

How Can I Connect with God?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

6th in an eight-part series

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Matthew 26:26–30 (NRSV)

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from 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 never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

³⁰ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

1 Corinthians 11:17–26 (NRSV)

¹⁷ Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²² What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Means of grace?

Connect with God? That’s a daunting thought. Reach out and bond with the Creator of the Cosmos, who has always been is, and always shall be. Yeah . . . like that’s a real thing.

But it is!! If we had to rely on our own abilities and resources, it would be a joke. But we don’t. God has reached out to us. God has revealed himself to us. God has given his only Son for us. . . . Yes, it boggles the heart and takes our breath away. But it is true. God sought out Abraham four millennia ago and God seeks out every one of us even now.

God has provided us with the means of connecting with himself. It isn’t that we deserve this, for it is by God’s grace that we have been given the means. John Wesley called these “means of grace.” They are God-given channels or resources that enable to us to live in a real, lasting, and active relationship with our maker. They are prayer, Scripture, and Holy Communion. Scott and Arthur Jones elaborate on these in this excerpt from their book¹:

In asking whether there are any means of grace, Wesley gives a definition of what he means by the term: “outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.” Wesley does not mean to limit God’s

¹ Jones, Arthur D. & Jones, Scott J. *Scripture and the Wesleyan Way*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

power to act—God’s grace can come to people in many different ways. But he is asking about the channels God has established as “the ordinary channels,” which can be trusted by believers on a regular basis. He lists three such means in this sermon: prayer, searching the Scriptures, and the Lord’s Supper.

Christ commanded us to pray in Matthew 7:7-8 where he says, “Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened.” Wesley refers to this and a number of other Scriptures, including the parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18. He also makes clear that he is referring to both public and private prayer as means of God’s grace.

The second means of grace is “searching the Scriptures.” Here Wesley quotes John 5:39 in the King James Version, “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” He also notes that Timothy was raised knowing the Old Testament from childhood and that Paul’s letter to him says that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16 KJV). Wesley believes that the written word of God—the Bible—is a primary way in which God communicates God’s word to humanity. Wesley uses the phrase “search the scriptures” to emphasize the importance of reading the Bible and he quotes the Letter to Timothy to show that it is trustworthy. Thus, people who are seeking God’s grace should read the Bible. . . .

The third means of grace is to receive the Lord’s Supper. Wesley quotes the account Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and the interpretation in 1 Corinthians 10:16 that the cup is the communion of the blood of Christ and the bread is the communion of the body of Christ. Wesley then concludes:

Is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread and drink of that cup.

In a related sermon written many years later, Wesley argues that “it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can.”

Of these three means of grace, the Lord’s Supper aka Holy Communion is often the most misunderstood, so we’ll examine it more closely.

The Lord’s Supper

In the first decades of Christianity, when the followers of Jesus gathered they shared a meal. For some, it was probably the best meal they got all week. It is clear from Paul’s scolding of the Corinthian Christians that they often forgot why they shared this meal that Jesus had given them. Some ate like gluttons. Some even got drunk. And, worst of all, some were excluded from the meal. I haven’t seen anyone ever stagger away from our Holy Communion at St. Andrew, but I wonder how much thought we ourselves give to what is really happening when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant, But ask “What is really happening?” and you’ll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn’t help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said, “This is my body . . . this is my blood?” or “Do this in remembrance of me.” The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding

of Holy Communion.² Since we are searching for the middle way, let's look at the two extremes.

Reality or recollection?

In the text box, I've tried to summarize the Roman Catholic view of Communion, namely, that by consecrating the elements (the bread and wine), they become the body and blood of Christ. For a Catholic, when Jesus said, "This is my body," he meant just that. But many Protestant reformers challenged that understanding. One, Huldrych Zwingli, held that the Lord's Supper is merely a symbolic meal, a recalling or memorial of the Last Supper. Remembrance, then, becomes no more than recollection. Many Baptist and similar denominations hold this Zwinglian view.

You can see how these differing views would lead to very different practices. Daily Mass by Roman Catholics is understandable since they believe the Mass makes Christ physically present. Likewise, if Communion is no more than a symbolic recalling, then one might practice Communion infrequently. And, indeed, there are many Baptists that share the Lord's Supper quarterly.

The Real Presence of Christ

In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ's presence. We hold that "in remembrance" is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus' death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from "This Holy Mystery" (see footnote):

"United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ's presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord's Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God's saving gift for the whole world." [Underlining added]

Past, present, and future

When we come to the Lord's table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God's time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven's clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying "This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . ." Of course, it wasn't *the* night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was *the* night in God's time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God's future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord's table.

²This is way too big a topic for this frustratingly short study. For more, you might read "This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion," which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004. It is available at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/this-holy-mystery-a-united-methodist-understanding-of-holy-communion>.

Transubstantiation

There's a mouthful. Many protestants think Roman Catholics believe that at Communion, the bread and wine are magically changed into the body and blood of Christ. This seems like nonsense, since the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine. Perhaps this will help.

This Roman Catholic doctrine is grounded in Aristotle's understanding of reality, as worked out by Thomas Aquinas and others.

Aristotle held that every object consists of *accidents* and *substance*. The object's *accidents* are all of its properties, everything that can be perceived by our senses. Its *substance* is its essence. For example, the *accidents* of this piece of paper you are holding are its color, size, texture, shape, smell and so on – everything that makes it paper so far as you can tell. But for Aristotle, its essence, its underlying “paper-ness” is something different; it is its *substance*. In other words, the piece of paper's *substance* is separate from the paper's properties.

Aquinas and others applied Aristotle's view of reality to the bread and wine of communion. The doctrine of transubstantiation (“conversion in substance”) holds that when the bread and wine are blessed, their *accidents* remain as they were. They still look and taste like bread and wine. But . . . the *substance* of the bread and wine is converted from “bread-ness” and “wine-ness” to “Christ-ness.” They may taste like bread and wine but the underlying reality is that they have become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Roman Catholics claim the actual physical presence of Christ at Communion.

Daily Bible Readings

More on prayer, the Scriptures, and Holy Communion

Monday, Exodus 12:1-32 God institutes the Passover.

Tuesday, Matthew 26:17-30 Jesus shares the Passover meal with his disciples.

Wednesday, Matthew 6:5-15 Jesus teaches prayer to his disciples.

Thursday, Luke 11:5-13 Jesus on persevering in our prayers.

Friday, Psalm 119 The glories of God's Law – meditating on the Scriptures.

Saturday, 2 Timothy 3:10-17 Paul instructs Timothy on the sacred Scriptures.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Daniel.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Embracing the Bible: an introduction to Scripture*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy