

**Sin, Salvation, and Baptism in the UMC**  
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**I. Review: Sin as Broken Relationship with God, Others, and Self** (See Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology for Today* [Abingdon: Nashville 1998] and Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* [Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1994]).

A. Sin Defined

1. Broken Relationship: First and foremost, sin is a turning away from God; breaking relationship with God. Instead of acknowledging our absolute dependence on God as the source of life and giver of all good gifts, and instead of receiving and relying on God's gifts of love, justice, truth, life, etc., we turn inward and try to rely on and secure ourselves.
2. Disordered and Enslaving Tempers/Passions: Separated from God's power and ordering principles of love and justice, our natural tempers and passions become unruly, compulsive, enslaving, and destructive. Take for example anger and sexual pleasure, two powerful human passions.
  - a. *Anger*: God gives us the gift of anger so that we can be alerted to injustice and mobilized to resist it. When our lives are ordered by God's love anger serves this healthy purpose. However, when anger is not governed by the gift of divine love it becomes unruly, and compulsive, and given time it becomes a way-of-being in the world, an orientation, or a dominate disposition. So we say, "He is angry person." This kind of disordered anger is the source of hatred, violence, and destruction.
  - b. *Sexual Attraction and Pleasure*: God has given us the gift of sexual attraction and pleasure which motivates and nurtures special bonds of love. When ordered by God's love, these are governed by genuine care and concern for the whole person in which we are in sexual relation. But when not ordered by love sexual attraction and pleasure is transmuted into lust. Lust reduces a person to body, seeks to possess that body as an object, and then selfishly uses that body for one's own gratification, regardless of (and often at the expense of) another persons spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. When lust becomes all consuming sex becomes compulsive and destructive.
3. Common Features of Disordered Tempers/Passions
  - a. Unruly tempers become insatiable because they drive us to use things in the world to secure and fulfill ourselves, but these things are incapable of securing and fulfilling us. Only God can ultimately fulfill and secure us, so these passions reach out to things in the world as God substitutes. No matter how often or to what extent they are partially fulfilled, fulfillment is fleeting and they always leave us empty and craving more, because what we deeply desire (even if we are not consciously aware of it) is communion with God. Only the eternal can ultimately fulfill us.

- b. It is precisely because we use finite things in the world to control and secure our lives and because they are never really fulfilled that these things become our ultimate concern in life. They take precedence over everything else; especially when we fear they will be taken away. In this way, the human heart becomes an idol factory.
  - c. As we try to use finite things to secure ourselves and they constantly fail, we enter into perpetual discontent, deprived of real peace.
  - d. These passions or tempers become like a pair of glasses through which we see everything, influencing all of our thoughts and actions so that we constantly act in ways that perpetuate broken relationships, not only with *God* but also with *others* and *ourselves*.
  - e. Instead of our passions and tempers serving our good and directing us toward fulfillment in loving relationship they become enslaving.
  - f. Being separated from God's truth (by our turning away from God), we cannot see past our own sin long enough to realize we are slaves to it. We live in the delusion that we are doing just fine by ourselves without any help, including help from God.
  - g. Our condition is worsened by the fact that it is not simply a matter of one or two corrupted passions that need to be reordered. Rather, when God's love is not behind the reigns in the chariot seat, so to speak, the passions become like wild horses competing with and trampling one another. We are torn apart by contradictory feels and become "egomaniacs with inferiority complexes" (a famous saying in Alcoholics Anonymous).
- B. Summary: Sin is not a single action or a group of isolated actions that we call "bad," confess, and then resolve to quit. Sin goes so deep and is so controlling that without God's power and presence a simple decision reinforced by willpower will not work. In fact, this would be, once again, trying to do it ourselves, which only further entrenches us in our sin! Rather, salvation requires divine forgiveness, renewed relationship, and continual growth in trust and love in relationship with God, which will then manifest itself in loving relationship with others and ourselves. Growing in love is a process.

II. **Salvation as Renewed Relationship and the Process of Growing in Love** (See Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology for Today* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1998]). Salvation is not an isolated moment caused by an adult decision, but is a process that God initiates and in which God empowers us to participate. To reduce salvation to a moment of conscious and mature decision is to make our choice decisive and to promote works righteousness, which is itself sinful because it keeps us turned in on ourselves and relying on our own power. To better understand salvation it is helpful to look at different aspects of God's saving grace.

- A. Justifying Grace: Before we were born (even before God created the world!) God in His mercy and goodness resolved to send His only begotten Son in the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal the nature of God and God's intention for human beings, to die for our sins, and to conquer the powers of sin, evil, and death that were unleashed by humans turning away from God. And this is exactly what God does this *for us* in Jesus of Nazareth. It is because of his salvific work that we can be forgiven and reunited with God, others, and ourselves in loving relationship. The work of Christ creates the necessary conditions of possibility for our salvation: to be reunited with God in covenant relationship and to be formed in the image of Christ as a result of this union.
- B. Prevenient Grace: As mentioned above, sin includes self-deception. We do not even realize our sin or our need for God until the Holy Spirit awakens our minds and hearts. Through many different people and in many different ways, the Spirit allows us to grasp our true condition as alienated from God and makes us aware of our need for God's pardon and power to be reunited with God in love. This is the work of prevenient grace which prepares us to hear and receive the gospel. Again, this is something that God does *for us*.
- C. New Birth as Receiving Justifying Grace: God's justifying and prevenient grace, both which together provide the necessary conditions of possibility for renewed relationship with God are utter gifts. We do not deserve them, nor can we earn them. They are simply what God does *for us* because we are God's children and God loves us. However, God does not give us these gifts for nothing; God has a purpose in all of this, which is for us to receive the gift of salvation in faith and, as a result, to be transformed into the image of Christ. In other words, God does not simply do things *for us* but also desires to do things *in us*. It is true that God is always working in us (indeed, every breath we take is a gift from God), but when we consciously receive God's gift of salvation as offered in Jesus Christ it begins a process of radical transformation. Our initial awareness and reception of God's salvation in Christ is sometimes called "new birth," a rich phrase with layers of meaning.
1. *Initial Awareness of Divine Love and Human Son*: New birth begins with an initial awareness of God's love that results in an awareness of our own sinful condition and need for God's help. It is important to note that an awareness of God's love comes first. We cannot face our true condition and helplessness unless we know God loves us and is willing to forgive us. Without an awareness of God's love and desire to forgive, we would hide from God and ourselves in fear. First, we become aware of God's love, and then we become aware of our sinful condition and need for God's help.
  2. *Receiving the Gift of Forgiveness* (See Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Cultural Stripped of Grace* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], chapters 4-6): As said above, we cannot recognize our true condition and need for God until we become aware of God's love and desire to forgive us. However, God does not simply *desire* to forgive us, but actually accomplishes that which is necessary for our forgiveness and gives the gift of forgiveness. Importantly, God's gives forgives *before* we

repent. An awareness of God's love and God's desire to forgive us is completed by an actual gift of forgiveness, and these three together constitute the conditions of possibility for our acknowledgment of sin and need for God. Unless we see the gift of forgiveness lying in front of us we cannot receive it. Nothing that we do can produce this gift, including our repentance. In fact, repentance is not the condition or cause of our forgiveness. Rather, repentance is a fruit of forgiveness. First God says I love you and forgive you, and then we trust God enough to repent and receive God's salvation. This reception happens in a twofold way:

- a. **Repentance as the negative dimension of reception.** The very offer of forgiveness implies we have done something wrong that requires forgiveness. There is always condemnation in forgiveness. The good news is that God condemns our sinful action without condemning and destroying us. But receiving forgiveness includes receiving the just condemnation of our sinful actions, and we do this by repentance, which includes:
  - i. Acknowledging and confessing our sin, without hiding, blaming, or minimalizing our wrong doing.
  - ii. Receiving God's forgiveness in gratitude. This means we come to truly believe that "Jesus died for me," and as this registers deep within our consciousness we are enabled to let go of our guilt and fear of damnation. In this way, we let go of our sin and guilt, turn away from our sin towards God with open hands, and say "Yes" to God with a genuine desire to receive God's gift of pardon.
  - iii. Reflecting on the way we have hurt others and (when it is the loving thing to do) making amends with those we have hurt.
- b. **Faith: Entrusting our lives to God and embracing Christ as the positive dimension of reception.** Since the ultimate purpose of the gift of divine forgiveness is renewed loving relationship with God, when we truly experience God's love and forgiveness in repentance the Holy Spirit also gives us a sincere desire to embrace and follow Jesus. Once we are united with Christ in love, we are not only set free from the penalty of sin but also the power of sin (but not yet the *plague*) of sin. For the first time we are given the *real possibility* of *not* sinning. This does not mean that we will never sin again and need to repent. It means that we start to follow Jesus, and as we follow our *awareness* of God's love, our *trust* in God's promises, our *desire* to follow, and our *knowledge* of how to follow grows deeper and stronger. Put differently, our capacity to receive and experience God's good gifts is expanded so that we can receive more and more of the good things that God has for us; God stretches our hearts so that we can receive more fully. This process is described as sanctification.

