as meat and in the form of wine blessed by Him as drink.*
- (ii) *The sacrifice offered by our Lord on Calvary was offered once for all, expiates the sins as well of the living as of the dead, and reconciles us with God. Our Lord Jesus Christ does not need to sacrifice Himself again.*
- (iii) *The sacrifice on Calvary is perpetually presented in the Holy Eucharist in a bloodless fashion under the form of bread and wine through the consecrating priest and through the work of the Holy Spirit in order that the fruits of the sacrifice of the Cross may be partaken of by those who offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice, by those for whom it is offered, and by those who receive worthily the Body and Blood of the Lord.*
- (iv) *In the Eucharist the bread and the wine become by consecration the Body and Blood of our Lord. How? This is a mystery.*
- (v) *The Eucharistic bread and wine remain the Body and Blood of our Lord as long as these Eucharistic elements exist.*
- (vi) *Those who receive the Eucharistic bread and wine truly partake of the Body and Blood of Our Lord.*

What a tremendous thing it is to be a Christian! What an honor it is to come before the Lord, offering ourselves, our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice to Him, as we partake of His life, in the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation.

Let us pray: “Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, did institute the Sacrament of his Body and Blood; Mercifully grant that we may thankfully receive the same in remembrance of him, who in these holy mysteries giveth us a pledge of life eternal; the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen. (The Collect for Maundy Thursday, page 152 *BCP*)