

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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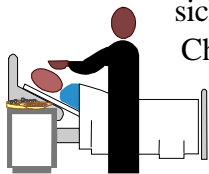
BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Communion, change, and community



Eucharist, Communion, the Lord's Supper. It has been a central feature of Christian worship—some Christians say *the* central feature—throughout the church's history, yet churches differ widely in the importance they give it. Some include it in every worship service, while others observe it much less often.

Christians seem to have widely different feelings about Communion, too. For many Christians, Communion is vital. They get upset if their congregation skips one of its usual Communion times. They want Communion brought to their bedside if they're too



sick to come to church. For many other Christians, however, Communion is something to avoid. They deliberately stay away from church on Communion Sundays.

What makes Communion seem vital?

I don't avoid Communion, but it's nowhere near vital to me and I can't really see why it is vital to so many other Christians. I know that to many Christians frequent Communion is important for very deep reasons, but some seem merely afraid of incurring God's disapproval by not following a particular Communion schedule or method, and I can't believe God cares that much about our schedules or methods.

I've read and thought a lot about Communion. I've experienced it in a variety of settings. I've talked with Christians who consider Communion vital. But most observances of Communion still leave me cold even though I see important meaning in what Jesus seems to have commanded.



Give yourself, give your life

The main meaning I see in Jesus' command to observe Communion comes from the nature of the

The sustaining community

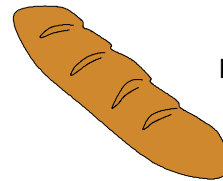
This evening he gathers them together
In an upper room ...

And the little man says to them,
"The good news is tonight
I am going to create
A sustaining community
Among you. It will not depend
On your always being faithful
Or perfect or good, or right,
Powerful or unblemished, or pure.



"It will not depend on your
Holding an advanced degree
Or your wealth, your skin color,
Sexual orientation, gender,
Or religion.

"It depends on two things:
Your willingness to share, and
Your memory of me.
These two are enough to bind you
To one another, and to your work
On behalf of the world.



"Take this bread, then,
It represents my physical
Presence which has been with you
In many adventures, the bodies
Of all those forebears
Who have tried to love mercy,
Create justice, build a better world.

"Whenever you eat bread,
Remember this evening.
Think on what we have tried to do
For the poor and the people of the land." ...

The little man says,
"If the worst happens,
Every time you drink
This fruit of the vine,
Remember me, for this is
The blood of my veins;
It pulses with life for you,
This wine, and your thoughts of me,
Will sustain you, and restore your spirits."



He left the room
And went out in the darkness
To the garden.

—Gary Holthaus

Bible's words that describe his last meal with his disciples. In the symbolic language that we find not only in the Bible but also in dreams, the arts, and the rituals and scriptures of many religions, the body often represents the whole self. A visual or verbal picture of someone's body represents the person's feelings, thoughts, will,



He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood ..."



— Luke 22:19-20

and whatever other traits make up that person. So when Jesus says he gives his body, I believe it means not only his physical body but also his whole self. Thus giving our whole selves is what his words ask us to do.

Similarly, blood often represents life, as in Genesis 9:4, "you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood." So in saying that his

blood is poured out for others, I believe Jesus is saying he gives his life for others. Thus he is asking us to give our lives, too, following his example.

I therefore believe that the language used in the Bible to describe this incident says much more than "Drink a token sip of wine or juice and eat a token bite of bread regularly in worship services, as a reminder that I died for your salvation." I believe that when Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," he is saying, "Give your whole self as I gave mine. Give your life for others as I gave mine. Do *this* in remembrance of me."



The meaning gets lost

Although I see that message as vitally important, however, I don't find it communicated in Communion observances. I never hear it mentioned, and two distracting features of most Communion observances keep me from thinking of it.



The first of those features is the ritual words. Parroting the same words in every Communion service keeps them from meaning much to me. When I've heard the same words repeatedly for years, I no longer notice their meaning.

Also, hearing all-masculine words used in our rituals, to refer to all human beings or to God, keeps reminding me that such usage gives an inaccurate and harmful message about the relative value of women and men, even though the words' users may not intend to give that message. Hearing that false message—that God is male and all people are male—distracts me from whatever other message the words may be meant to communicate.

The use of outdated language in the church is another big distraction for me, because to me it says that Christianity is pertinent only for past centuries and not for the one we're in now. I think that message is false and thus is very important for our churches to avoid conveying. So when I hear outdated words in Communion rituals, they're a hindrance for me rather than a help.



"Because I like it!" A good reason or not?

I realize, of course, that many other Christians feel quite differently about the words we use during Communion. I was reminded of this when the subject of church came up in a recent conversation. A friend said she was disgusted with the United Methodist Church, of which she's a lifelong member, because it had changed the Communion ritual. That surprised me because I wasn't aware of any recent change.

