

How Should I Benefit from Communion?

By Rev Ian Hamilton
Cambridge Presbyterian Church
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At a time when Reformed churches are taking the celebration and frequency of the Lord's Supper more seriously, the question 'How Should I Benefit From Communion?' is timely.

Many helpful books and articles have been written on how the believer can and should benefit from partaking the Lord's Supper. At the heart of most of them the believer is encouraged to meditate on Christ, particularly on his self-giving, love constraining sacrifice. We can be sure that we will derive no benefit from the Supper if the Father's love, the Son's sacrifice and the Spirit's fellowship are not the focus of our feeding. The *Sursum Corda* (an element in early Christian liturgy meaning "lift up your hearts") reminds believers to look up to Christ the exalted King and not into themselves.

I would like first, then, to change the title I was given. The change appears minimal, but it is actually profound. I would like to substitute the plural pronoun 'we' for the singular 'I'. We too easily, and unbiblically, think of the Christian life in personal, singular categories. We read the Bible as if it were addressed particularly to us as individuals, when it was written to God's people in their corporate, covenantal identity. I do not mean for one moment that the Christian faith is not personal, or that there is no such thing as individual faith. Rather, my point is this: God's people are one. Salvation brings us into the one Body of Christ, his church (1 Cor. 12: 13). The default mode for the Christian life, then, is not 'me and Jesus' but 'us and Jesus'. The Lord's Prayer puts it memorably: 'When you pray, say: "Our Father..."'. With this in mind let us think a little about our question.

John Calvin begins his exposition of the Sacraments (Institutes 4.15.1) with these words: 'We have in the sacraments another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel.' The key words here are 'aid to our faith'. In giving us sacraments, Calvin goes on to say, 'God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness.' The sacraments are needed, not because God's word is lacking in any way, but because we need all the help God can give us to instruct us and establish us in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the sacraments then, God, 'according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings' (Institutes 4.15.3).

This is our starting point. We have a kind and merciful God who uses earthly

elements 'to lead us to himself'. All the benefits we are to receive from partaking of the Supper will be experienced in God leading us to himself. He wants his children to know him better. The Lord's Supper is a gracious gift from a gracious Saviour to help us better grasp, and experience, his love for us.

The first thing that needs to be affirmed, then, is that believers are expected to benefit from participation in the Lord's Supper. The Lord has not left us a spectacle for us to admire, but a Supper for us to eat and be spiritually nourished by. Just as we give our children food to nourish them, so the Lord has given his children food to nourish them. Along with the preaching, hearing, reading of God's word, prayer and the fellowship of the saints, the sacraments are 'means of grace'. They are not bare or empty symbols, but vehicles for the Holy Spirit to bring us into sweeter communion with our risen Saviour (1 Cor. 10: 16). We benefit from the Supper as we recognize and receive Christ by faith in the emblems of bread and wine.

Second, any benefit that we are to obtain from feeding on Christ at the Supper is dependent, in large measure, on grasping that we are feeding on Christ in communion with other believers. The Lord's Supper is not a transaction first between the individual Christian and Christ, but between the church fellowship as a whole and Christ. This is highlighted graphically and dramatically in 1 Corinthians 10: 17. The one common loaf is an expression of, indeed a symbol of, the one people of God. In other words, we gather at the Supper as 'family'. We are there together to meet with and fellowship with our risen Lord. I am not saying at all that there is no individual benefit for believers at the Supper. Rather, I am saying that we come to the Lord's Table not as a disparate group of like-minded and like-hearted believers, but as God's one family. This means that we must seek to cultivate a sense of the theological imperative at the heart of the Supper, namely that it heralds, highlights and proclaims the oneness of Christ's church, the unity of the twice-born. Just as a family is greater than its constituent parts, so the church is greater than an aggregate of its members. One of Paul's solemn strictures on the Corinthian church was that people were eating and drinking 'without waiting for anybody else' (1 Cor. 11: 21). There was an arrogant individualism that was bringing great dishonour to the celebrating of the Lord's Supper.

Two practical points may help us derive benefit from the Supper: Think familiarly. As you eat and drink say to yourself, 'These are my brothers and sisters. We are all one in Christ. We belong to one another. We have all been redeemed by the same blood and are indwelt by the same Spirit. We are all the children of the same Father. We are blessed beyond all words.' Also, it will help if we placard our unity by eating and drinking together, not individually the moment we receive the bread and wine. Two practical points may help us derive benefit from the Supper: Think familiarly. As you eat and drink say to yourself, 'These are my brothers and sisters. We are all one in Christ. We belong to one another. We have all been redeemed by the same blood and are indwelt by the same Spirit. We are all the children of the same Father. We are blessed beyond all words.' Also, it will help if we placard our unity by eating and drinking together, not individually the moment we receive the bread and wine.

All of this is a great mystery to us. Calvin even urges us 'not to confine (our) mental interest within...too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher' than he is able to lead us. In a striking statement, he acknowledges, 'although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to confess' (Institutes 4.17.7). The old Scot's saying puts it well, 'It is better felt than telt.' Not everything in the life of faith can be reduced to comprehensive statements. There are profundities that take us out of our depth – and the Holy Supper of our Saviour is one of those profundities.

Pray then that the Lord, by the power of his Spirit, will feed you with himself. Pray that his won graces will be more powerfully impressed on your soul. Pray that the presence of the One who walks among the lampstands (see Rev. 1: 13, 20; 2: 1) will be felt and experienced as in faith we eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6: 53,54).