D. Sanctifying Grace: As we follow Jesus day by day we are transformed into his image. Like iron placed in fire, when we are “in Christ” we look like Christ. God transforms us in a threefold way with two positive dimensions and one negative dimension.

1. *Healing as a positive dimension of sanctification.* God heals our sin sick souls. This does not happen all at once or magically because we play a part in the healing. We must accept the medicine and take it daily, so to speak. Furthermore, God meets us exactly where we are on life’s way. Think of triage; God finds in us in bad shape, gives us a good looking over, and then starts to heal our greatest infirmities. As God heals the fatal and tragic wounds of our heart then He moves on to heal other sores, bumps, scrapes, and scratches, at the right time in the right way so that we can become healthier and healthier. This does not mean that the “smaller” sins are not important, or that God might work on small and big sins together, but that healing is a process and in love God starts working in our hearts where we need Him the most.
2. *Digging out sin as a negative dimension of sanctification.* Our transformation also requires the removal of the deep roots of sin in our hearts (i.e. the unruly, selfish, compulsive, enslaving, destructive desires that make us sick). This digging (and tilling) prepares our hearts to receive new seeds of life.
3. *Planting new seeds and producing new fruit as a positive dimension of sanctification.* God plants new seeds in our hearts and allows them grow and bear good fruit (the fruits of the Spirit) as we nurture our faith and stay grounded in God. To grow in faith is to grow in love. It is to move toward fulfilling the greatest commandment: to love God with our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. (Note: the closer we get to God the closer we get to others.) The goal is perfection in love, to get to place in our lives where we do not willfully and intentionally violate the law of love and break relationship with God, self, or others. But this is the *goal* of Christian life and most of us have not arrived! As love grows in our hearts it gradually becomes the “reigning tempter” that serves to guide and order all of our other tempers.
4. *Transformation as the goal of sanctification:* As God heals us and empowers us to mature and grow, our hearts and minds are radically transformed.
  - a. First, our initial *desire* to follow Jesus and please God increases as we follow Jesus and through him get closer to God. The more we act on our desire to follow Jesus, the stronger it gets.
  - b. Second, the more we follow Jesus the more we *understand* what it means to follow Jesus. We learn to follow Jesus by following him, and as we do we gain wisdom and clarity. As this happens we gradually come to see the world in a new light, our priorities change, we value things differently. We gradually see the world, ourselves, and others the way Jesus sees them.

- c. Third, our *strength* for following Jesus increases. As we surrender ourselves to God (i.e. step out of the way and stop trying to do it all ourselves) and get closer to God we receive more power to resist sin and become the person God wants us to be. The closer we get to God (presence) the more we can receive from God (power).
  - d. As we come to see God's nature and activity more clearly, and as our desire to and strength for following Christ increases, we begin to more closely *imitate* God as revealed in Jesus. As we grow into the likeness of Christ our wills become so congruent that we can say with Paul, "It's no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me."
  - e. Finally, we are progressively filled with God's peace, joy, love, justice, etc.
- E. Glorifying Grace: This is the grace we experience fully on the other side of death where we are perfected in eternal unbroken communion with God. This is the goal of salvation.
- F. Summary: Everything mentioned above—*all of this*—IS salvation. We cannot understand the fullness of salvation if we isolate one moment in God's work to the neglect of others. Salvation is not a single moment of personal decision in which we move from being residents of hell to residence of heaven. Conscious decision is important, but even the awareness and power to make a decision for Christ *is given by Christ!* Furthermore, we don't just make a one time decision; we don't fully receive God's gift in a single moment. Rather, Christian discipleship involves a *constant* reliance upon God, a constant process of turning away from sin and cultivating loving relationship with God, others and self through intentional spiritual discipline. Salvation is embracing Christ, entrusting our whole lives to God. So we must say two things at the same time: (1) we are saved by God's grace and (2) we are being saved by God's grace.

