



It's always amazing to me how over time something good can become something twisted and distorted. The human heart is such that something God originally designed as a powerful symbol of life and grace becomes a ritual of death. Often this happens as human institutions and religious practices get hold of something and over time rob it of its raw power and preciousness in our life.

### **A Good Snake Gone Bad**

We have a great example of this in the OT. It has to do with a snake. Not all snakes are bad; this particular snake started out quite good but became bad. The Jews had come out of Egypt. God delivered them and led them through the wilderness, but from the day they hit the wilderness they complained. They complained about Moses; they didn't like his leadership. They complained about the wilderness; they didn't like the ambiance. They complained about the food; they didn't like the menu. They griped incessantly. They wouldn't stop. They were like kids on a trip who want to stop at every McDonald's that goes by. Pretty soon God got sick of hearing about it. So he sent a plague of snakes into their camp—poisonous snakes, and many of those who were bit died because of it.

Finally, the people turned to Moses and said, "Can't you do something!?" God then said to Moses, "Put up a tall pole, and on top of the pole, lift a bronze snake. Anyone who looks at that bronze snake will live." Moses did what God said, and it worked! The snakes causing death were counteracted by a bronze snake that gave life.

That's a good snake! What do you do with a snake like that? Well, the Jews decided they'd better keep it. So they took it down, wrapped it in styrofoam, and lugged it with them for 40 years in the wilderness. They even took it into the promised land. In fact, 500 years later when Solomon built the Temple the bronze snake was put up on the wall as an object lesson. It was still a good snake.

But then something happened. The people began to light incense to that snake. They forgot its intended purpose as an object lesson of life and turned it into an object of worship. It became such a source of idolatry for the Jews that look what King Hezekiah, a godly man, had to do: *"He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites*

*had been burning incense to it"* (2 Kings 18:4b). You see, we humans with all our religion easily turn something that God intended as a powerful symbol of life into something that actually gets in the way of our relationship with God.

### **The Lord's Table**

Take what we're doing here this morning: Some call it the Lord's Supper, others Communion, still others call it the Eucharist, which means to give thanks. It doesn't matter what we call it. The fact is we're entering into a practice instituted by the Lord Jesus himself as a powerful symbol of life and grace and forgiveness.

### **Reality or symbol?**

But there are some who say it's not a symbol; it's the real thing. Somehow this bread and juice actually become the body and blood of Jesus. Didn't Jesus say, "This is my body"? But Jesus spoke Aramaic, not English, and at that time the NT was recorded mostly in Greek. So literally Jesus' Aramaic phrase went like this: "This—my body." The verb "is" doesn't appear in the verse. So what's the big deal? Well, the big deal is the church has been arguing for nearly 2,000 years about what this "is" means. Some people have interpreted "This is my body" as a literal statement. So, then, quite literally, this piece of bread becomes the flesh of Jesus. But then other Christians have said, "No, no, it's meant as a symbol."

But symbols are important. In every age and culture people have developed ways of saying things by doing things. Could you imagine a world without gestures and symbols, no handshakes, hugs, kisses, wedding rings, special songs, flags, dances, salutes, or flowers on Valentine's Day? Symbols, both symbolic objects and symbolic gestures, open up a level of reality for which non-symbolic speaking is inadequate. For instance, a woman's wedding ring says, "I love my husband and I'm committed to him until death do us part," but the symbol explains all of that in a single glance.

Now you might say, "Well, I don't need symbols, especially in my relationship with God. I'll get by with the Word of God and only the Word of God. I will use only my rational brain to figure it out." But all throughout the Bible God used physical things and symbols and actions to communicate his love and truth to us. When God wanted to express his love for Noah and all

of creation, he not only said it but he put a rainbow in the sky. When God wanted to demonstrate his glory, he said it but he also led his people to build an elaborate tabernacle. When God wanted to show us how awful sin is and how much forgiveness costs, he had his people pick one of their best sheep, bring it to the tabernacle and kill it and then sometimes the blood of the animal was sprinkled on the people. That may sound rather crude and old-fashioned, but I promise that you'd never leave a worship service and say, "I just don't understand why God hates sin so much and what forgiveness means." You participated in it. You watched it. You felt it. You smelled it.

So why does God give us symbols and gestures and signs? The short answer is this: the God we see in the Bible actually loves us and wants us to know him—not only to know about him but to trust him with our whole heart. The bread and wine symbolize the broken body and shed blood of Jesus on our behalf that we might have life. But, the way some people approach this table you would think they had just ate a lemon. Why is that?

### **Tragedy or triumph?**

One of the ideas that gets tossed around about this table is that it's a time that we're supposed to do everything we can to think of the actual process of Jesus dying on the cross. The idea seems to be to think how badly the whole thing must have hurt him. And of course it would be totally inappropriate to rejoice at an occasion like that. It's as if Jesus were saying to these people, "Remember what I went through—the nails, the thorns, the spear, and never forget that it was all your fault." So you certainly shouldn't have **joy** at the Lord's Table, but sorrow mixed with a lot of self-imposed guilt. And that guilt is supposed to get us to offer our own life up for him, "Look what he did for you; how can you hold anything back from him, you wretch? Aren't you grateful!?"