She felt, it turned out, that the UMC should never have stopped using the ritual of our childhood, which used Elizabethan, King-James-Version English. "Why should today's people use 17th-century English?", I asked. Her answer? "Because I like it!"



To me that's not a valid reason for choosing what a church does, yet I know that many church members share my friend's feeling that constant use of the same words for Communion is essential. It reminds them of the permanence of the gospel, and of what Christians everywhere have in common. So the rote repetition and ancient language that distract me apparently seem indispensable to these members.

Community, or merely being present?

The second feature that for me often hides or even seems to contradict what I see as the true meaning of

Communion is the lack of evidence that participants see themselves as a community. It's the feeling that participants don't support or even know of each others' efforts to give themselves and their lives in the ways God is calling each one to give. I get the impression that to most church members, the only community in Communion is merely showing up at the same time and place as other members.

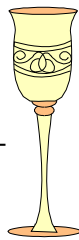


Two different Communion services

Two recent Communion observances made me freshly aware of the importance of words and of community. One observance was part of the main Sunday worship service at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which is huge and ornate and beautiful. The words of the Communion ritual were the Elizabethan, all-masculine English of a historic Church of England ritual. Yet they came from about the same time in history as the building, so in that setting they weren't as distracting to me as they would have been in another setting.



As for community, in the sense of knowing each other it didn't exist in the cathedral service, because the participants were from all over the world and most were strangers to each other. But because we followed a familiar ritual and sipped wine from common cups, I was quite aware that in another sense we were a community. I knew we shared the same faith.



Visible community, fresh words

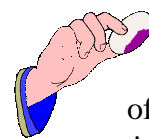
A few weeks later I took part in a Communion service that was very different from the one at St. Paul's Cathedral. It was at a church I'd never attended

before, a Metropolitan Community Church. It aims very deliberately at making all kinds of people feel welcome and part of a real community. It is multiracial and includes many openly homosexual members. I went because two friends, one of whom is an MCC member and both of whom are heterosexual, were speaking at its morning worship service.



This MCC congregation has Communion every Sunday. That day, as the celebrant (a lay woman "volunteer," not a clergy person as many churches require) broke the bread and poured the grape juice she read the poem from which I quote on the first page of this *Connections*. Hearing that contemporary, personal expression instead of often-repeated, outdated words as the introduction to Communion was a uniquely powerful experience for me.

Then several lay Communion servers distributed themselves across the front of the sanctuary, and congregation members came and went whenever they wished, to whichever server they wished, to be served. Many went as couples or small groups. Some were groups of friends. Some were heterosexual couples and their children. Some were Christian gay or lesbian couples who had been faithful partners for many years but before finding MCC had avoided churches because they hadn't felt free to be seen in church as a couple.



For each group, a server dipped wafers in juice and put one on the tongue of each person. Then the communicants and the server stood with arms around each other while the server prayed aloud for the little group. Each prayer was spontaneous and directly re-



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate discussion, fresh thought, and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

lated to those in the group, most of whom the servers prayed for by name and obviously knew well.

I feared this procedure would be uncomfortable, but it wasn't. In fact, experiencing it arm in arm with my husband, our two friends who had spoken, and the husband of one of them, among a larger group that obviously cared for each other, helped make that Communion service one of the most powerful I've ever experienced.



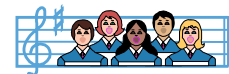
How would I have felt, though, I wondered, if I'd come alone to that kind of Communion service and hadn't known anyone there? Members of that congregation invite newcomers and singles to go with

them to Communion, but in many congregations that wouldn't happen, And even if it did, it could easily be unwelcome. Despite our good intentions we too often make singles feel unwanted by our constant use of "family" language in church, and we make introverts uncomfortable by urging them into groups,

Experiencing MCC's Communion again, without its newness, might lessen its impact for me, but that Sunday its fresh words made me think, they revealed God instead of misrepresenting God, and I knew I was in a community. So the more usual Communion procedures mean even less for me now than before. I've now seen a better way.

Barbara

In the MCC worship service I've described above, the choir sang an anthem I've heard and sung many times. But at those times it has been painful to me, while this time it was inspiring and exhilarating. The words made the difference.



They come from Psalm 8:3-9, and in the anthem's original version they're full of "man" and masculine pronouns. "What is man, that you are mindful of him? You have given man a crown of glory and honor. You have made him a little lower than the angels. You have put him in charge of all creation. ... Alleluia!" These words show a male God heaping honor on men only, and putting men in charge of everything and everyone, and they show that as a reason for rejoicing. Ridiculous, and false!



The MCC choir corrected that picture. "What are we, that you are mindful of us?" they sang. "You have given us a crown of glory and honor. You have made us a little lower than the angels. You have put us in charge of all creation." In all hymns, too, MCC's words made clear that God isn't male, that God values men and women equally, and that the church isn't composed only of men. That's a real reason for saying "Alleluia!"