III. **Christian Baptism** (See Gayle Felton, *By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry* [Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997])

- A. Definition: Baptism is the *initiating* sacrament by which a person is incorporated into the new covenant community given by God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sacrament we are given a new identity as a *vocation*; we are called to be conformed to the image of Christ, and we fulfill this calling and realize this new identity by daily remaining faithful to our baptismal vows in a life of discipleship.
- B. Channels of God's Grace Given To and Through the Church: In order to help us along the way of salvation as the body of Christ, God gives us special helps that we call means of grace. These special helps are given to the body of Christ to be freely distributed to God's people in order to empower them to become the people God's wants them to be individually and corporately. God sustains us in the process of salvation *through* the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. You cannot be in close union with Christ, unless you are an active member of Christ's body. So salvation is not only a process, but it is a process

that *necessarily* finds its intended fulfillment (at least in this life) in a community of faith. The church is not optional if you are to fully become the person God wants you to be, and to argue otherwise is equivalent to arguing that a finger can live independently after being severed from the body (i.e. the hand). We need the presence and power of God mediated through the church in the power of the Spirit to become who God wants us to be.

C. Distinguishing a Sacrament from a Means of Grace?

1. *Mediated Presence and Power*: By affirming that God is the Creator of the world and by looking at God's redeeming work in Jesus, we affirm that God can and does work through things in the world to foster loving relationship. If this were not the case, if God did not work through that which is familiar to us, then we would not be able to recognize God's actions to help. The primary example is the way that God works through the humanity of Jesus to accomplish our salvation. But God also works through other things in the world to convey, communicate, or give His presence and power to us so we can be changed. Think, for example the Bible, which is a human book that God uses to convey truth, meaning, and that which is necessary to fully experience God's salvation. And we could say the same about the church, friends, or music. The *main point* is that God transforms physical things in the world to make them bearers of divine presence, power, and meaning—they become channels or means through which God's grace reaches us and changes us. God's presence and power is mediated to us through finite things. (Remembering the stories associated with the Arc of the Covenant, we can say that if we were fully exposed to God's immediate presence and power we would be destroyed. Again God meets us where we are, communicates in ways that we can understand, and gives in ways that we can receive.)
2. *Many Means but Only Two Sacraments*: Although God works through a variety of finite means to communicate His saving presence and power, not all means of grace are properly called a sacrament. It is true that God works through scripture reading, prayer, Christian fellowship and friendship, marriage, nature, and many other things. But only two special ways were commanded by Jesus in the New Testament: Baptism and Holy Communion. Because these are commanded by Christ, most Christians assume they are particularly important and powerful ways that God communicates his presence and power to us. Our understanding of scripture and their enduring presence throughout all of Christian history lead us to believe that they are the two *primary ways* that God communicates grace to us: Baptism and Holy Communion.
3. *Definition of Sacrament*:
  - a. Sacraments are commanded by Christ in the New Testament.
  - b. Sacraments have the power to reveal the deep things of God. The word sacrament derives from the Greek word for *mystery*. In the sacraments God reveals things to us that are beyond the powers of

human reason alone and allows this mystery to register on a deeper level of human consciousness. This conviction leads us to say that sacraments are the outward and visible sign of an invisible divine grace, and grace is the word we use to describe God's loving and transformative presence and power in the life of the believer and church.

- c. Sacraments convey or communicate God's presence and power in a special way in order to empower us to be transformed in the image of Christ. Although God can work through any means God chooses, although God can reach us at any time in any way, in any place (which means that we in no way control God's grace), the Church teaches that the sacraments are the *primary* ways God conveys presence and power and the way God's grace is most *surely* and *immediately* present to us.
- d. Sacraments are special rites given to the church, rites which have been around since the beginning of the Christian community, and as such they unite Christians from all places at all times as a tangible sign of our unity in diversity both synchronically and diachronically.

D. Biblical Roots of Baptism in Covenant: Baptism cannot be understood apart from the covenant making God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God established communion by making covenants and establishing a covenant community. Covenants are simply expressions of promises and responsibilities between two or more parties. Furthermore, God's covenants are always accompanied by signs that distinguish the covenant community from other communities.

1. *Abrahamic Covenant*: The primary (but not only) covenant in the Old Testament starts with Abraham. God promises Abraham that he will make him a father of a great nation that would become an instrument of divine purpose in the world. This covenant was reaffirmed with Abraham's descendants: "I will be your God and you will be my people." The sign that accompanied this covenant was circumcision, which was to take place on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after birth.
2. *New Covenant*: In Jesus, God establishes a new covenant, which we see for example in the words he spoke at the Last Supper ("the new covenant in my blood"). Throughout the church, baptism has been understood as the accompanying sign of this new covenant, much like circumcision was the accompanying sign of the "old" covenant (both of which included children). In fact, we sometimes talk about the "circumcision of the heart." So baptism is an outward and visible sign that God loves people of all ages, nations, races and invites and includes them in the new covenant community so that they can be remade in the image of Christ. You can't *earn* your place in the covenant community because you need to covenant community in order to begin and continue through the process of salvation as outlined above. We all come into the covenant community as sinful, broken, and helpless to save ourselves. So baptism is the initiation rite

in which an individual is incorporated into the church and given what s/he will need to grow in grace. The person being accepted into the covenant community cannot perform his/her responsibilities stipulated in the covenant without the covenant community! The church performs this rite of passage because it is the community of the new covenant. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of what God does *for us* in Jesus Christ and the promise that God will give us what we need to become who God's wants us to be.

E. Two Essential Elements in Baptism

1. *All Baptisms Require Water*

- a. Symbol of Life: In Genesis the Spirit hovers over the waters in Creation and the first animals emerge from water. We also acknowledge that human beings are nurtured in the water of a womb and that water is necessary for life.
- b. Symbol of Death: Drowning in the great flood, Paul's image of baptism as dying and rising with Christ.
- c. Symbol of Salvation: Jesus speaks of the water of life.

2. *All Baptisms Require the Working of the Holy Spirit*: In all of the passages in the Bible where water carries these meanings, the Holy Spirit is always present and working. It is the activity of the Holy Spirit that communicates grace through water.

F. Modes: The early church used a variety of ways to baptize people, all which convey rich symbolic meaning.

1. *Sprinkling*: image of cleansing and setting apart for service to God (Ezekiel 36:25-27; Exodus 29:21).
2. *Pouring*: expression of the outpouring of the Spirit on the person being baptized and upon the whole church (Act 2:1-4, 17-18).
3. *Immersion*: expresses dying to sin and rising to new life by participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 6:1-11, Col. 2:11-12).
4. All three involve the "*laying on of hands*," which is a symbol of consecration for service and the giving of authority for such service. All who are baptized are commissioned for ministry.

G. The Meaning of Baptism: There are several different images that help us understand baptism. We need all of them because what God does in baptism ultimately remains a mystery, and these different images give us glimpses of this mystery from different perspectives.

1. *Incorporation* into God's new covenant in Jesus and into the church as the new covenant community (parallels with circumcision). Through baptism individuals are brought into union with Christ and all Christians from all times and places and given the promises that make makes through this new covenant. All are invited to be baptized because Jesus died for all, invites all to be a part of his body, and because everyone needs the church in order to become a responsible member of the new covenant community. To require someone to make an adult decision to be baptized is like abandoning a baby in the

wilderness and saying, “You can join our community when you grow up and decide for yourself.”

