

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.33 No.46

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

10/06/02

The Holy Communion I

I once witnessed a dying man struggle to receive his last communion. He had been a quiet faithful churchman, not the sort who wears his faith like the latest fashion. At this moment of approaching death, when the habits of the soul are made manifest, he showed a profound reverence and need for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It was beautiful to behold.

A habit of reverence and need for the Holy Communion is rare in our day. We pursue all kinds of Bible Study and discussion groups, teaching on this or that issue, conferences on spirituality, and a variety of ways to serve both within the Church and in the community. There can be no doubt that all of these have value of a greater or lesser degree.

But along with these pursuits there has been a diminishment of what might be called the objective side of our religion. This is certainly true when it comes to our casual approach to the Holy Communion.

It is also particularly true with the study of the Bible. Of course, the study of the Bible is objective in so far as the Bible stands outside of us as the inspired Word of God. But our study of God's Word is not always objectively understood. We are often preoccupied with subjective concerns and prejudices of one kind or another that hinder a true understanding.

While it is a most solemn truth that the Holy Ghost must teach us through the Scriptures, which He certainly does, we are not guaranteed that our private approach to the Bible will be always free from error. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church into all truth. But we can hardly blame the Holy Spirit for the multiplicity of diverse doctrines in the multitude of different churches. Differences remain even among the great churches of historic Christendom, which have for centuries explored the Bible along with the discipline of prayer and under the tutelage of the greatest minds and hearts in the communion of saints. As the Articles of Religion teach us, particular churches can err and have indeed done so. (Article XIX, p. 606 BCP.)

I love to study the Bible. My foremost reason for beginning the study of Classics, now thirty years ago, was to read the New Testament in Greek. But since then, I have learned that the history of theological

thinking within the Church is a necessary guide, if I would avoid the mistakes of our fathers in the faith. Over time, the Church has learned a great deal in her subjective appropriation of the objective word of the Bible. The Creeds we profess every Sunday are evidence of this fact.

When it comes to the Holy Communion, we enter what is truly the objective side of our religion. It is what we call a "means of grace."

During the Reformation, Thomas Cranmer, along with John Calvin and others, distinguished Baptism and the Holy Communion as the only two sacraments ordained of Christ in the Gospel. Distinct from the five other sacraments that had grown up in the Church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper were called dominical sacraments, sacraments of the Lord, and they were understood to be the essential means of grace for the Christian. The Catechism puts it this way; the sacraments are "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us; ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof." (See the Catechism, p.581 BCP, and the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, XXV, p.607 BCP.)

Perhaps our casual and arbitrary attitude toward the sacrament is because we do not understand what we are doing when we receive the holy mysteries. Otherwise, if we do understand, and still neglect our Lord's command and precious gift, we assume a grave spiritual condition. What, then, are we doing when we receive the holy mysteries? What is the true importance of the Holy Communion?

When we come to the altar we hold out

the empty hands of faith, which only God can fill. And the glorious truth is this; God the Holy Ghost fills our empty hands with His nourishing grace, which in the Lord's Supper, is nothing other than Christ Jesus Himself. In the sacrament of Holy Communion, God gives the life of His own Son to us objectively. We respond subjectively. We partake of His body and blood spiritually, that is, by faith. But if we do not open the hands of faith, and take the precious gift that is offered, we do not indeed receive it. It was this reception of His own person that Jesus spoke of when He said, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you."

It came to me the other day, that if every time someone came to church, he or she lost five pounds, the church would be full of people (chubby I guess) on a regular basis. If the church offered that kind of reality, then we would have no problem making the church a priority.

Of course, the holy mysteries are not that. They are something infinitely greater. What does the priest say when you receive communion? "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving." The church offers us the very life of Jesus, which we may take into ourselves, and be nourished by Him. The Holy Communion is the means whereby Christ continuously dwells in us and we in Him. How much of a priority should that be?

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

[send this](#)

[bookmark](#)

[print](#)

[close](#)

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.