

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." ³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Introduction

Today's message on Matthew 26.26-30 is another sermon *about* communion; it is not a communion message. This is a message about how we should understand the nature of communion based on the two words, "This is" in relation to the body and blood of Christ. My title is therefore, "Gospel Sign, not Miraculous Event."

The simple words (this is my body; this is my blood) take us to the heart of one of the most important practices in the Christian church, a practice surrounded, sadly, by controversy. Therefore, we need to discuss the confessional conflict that exists regarding the words "this" and "is" in relation to our Lord's body and blood (26.26b-28a, **Jesus took bread... and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷And he took a cup, and...gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood**). The two "this is" sentences give us "the words of institution", which some church confessions call "the words of consecration" (for our purposes, we can use either designation).

Some questions reveal the point of confessional conflict that we are about to tackle today. By the words of institution or consecration, does Jesus tell us that a miracle will take place during communion? Is the mystery of the Table a miraculous mystery? Should we come to communion with the thought in our heads that we are about to participate in a miraculous event?

To answer these questions, we will cover two main things: what communion is not, then, what communion is (the negative followed by the positive). We need to explain why the answer to the questions above is no. We cannot simply take a dismissive posture toward Christian churches with whom we disagree. We must be fair while we carefully seek to refute their views (cf. Titus 1.9; 2 Tim. 2.24-25). Furthermore, we should not end on a negative note. We should expand the positive claim that communion is a gospel sign, and that it is, therefore, something truly extraordinary though not miraculous (beyond our scope is a philosophy of miracles rooted in the apostolic foundation).

1A. Communion is not a miraculous event

The central tenant of Catholic and Lutheran views is a very literal, shall we say, literalist, reading of the words of institution. This leads them, unavoidably, to the firm conclusion that a miracle takes place when the minister or priest utters the words of institution ("this is my body" and "this is my blood"). The administrator of the sacrament blesses the elements by prayer and the result is that the bread and wine become the "true" body and blood of Christ (*Luther's Shorter Catechism*, LSC, 1) and "truly" the body and blood of Christ (*Catholic Catechism*, 1992, CC, par. 1376). Both traditions plead strongly for the idea that Jesus plainly means what He says when He tells us what the bread *is* due to the blessing, and what the wine *is* due to the blessing. Bread is His body and wine is His blood.

However, there is another aspect of the miracle here that leads adherents to compromise their literal attention to exact wording. An associated aspect of the miracle is the fact that the elements that participants eat and drink in communion look like, smell like, and taste like ordinary bread and regular wine. Therefore, both traditions make a shift in the language they use to describe the presence of the body and blood of Christ. Both leave their original emphasis on the word "is" to replace it with an emphasis on the word "under."

Luther's Shorter Catechism begins with the question "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" The answer states, "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ *under* bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink, established by Christ Himself" (*LSC*, Q1, italics mine). In the Catholic Catechism, authorized by John Paul the second in 1992, we read, "Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering *under* the species of bread" (*CC*, par. 1376, italics mine).

An aspect of the miracle is that no one can apprehend the body and blood by the senses (*CC*, par 1381), and as Luther put it, "the Sacrament is bread and wine, but not *mere* bread and wine" (*LLC*, italics mine).

These traditions do not deny that what we eat and drink in communion looks like, smells like, and tastes like (and sounds like, and feels like) bread and wine. What both affirm is that the elements are truly Christ's body and blood, but in a mysterious and miraculous way (miracle is part of the meaning of mystery).

Notably, this leads them both into the same ditch. Literal attention to exact words leads them to miracle, and miracle leads them to compromise literal attention to exact words. However, they cannot have their cake and eat it too. Something stinks not only in the state of Denmark, but also in the states of Italy and Germany. The shift from "is" to "under" shows the inconsistency of claiming that Jesus *plainly* says that Bread is my body so that is what the bread is (and likewise for the wine). If the body of Christ is *under* the bread, then the bread is ordinary everyday bread. In turn, we cannot say that it *is* His body. If the blood of Christ is under the wine, the wine is ordinary everyday wine. Thus, we cannot say that it *is* His blood. In other words, these thinkers immediately deny what they affirm relative to the "this is" sentences. They affirm that bread and wine is the body and blood of Christ, and then they deny it by saying His body and blood are under the bread and wine. This self-contradiction reveals great misunderstanding of the simple words by which Jesus gave us communion.

These views are interpretations. We must remember that fact. With respect to both views, they seem to forget that they are doing interpretation. They claim that Jesus simply states the view that they hold. However, despite claims to the authority of tradition or the obviousness of the passage, both Catholics and Lutherans engage in fallible interpretation. They evidence the fact of interpretation by the shift from "is" to "under." Furthermore, a number of other observations indicate that the interpretations they opt for are erroneous. Three observations are presently important showing that the whole idea of a miraculous event collapses in on itself.

1) The miracle idea is irrational

One reason that the bread is not His actual body or the wine His actual blood is that Jesus is present there in flesh and blood holding the bread and cup. If we press the literal reading, then we have the highly unusual conclusion that Jesus holds His own body and blood in His flesh and blood hands. Then, we must think of Him using His flesh and blood hands to give His flesh and blood to the disciples. This, shall we say irrational idea, cannot be avoided by either the Catholic or the Lutheran view. Even if the bread and wine still look, feel, and taste like regular food and drink while they are actually the body and blood of Christ (Catholic view) or the actual body and blood are present in, with, and under the bread and wine (Lutheran view), the end result is the same. On either view, the essence of the thing is that Jesus holds His own body and blood in His flesh and blood hands in order to use His flesh and blood hands to give His flesh and blood to the disciples.

At this point, we could discuss the mistakes of a philosophical sort that also show the erroneous nature of these views. These thinkers try to explain how the elements can look and taste like normal earthly things at the same time that they are actually something else (Catholic view) or something more (Lutheran view). When they do this, they use misleading and mistaken distinctions from philosophy (essence/accidents) and theology (communication of properties). We can leave those distinctions for the theological technicians to sort out. That sorting goes beyond our purpose today. Now we can take up a second observation.

2) The miracle idea mishandles metaphor in the teaching of Jesus

Those who affirm miracle fail in two ways to handle the figurative language of the Lord Jesus. First, they recognize that when Jesus tells us that He *is* a good shepherd (Jn. 10) or He *is* a true vine (Jn. 15), He is making comparisons by the use of metaphor without actually claiming to be a shepherd or actually to be a vine. Still, they refuse to interpret Matthew 26 in a similar and consistent way. Second, they fail to appreciate the graphic way that Jesus uses metaphor. If we insist on connecting the eating and drinking with the body and blood of Christ, and if we claim that Jesus says, “Take and eat my flesh, and drink my blood,” we should compare this to the commands of Christ that we “cut off our hands” and “gouge out our eyes” (Mat. 5.29-30). These rich metaphors grab our attention and powerfully drive our thoughts without forcing a wooden literalism upon us.

We do not need to go to extremes in trying to understand what Jesus means when He says that bread is His body and wine is His blood. We do not need to depart from metaphor even if the effect of the language is that Jesus commands the partaking of His flesh and blood. We must simply understand Him to mean that we partake of His flesh and blood *metaphorically*.

3) The miracle idea misunderstands the transformation of the elements

We need to ask and answer the basic question, “What is changed?” There is change. There is even transubstantiation if we use the big word in a literal way (and in a guarded way). Literally, transubstantiation means a transfer of one substance to another. In a historical-redemptive sense (in the shift from OT to NT), we can affirm a transfer of substances. However, it is *not* a transfer from wine and bread to the blood and body of Christ; *it is a transfer of the symbols of ritual*. In the OT, blood on the altar and on the people had symbolic function. In the NT, Jesus changed *blood to wine*. He also changed *meat to bread*. It is not a change that a priest or minister brings about by blessing the elements. We are talking about a change that Christ effected at the last Passover. He did no miracle then and we do none now. The change was the transformation of Jewish Passover to Christian Passover, from Passover to Communion *by a purposeful alteration of the symbols*: they are now bread (not meat) and wine (not blood).

2A. Communion is a gospel sign

Now we are ready to think in a different way about communion. We should not come to communion with the thought in our heads that we are about to enter a kind of “twilight zone” of the mystical and miraculous. That mindset goes with an emotionalism that people seek and perpetuate by stained glass windows. The emotional-mystical-miraculous becomes the object of our worship and not Christ, not properly, by the gospel (cf. worshipping bread [host] as an icon).