2. *Washing away sin.* This is a symbol of God’s unconditional offer or forgiveness. Remember we cannot do anything to earn God’s forgiveness and all of us are as helpless as infants to do so. God accomplishes and offers forgiveness to us as an unconditional gift, regardless of our awareness, acknowledgement, or acceptance of this gift. We can refuse the gift but the gift still stands.
3. *Dying and rising with Christ:* Baptism is an expression of the fact that when we are united with Christ by incorporation into his body, we are offered the gifts of Christ’s death and resurrection. We begin the process of dying to the old self and rising to new life, and this process happens even before we are explicitly aware of it as we are nurtured in the life of the church and instructed in the way of salvation.
4. *New birth:* Baptism is an expression of new birth, which means that we are all as helpless as infants to save ourselves, that we all need the new covenant community to grow to maturity as disciples as Jesus, and that we all start as “baby Christians.”
5. *Door way to transformed life:* Baptism is a symbol of an open door through which we are invited to walk, the door of justification that Christ unlocks and opens for us.
6. *Commissioning for Ministry and Mission:* Every baptized person is commissioned as a minister and missionary of the Christian faith. This image of commissioning is grounded in a central tenant of all Protestant churches: the priesthood of all believers. When we baptize people (whether adults or infants) the laying on of hands signifies that they are being set apart for training to serve the world as a minister of Jesus Christ. In the case of infants, they are nurtured and trained over a period of time to serve in this capacity. As the baptized person matures in their faith they must accept this commissioning in order to remain faithful to their baptismal vows. All baptized Christians make a promise to God and the church to spread the gospel and make a difference in the world.

(Note: In all these images, baptism symbolizes a new *beginning*; baptism is not the end of a process but the beginning of a process.)

#### H. Infant Baptism

1. All come before God to the baptismal font (whether 6 months or 60 years old) as helpless as infants to save themselves. Furthermore, all emerge from the baptismal waters as “babes” in Christ. It represents what God does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. The danger of limiting baptism to adults is the assumption that adults have some power of their own which infants don’t possess to save themselves. But, again, this would be works righteousness.

2. God's grace is available to all, regardless of age or emotional maturity. God invites everyone into the new covenant and new covenant community, and offers all the presence and power they need to become the person God wants them to be. If we only baptized adults who understood the plan of salvation and made a conscious and mature decision for Christ, then we would have to exclude the severely mentally handicapped from baptism. This would be absurd.
3. Our worthiness of God's grace is not contingent upon the breadth and depth of our theological knowledge, how much we understand about God's saving work. Because we are saved by grace alone, even if we don't fully understand how grace works, God still gives it. This does not nullify the importance of teaching about God's salvation, but it does mean that our grasp of such teaching is not a condition of God's saving work in our lives.
4. God (not the infant or adult, not the parent or child) is the primary actor in our salvation and in baptism. This is why we only baptize once, because to baptize again would be to say that God's grace was not sufficient the first time.
5. Baptism does not magically or eternally secure our salvation. Nor is baptism a requirement of salvation (God can and does work outside the sacraments). Baptism incorporates the person into the covenant community where they can experience God's presence and power in a special way in order to become more fully the person God intends them to be. Baptism lays a foundation for commitment later in life, but does not eternally save us apart from our response. It is a gift intended to be received. This is why baptism cannot be separated from confirmation (the instruction of our children regarding the basic beliefs of the church, the significance of their baptism, and the opportunity to accept their baptismal vows for themselves as responsible members of the body of Christ in service to the world).
6. The church has always baptized infants, and if we were not supposed to baptize infants then it seems like then Bible would say so. But instead it connects baptism with circumcision (performed on infants) and gives examples in the New Testament of entire families, including their children, being baptized.

IV. **Holy Communion** (See Gayle Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* [Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2004])

A. Names of the Sacrament: Holy Communion has been given different names, each of which highlights important aspects of the sacrament. All the names point to the eating and drinking of consecrated bread and wine in the worshiping community.

1. *Lord's Supper*: This image reminds us that *Jesus* is the host and extends the invitation to the communion table. The Elder who presides just extends an invitation made by Christ. It also reminds us of the various meals Jesus ate with his disciples before and after his

crucifixion. The danger of this image is that we limit communion to simply remembering the supper Jesus shared with the disciples on the night he was arrested.

2. *Holy Communion*: This image helps us to focus on the way God gives Godself to us for loving communion with us, and the way we are empowered to give ourselves to each other in loving communion. This emphasizes loving relationship and the fact that God is truly present—really meets us—at the table.
3. *Eucharist*: Translates from the Greek as “Thanksgiving.” Communion is a celebration and points toward the heavenly banquet we will share with God in heaven.
4. *Mass*: From the Latin word meaning “sending forth.” Communion entails a commission to share the gifts we receive at the table with others in ministry to the world.
5. *Divine Liturgy*: Name of the sacrament in the Orthodox Church which is derived from the Latin word for public worship.

