

## Celebrating Presbyterian Worship

### Part 4. Communion

Last Fall the Session decided to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of every month, and your Worship Committee thought this first Sunday in February would be a good time to talk about this sacrament and our Presbyterian tradition.

The Lord's Supper is one of the two sacraments observed by the Presbyterian Church – the other is Baptism.

Although many meals are referenced in the Bible, none are more profound than the meal shared by Jesus and the disciples in the upper room on Maundy Thursday, just before the Jewish Passover. In the Passover tradition, the bread may have been unleavened, but when Jesus broke it, it meant *more* than remembering the Israelites in Egypt. Jesus said the bread represented His body broken, and the cup represented His blood spilled for the people of God.

The meal represents the new covenant between God and believers. Our sharing in the bread and the cup joins us to Christ. Paul said it well when he told the church in Corinth: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

The understanding and celebration of the Last Supper has gone through many changes since Christ broke the bread before his disciples. In the first few centuries the idea that the bread and wine transformed – or “transubstantiated” – into Christ's actual body caused the sacrament to be conducted with increasingly more ceremony and drama. It reached the point that people could not see the elements on the altar and could not hear the priest's prayers, because they were so sacred! A bell was rung to indicate the elements had transformed. The liturgy emphasized Christ sacrificing himself, rather than the people of God receiving grace and redemption through his death.

There was also great emphasis on Paul's warning that Christians must examine themselves and be worthy before sharing of the bread and cup. The fear of being *unworthy*, plus the awe-filled mystery of transubstantiation of the elements, caused many Christians to come to church just to see the sacrament performed – but not to participate! As time passed, the congregation's participation was more limited: by the Middle Ages they were often only offered the bread and were not allowed to share the wine. The sacrament was typically celebrated only once a year, and was entirely in Latin, so many congregants didn't understand what was being said.

Changing the celebration of the Lord's Supper was at the *top of the list* of priorities during the Reformation. Martin Luther re-wrote the sacrament in German and refocused its purpose so it would be understood as a gift *from* God rather than a sacrifice *to* God. The reformers returned the emphasis to a Communion *meal*: a table was used rather than an altar, and the elements were shared, more than just adored. John Calvin, and then John Knox, emphasized Jesus' instruction that the cup “is the new covenant in my blood,” and that drinking

of the cup seals us to God's promises. The actual breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine around a shared table were seen as important elements of the sacrament. After Communion was shared, the people would sing a psalm of thanksgiving.

Today Presbyterians share in "open Communion," which means that every baptized believer in Christ may participate. The Book of Order says "All the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table...."

The Book of Order suggests that when real wine is used – (and, yes, we Presbyterians can use real wine!) –grape juice should also be offered. The wine or juice may be served by "intinction" (when the bread is dipped into a common cup) or as individual elements either at the front of the sanctuary or "in the pews." We could also drink from a common cup but that raises sanitation questions for many of us! There is no explicit guidance on what kind of bread to use though there is a preference for trying to share a common loaf. This church has used wafers, sweetened bread cubes, and a broken loaf in various Communion services. Our bread recipe is not gluten-free but an alternative could be offered if any member has special dietary needs.

The Book of Order directs that the Lord's Supper be observed regularly and frequently enough to be recognized as *integral* to our worship – the Session of each church determines that frequency, but it must be at least quarterly. Some Presbyterian churches observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

Today we celebrate the Lord's Supper and we re-affirm God's covenant of grace and redemption. Thanks be to God.