Granted, it is difficult to move away from a mentality of stained glass windows, mystery, drama, emotionalism, and entertainment (and these things go together smoothly). Nonetheless, it is easy to make this move when you hunger for the nourishing bread of the gospel that Jesus provided by His sacrificial death on the cross. People in the grip of deep thirst for the new wine of fulfillment that Jesus secured by His life, death, and resurrection will find it easy to leave the trappings of religion and virtual idolatry in order to have the meal of friendship and fellowship with the Lord Jesus by abiding in His holy word.

We are now on the positive side of this discussion about bread and wine. What is Jesus saying when He says to the disciples (then and now), “This bread is my body” and “This cup is my blood”? He is saying that the bread and the wine represent (picture and symbolize) the nourishing benefits of His redemptive work on behalf of His people.

Consider the larger image. He does not simply speak about bread and wine. He speaks about giving and receiving the bread and wine. By the enacted parable of communion, He promises us the gospel.

He says, “The bread and the wine are for you. Here, take, eat, and drink.” When we remember Him in our post-resurrection time, when we continue to come to the Lord’s Table, He says, “Here is my promise. My work on the cross as the Passover lamb of Passover lambs

provides you with life-sustaining nourishment.” Giving and receiving bread and wine picture the nourishing benefits of the death of Christ that He promises to us in the gospel. These nourishing benefits come to us from the very body and literal blood of Christ that He offered up to God as a fragrant sacrifice well pleasing to God (Mat.26.12; Heb.13.15; Phil.4.18).

What does He promise in the gospel sign of communion? All of the promises come together in Jesus Christ the very bread of life. Still, Jesus does cite some specifics of the gospel that the bread and wine signify.

1) First, He promises the forgiveness of sins

²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (26.27-28). At its core, this means that by His death on the cross He secured deliverance from punishment for sins. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb protected the sinful Israelites from the death angel at the time of the Exodus, likewise, the blood of Christ protects sinners today from eternal death under the wrath of God. The wine pictures this life giving nourishment of forgiveness that comes to sinners from the Lord Jesus in His person and work. Blood as wine indicates that gospel benefit.

Furthermore, when Jesus tells us the wine pictures the nourishing benefit poured out *for many*; He tells us that the gospel is a sure and certain promise. The many in view are His covenant people. He thus drives us in thought back to Isaiah 53 through His words of Matthew 20.28 (**even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many**). Clearly, the mention that He pours out the blood of the covenant **for many for the forgiveness of sins** (Mat. 26.28) directs our thoughts to Isaiah 53. In that famous OT text, we learn of the benefit of justification secured by our Lord His death (v. 12). The text tells us that His work is efficacious because “**he shall see his offspring...he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities**” (vs. 10-11). What is in view in the institution language (this is my blood of the covenant poured out for many) is the application of the blood of the covenant that secured the justification of each one for whom Jesus died (per the allusion to Isa. 53.11-12). His blood shed on the cross is an accomplishment; the blood He now pours out as nourishing drink shows that the accomplishment secured the application of savings benefits to the covenant children of Christ (Heb. 2.13-14).

2) Second, He promises the festive glory of heaven

I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom (26.29). Jesus is looking to the time of the church between His comings. His disciples (then and now) continue to drink of the fruit of the vine, but Jesus does not do so. This was His last Passover, but it is the Passover of transition to the new covenant meal. Therefore, we have the Lord's Supper to remember Him in a special way until He returns. In this context, notice the marvelous promise of the gospel that He gives in communion as gospel sign. He promises the Father's kingdom to you by saying that He will drink it **new with you**. What a remarkable benefit! The wine pictures the coming feast in glory. By this picture, Jesus says, “take and drink of that heavenly feast *now* by drinking of the blood of the covenant; that is, by drinking the nourishing wine of God's covenant word. That is extraordinary. Moreover, He tells us again of the *efficacy* of His saving work on the cross for the many by saying that He will drink it new “with you” in His Father's kingdom. In other words, here is the promise that is extraordinary beyond extraordinary, *Jesus* desires to sit down at that heavenly feast with *you*, and He promises to nourish *you* by the gospel all the way to glory!

May we fall down before the majesty of God in unending praise and thanksgiving for the nourishing benefits that He provides for us through the person and work of Jesus Christ our risen Lord. To Him be all glory now and forevermore, amen.