#### B. Background

1. *New Testament*: Story of the Road to Emmaus. Jesus’ disciples recognize him in the breaking of the bread. In the New Testament sharing consecrated bread and wine entailed:
  - a. Remembering Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection *and*
  - b. Encountering the living Christ who is genuinely present and sustains us in our life of discipleship.
2. *Roman Catholic Transubstantiation*: The elements of bread and wine are actually but invisibly transformed into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus.
3. *Lutheran “Consubstantiation”*: The elements remain bread and wine but in the power of God the literal body and blood of Jesus come to be mixed in and with them; Jesus’ real body and blood are present in the elements of bread and wine.
4. *Zwingli’s Commemoration*: Communion is a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice, an affirmation of faith, and a symbol of Christian fellowship. Nothing happens to the elements.
5. *John Calvin’s Real Presence*: Jesus is really and truly made present by the power of the Holy Spirit, but it is a spiritual presence. Jesus really and truly meets us at the communion table, unites us with himself, and conveys the presence and power of God to nurture, sustain, and grow our faith.
6. *Church of England*: Basically followed Calvin

#### C. Communion in the United Methodist Church and the Issue of Frequency

1. *John Wesley*: According to Wesley, the Lord’s Supper is “the grand channel whereby the grace of his Spirit [God] was conveyed to the souls of all God’s children.” For the most part, he followed the teachings of the Church of England, which basically followed John Calvin. Because God offered us power through this sacrament, a power which become active in us when we receive it in faith, Wesley encouraged his people

to communion as often as possible (he took communion on an average of four times a week). If God works through this sacrament to bring us closer to God and to empower us for the life of discipleship so that we can be conformed to the image of Christ, then we should commune as often as possible.

2. *American Methodists*: The early Americans, who started arriving in the 1760's, were able to receive the sacraments from the Anglican church (Church of England) of which they were considered apart. However, before long the Methodists in America began to reject the Anglican Church, and then most of the Anglican priests fled home when the Revolutionary War broke out. Furthermore, the missionary preachers sent to America by Wesley were laymen and could not perform the sacraments (remember that only ordained clergy can perform the sacraments). As a result of these things, by the mid-1770's most Methodists had no access to the sacraments because there were not enough clergy to offer them. The combination of the longing of American Methodists for the sacraments and Wesley's high view of them, led him to reluctantly ordain Methodist ministers (Bishops) for the first time. This signaled an official break with the Church of England (of which he was clergy) and led to the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. These ministers were then sent to America to ordain other ministers to perform the sacraments. But the number of new clergy was outpaced by the rapid growth of Methodism in America, which meant that American Methodists could only receive communion on an average of once every three months (quarterly) when the itinerant minister arrived on horseback. What was seen as a tragedy then (quarterly Communion) was transformed into a common Methodist practice in America even after there were enough clergy to offer the sacraments weekly. Wesley would have been appalled!

D. The Meaning of Holy Communion: Holy Communion is the nurturing and sustaining sacrament given by God to help us to live into our new identity given in baptism and to remain faithful to our baptismal vows, which includes a commissioning for mission in the world. Like baptism, it is intended to form us in the image of Christ and make us agents of transformation in the world. Communion is also a paradigm of the whole Christian life, which includes: repentance and celebration, memory and hope. Every time we take communion we are invited to reflect on and recommit to our baptismal vows. We remember our failures (the ways we break our covenant vows), but also that Christ died for us and forgives us, and this leads to renewed repentance and resolve. Finally, we are carried forward in hope through partaking in Holy Communion because in this sacrament we are reminded of the promise and given a real glimpse of the great heavenly banquet promised to all of God's people in the new heaven and new earth. Looking at the rich meanings and images of Communion will help us to grasp its importance in Christian life.

