

## ***Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans***

**1 Corinthians 11:10-32**

Pastor Duke Jeffries

The Latin phrase above is translated into English as “a fearful and fascinating mystery”. It speaks to the “otherness” of God which renders believers awe-struck with holy and reverential fear but, at the same time, attracted to His love and grace. When I first heard it applied to the consecrated bread and cup of Holy Communion, I was inspired to review my own understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Raised in a church where Communion Services were held only twice a year, and where the concepts of neither “holy mysteries” nor “reverential fear” were much discussed, I came to contemplate and then to cherish them later in life. Both, I believe, have deepened my Christian faith and enhanced my experience at the Lord’s Table.

The Grace Brethren denomination in which I was raised didn’t care much for the notion of “sacrament” either. The preferred term was “ordinance”, which Dr. Webster defines as “an authoritative decree”. Not much *holy mystery* there, eh?

One of two sacraments (or ordinances, if you prefer) retained by the Reformers in their break from Roman Catholicism (the other being baptism), the Protestant understanding of Communion was controversial from the outset. A passionate and often cantankerous debate developed among the early leaders of the Protestant church as to just how Christians should interpret the words our Lord spoke to His disciples at the Last Supper as He broke the bread – “*Take, eat; This is My body*” – and as He passed the cup around – “*Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant*”.

What did the disciples think as they ate and drank? And, more to the point, perhaps, what do YOU think as you partake of the bread and cup?

The earliest mention in Scripture of any kind of “Communion Service” is found in **1 Corinthians 11**, wherein the apostle Paul chastised the Christians in Corinth for their behaviour at the Lord’s Table. We are familiar with his warning: *Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.*

But what constitutes the partaking of the elements of the Eucharist in a manner which is so “unworthy” as to render one *guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord*? This would be a grievous sin, indeed; one which no Christian would knowingly commit, especially since to do so would, Paul says, serve to ***eat and drink judgment*** upon one’s self!

Paul, it seems, saw the Communion service as being fraught with spiritual danger. If he was right about that (and I believe he was), his earnest exhortation that his readers take care to examine themselves before approaching the Lord's Table should be regarded as not only reasonable, but *imperative*. That is why Communion services in this church include a time for silent preparation, to provide each believer with the opportunity for self-examination.

In what way, within this sacred silence, should we "examine" ourselves? What, you should ask yourself, must I do to ensure that I do not offend God as I participate in this service? Four suggestions:

- First, **close your eyes**. This may seem rudimentary, but it is essential, for most of us, to remove from our direct and peripheral vision all external distractions.
- Then, **confess your sins**. The Bible includes several hair-raising accounts of what happened to people who presumed to come into the presence of God on their own terms, with attitudes of the heart either prideful, blasphemous, deceitful, or ignorant. To receive consecrated food and drink while *knowingly* burdened with unconfessed sin is surely an affront to God and profane, indeed.  
*ref: Genesis 4:1-8; Numbers 3:4; Acts 5:1-10; 2 Samuel 6:1-7*
- Next, **empty yourself** of all internal distractions: anything – thoughts about what happened yesterday, plans for this afternoon, concerns about any impending issue in your home or at work – which might diffuse your focus on the holy business at hand.
- Finally, **think**. Direct your focused thoughts on what is about to happen. I encourage you to ask yourself, in the silent moments before you approach the Lord's Table at every Communion service, to reflect on and be willing to wrestle with its two essential meanings.

(1) First and foremost, there is the direct and very real connection provided by this sacrament between you, the "communicant", and the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ. Understanding this connection has intrigued, confounded and, sad to say, divided the Church for many centuries. The Reformers may have been unanimous in their rejection of the Roman doctrine of **transubstantiation**: the belief that the bread and wine, when consecrated by the priest in the Mass, become -- literally, really and truly – the flesh and blood of Christ *in substance*.

But no fewer than three distinct Protestant teachings on the essential substance of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were set forth in the earliest days of the Reformation, with a fourth understanding emerging centuries later. Note the line of theological demarcation which separates the competing understandings of Communion as a *sacrament* or as an *ordinance*, winding its way through them.

- Martin Luther set forth the Doctrine of **Sacramental Union**, or "Real Presence", as it is also known. This teaching holds that the body and blood of Christ are "truly and substantially present" to the communicant "in, with, and under" the consecrated elements of bread and wine. By the sixteenth century a term had come into use to describe this doctrine: **consubstantiation** ("*with* the substance"). But Luther himself rejected that (as do most modern Lutherans) on grounds that it echoed too closely the metaphysical overtones of the Roman tradition.
- John Calvin held that the real presence of Christ's body and blood are not brought *physically* to the elements, but that "the Holy Spirit truly unites things separated in space". This understanding has been labeled as the Doctrine of "Pneumatic Presence" or **Receptionism**, but it is better understood, I think, as the Doctrine of "Real Spiritual Presence". In this view the actual presence of Christ is imbued *spiritually* to the communicant by the action of God, its effect of grace no less a blessing to the believer who receives it in faith and its effect of judgment no less a condemnation on the one who receives it unworthily.
- The teachings of the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli regarding Holy Communion were considered insufficient – even radical -- by the earliest Protestants, but were enthusiastically affirmed by the Anabaptist movement which soon emerged, and is embraced by the denominations which have come after – particularly the Baptists and Brethren – as the most reasonable and, perhaps, the least "other" understanding of the elements of Communion. Zwingli held that Jesus, when He told His disciples that the bread and wine were His body and blood, surely meant that "these signify My body and blood". The Eucharist, he believed, was not a time to experience or encounter Christ, but to remember Him: a memorial service during which all the events of the Last Supper – including a "Love Feast" and feet-washing – were re-enacted. This teaching is known as Doctrine of **Memorialism**.

- John Wesley, centuries later, found middle ground between the two extremes of *divine metaphysics* on the one hand (transubstantiation) and *perpetual commemoration* (memorialism) on the other.

“Jesus Christ is truly present in Holy Communion. Through Him and in the power of the Holy Spirit, God meets us at the table. God, who has given the sacraments to the church, acts in and through Holy Communion. Christ is present in the community gathered in Jesus’ name (Matthew 18:20), through the Word proclaimed and enacted, and through the elements of bread and wine shared (1 Cor. 11:23-26). The divine presence is a living reality and can be experienced by the participants; it is more than a remembrance of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion.”

- “The Holy Mystery” Part 2; *The United Methodist GBOB*, 2010

(2) Nearly every expression of the Christian faith accepts the second essential meaning of Holy Communion as a divine **sign** -- something which, when consecrated to God, points to a greater reality beyond itself: the ***communio sanctorum***, the sacred, binding fellowship of all believers in Christ.

Yet some Christians do not embrace the notion of an all-encompassing sacred fellowship of Christians. Accordingly, they are selective about the company they keep at the Lord’s Table, proffering what is called “closed Communion”. This has always amazed me. Do we really think that the twelve communicants at the original Lord’s Supper shared the exact same convictions about Jesus – who He really was, what He was sent by God to do, and how He was to do it? Do we think they all understood this business about the bread and the cup and His body and blood? We know, don’t we, that Judas Iscariot did not! Beloved, it is at the Lord’s Table, when we celebrate the atoning sacrifice of Christ on Calvary’s cross, where Christians of all stripes and scruples stand equal before God: desperate sinners saved by grace and called into binding fellowship by the One who saved us. Let all come to the Table!

Holy mysteries are by their nature complex and, ultimately, beyond our full comprehension. But they should not discourage us and must not divide us. They should, rather, *inspire* us to wrestle with them; to humbly, prayerfully, and with reverential fear, in the light of Scripture as it is illumined by the Holy Spirit, engage our minds as we prepare our hearts to receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion. You might begin with **1 Corinthians 11:10-32**, as the early church did. May God bless you as you wrestle with His Word. Soli Deo gloria. *Amen*.