But when we approach the Communion table that way we forget originally Jesus instituted this as a real meal which he ate with his disciples at the Passover. And when the early church celebrated it they ate a meal together which they called a "love feast." When I think about a meal, especially one surrounding a holiday, I don't think about sorrow and guilt unless it's because I ate too much! I think about joy! I think about fellowship! Even laughter might be appropriate.

Thanksgiving is right around the corner. Everyone loves Thanksgiving. It all culminates in a feast and believe me, we enjoy ourselves at those feasts. There is an atmosphere of joy and fellowship. You don't sit there and silently look down at your plate. You celebrate. You laugh. You have joy.

It's clear when we read the NT the early church was taught by the Apostles that the Lord's Table was to be a place of joy and fellowship. In one of his letters to the church at Corinth, Paul had to rebuke them for getting drunk at the Lord's Table. Not only that, some of them were bringing their big picnic lunches and feasting, while others had nothing to eat.

Paul rebuked them for their drunkenness and selfishness. That was wrong. But, get this: if the apostle Paul had established the Lord's Supper as anything less than a joyous celebration, it seems unlikely that it would have ever turned into a bawdy feast. The fact is Paul had never taught them to treat this as a morbid moment in the life of the church. It was a time of rejoicing that they wrongly took to the extreme. And so Paul corrected them, but he never intended that it become what it is in some circles today, something akin to a funeral service.

You see, this table doesn't represent tragedy. It represents triumph. When the table becomes for us a symbol of tragedy, we need to smash that distorted image to pieces like good snake gone bad. The broken body and shed blood of Christ are the very things which allow Christ in us to triumph over sin, death and the devil; there's no tragedy here, only triumph!

### **Refuge or rejection?**

But, there is another idea floating around that distorts the meaning of this table. It's the idea that we must somehow be worthy of it. And to be worthy we must go through a process of self-examination where every sin is carefully confessed. I remember thinking early in my Christian life that if I didn't get all my sins confessed before I took Communion I might bring down punishment upon myself from God.

There are some churches which build a kind of wall around the Lord's Table for this reason. It's as if they want to protect people from getting hurt. It's not enough to just trust in the Lord Jesus as Savior to take Communion. They say that you also have to be a member of the church. Or they say that you can't be divorced or guilty of some other mortal sin and still come to the Table. Most just exhort people to search their hearts during a time of prolonged silence so they can be sure to get every sin confessed.

All of this is based on a passage of Scripture that is grossly mishandled. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul tells the Corinthians, the same ones who were getting drunk at the Communion celebration, that they mustn't celebrate Communion in an "unworthy manner." Listen to what he actually wrote: *"So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink*

*without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves” (1 Cor. 11:27-29).*

And so, he tells them to “examine themselves.” But he doesn’t tell them to examine themselves for sin. The idea is to examine themselves to make sure they come to the Table with a proper discernment of what the Lord did for us on the cross. That’s what it means to “discern the body of Christ.” The examination isn’t over whether we’re worthy because we have no known sin, but rather whether we come in a worthy manner, which consists of an attitude of faith that indeed Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross.

In his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, author Thomas Cahill mentions two famous silver cups uncovered in the marshy bogs of Ireland. The first cup, known as the Gendstrup Cauldron, comes from a few centuries before Christ. It is adorned with pictures of violent gods and warriors. One panel on the cup shows a gigantic cook-god holding squirming humans to appease their appetites. The second cup, known as the Ardagh Chalice, comes from seven hundred years after the Good News of Jesus came to Ireland. Like the first cup it is a superb work of craftsmanship. But the Ardagh Chalice depicts a radically different view of God. It was a cup of peace, designed to be used in the Lord’s Supper. As the worshipper lifted the cup to his lips, he was reminded that this God sacrificed himself for us. Jesus, the Lamb of God and the Living God at the same time, gave himself in love for us.

So it’s very important we get this straight: no one is worthy to come to this Table. As the Scripture says, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!” To somehow give the impression we have to be anything besides one who trusts in Jesus is to distort the very essence of what Communion is all about. That’s a good snake gone bad and we ought to smash illusion to pieces.

Jesus Christ gave his life up for those who are weak, not for those who are strong; for those who are hungry, not for those who are

filled; for those who are dirty, not for those who are clean; for those who are sick, not for those who are well. This is a place of refuge, not of rejection. The bottom line is the very thing this Table represents—the life of Jesus given for us—is the only thing that can make us worthy! And that’s the gospel; the good news.

One day I had the opportunity to spend a day in prayer with about 40 pastors and ministry leaders around the Peninsula. It was a great time. At the end we celebrated Communion. Chairs were set in a circle with the Table in the middle. There were no leaders. One by one we had to get up and go to the middle of the room and kneel at the Table and say, “I’m broken and I want to be healed,” while one of our fellow pastors served us the elements. It was a powerful experience. Pastors are generally suspicious of each other and rarely do we get on our knees with others and confess our brokenness.

But that is what this Table is all about. Are you broken? Come and be healed. Are you hungry? Come and be filled. Are you dirty? Come and be cleansed. Are you weak? Come and receive strength. To come in need and to come in faith that Jesus meets your need is to come in a worthy manner.

This morning, as we take the Lord’s Supper, if it has become for you an old dead snake—a place of tragedy, a place of rejection—then I ask of you, for God’s sake and for the church’s sake, before you come up, smash those images to pieces. This is not a place of tragedy but of triumph; it’s not a place of rejection but of refuge. Come and be healed.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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