1. *Thanksgiving—Eucharist*: In Communion we remember and celebrate God’s faithfulness to us and His mighty deeds of salvation in gratitude offering our thanks and praise.
  2. *Fellowship with God and Each Other*: The very word Communion implies intimate sharing and fellowship. God gives Himself through presence and transformative power, and the Holy Spirit unites us into one body redeemed by Christ’s blood given in service to the world. We are united not only as a local body but as the church universal of all times and places. Communion is the most appropriate context for worship of God, and this is the main reason that we generally do not serve private communion to individuals (except in rare situations shut as serving people in shut-ins or in the hospital, but even here the minister represents the entire body and uses elements consecrated in public worship).
  3. *Remembrance* of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and the meals that he shared with people before and after his resurrection. However, the English word for remembrance is misleading, because in Communion we don’t simply call to mind a story or event. Rather, the Greek word here is *anamnesis*, which refers to the dynamic corporate action of re-presenting (not reenacting or repeating as in some Catholic theologies) God’s gracious acts in the past so that they are truly present for us in the here and now. *Anamnesis* is more dramatic than the English word “remember” connotes. It is a dramatic re-presentation in the power of the Holy Spirit that makes the past come alive again in the present so that we can experience in a very personal and powerful way the grace available in Jesus’ atoning death on the cross. This in turn empowers us to be living sacrifices to God.
  4. *Eschatological Hope*: As stated above, we commune and are united not only with the living (the faithful who are physically present) but also with the saints of the past, including loved ones who have died. As we commune with each other in this way, we get a glimpse or taste of the heavenly feast that Christ promises to the faithful. But this is a powerful glimpse or taste conveyed by the word *prolepsis*. Like *anamnesis*, *prolepsis* makes the future present (i.e. heaven) in a powerful and personal way so that we truly experience what is to come and receive hope from this experience that gives us strength for tomorrow.
  5. *Work of the Holy Spirit*: All that has mentioned above is accomplished by the working of the Holy Spirit through our obedient action to God in fellowship with one another. Scripture teaches that it is the work of the Spirit that makes Christ truly present to us, unites us with Christ, and reminds and teaches us what Christ commands.
- E. Benefits of Holy Communion: There are several overlapping benefits of partaking in Holy Communion. In addition to Christ’s command to frequently take Communion (“ . . . do this *as often as you drink it* in remembrance of me”) and John Wesley’s insistence on the *duty* of constant Communion, we should take Communion as often as we can because of these benefits:

1. *Opportunity for Repentance*: Frequent communion gives us an ongoing opportunity for confession and repentance and creates a powerful symbolic space for us to deeply experience God's forgiveness and assurance anew. In this way, we are encouraged to continue striving for perfection in love.
  2. *Spiritual Nourishment*: In Holy Communion God gives us the bread from heaven that nurtures our hungry souls and empowers us to remain faithful to our baptismal vows.
  3. *Healing*: As we are touched by God's grace our broken and sin sick thoughts, emotions, minds, bodies, attitudes, and relationships are healed. Communion is not only food for the soul, it is also medicine for the soul.
  4. *Transformation*: As we are constantly touched by God's grace in communion and closer united to Christ (as we are nurtured and healed) we are gradually transformed into the image of Christ. We become holy (not in the sense of "holier than thou," but holy as filled with God's love, mercy, and justice) and, according to Wesley, this is the only path to happiness and true fulfillment.
  5. *Empowerment for Ministry*: Every single baptized Christian is commissioned as a minister of Jesus Christ. Our identity is a vocation into which we live-in-to. Communion strengthens us for the work of ministry: reconciliation, justice, peace, and compassion.
  6. *Assurance of Eternal Life*: As we are touched by God's healing and transformative grace and are shaped into the image of Christ our faith and hope in eternal life is strengthened within us.
- F. Summary: United Methodists believe that Jesus Christ is truly made present in the power of the Holy Spirit in Holy Communion. Christ meets us at the Communion table and offers himself to us in intimate loving relationship. More than remembrance of someone who died, God's power for life against death is conveyed through the bread and the wine in a threefold way:
1. By reminding us of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ (past; "while we were yet sinners").
  2. By allowing us to powerfully experience God's presence and work in us as we obediently partake (present).
  3. By giving us real anticipations of what God has promised to do in the future, not just in our own individual lives, but also in the community of faith, the world, and the new heaven and earth (future).