



# Minutes With Messiah

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## DRY GRAPE VINE

For Christians, the fruit of the vine has immense significance. We do not take the Lord's Supper with plain water or apple juice, fig or date juice. Jesus used the fruit of the vine to institute that ceremony, and the phrase doesn't even specify whether it be fermented or unfermented. We think a lot about the fruit, but what about the vine itself. The Bible is not silent about that.

Perhaps the most complete passage about the "vine tree" can be found in Ezekiel 15. God uses the vine as a metaphor for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Son of man, What is the vine tree more than any tree, or than a branch which is among the trees of the forest? Shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon? Behold, it is cast into the fire for fuel; the fire devoureth both the ends of it, and the midst of it is burned. Is it meet for any work? Behold, when it was whole, it was meet for no work: how much less shall it be meet yet for any work, when the fire hath devoured it, and it is burned? (Ezek 15:2-5)

Unfruitful Jerusalem is like a dry grape vine. They would bear no fruit, and they weren't even strong enough to hold a kitchen pot. A grapevine doesn't even make a good hat rack. And that is when the vine is in its natural but dry state.

Unrepentant Jerusalem is about as valuable as burnt grape vines. A burning vine is even less than useless. Once burned it has little value, but even when it burns it gives off little heat. Its only value is as a fire starter, and it doesn't even do that well.

This metaphor was for Jerusalem, but it has a broader application. It can be applied to God's people at any time.

What is the purpose of a grapevine? It is not meant to do household work, or even to be burnt. A vine's purpose is to bear grapes. From the beginning what was seen by God as good was fruit bearing after its own kind. (Gen 1:11-12) So it has been with God's people through the ages.

The Jewish people were never much into proselyting. God told them to be separate from the nations, and did not expect them to convert the nations to

their ways. (Nevertheless, there were those who chose to follow the Law even though they weren't born under the Law.) Instead of growing new Jews from without, they were expected to have believing children. "As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them." (Ps 127:4-5)

Christians, on the other hand, are not content to rely on procreation. Instead we are told to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations." (Matt 28:19) The fruit we bear can be found in the hearts of others.

There is another fruit that our vines can bear. John the Baptizer called it "fruits meet for repentance." (Matt 3:8) Paul called it "works meet for repentance." (Acts 26:20) How do we show our repentance. If we have harmed someone, it is by repaying that harm, with interest. (Lk 19:8) If the repentance is due to God, and what is not, then we follow in His way.

If we are not bearing fruit, then we are like a dried vine. We are not good for any useful endeavor, and we are barely useful for burning. Worse yet, God will set his face against us.

Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will set my face against them; they shall go out from one fire, and another fire shall devour them; and ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them. And I will make the land desolate, because they have committed a trespass, saith the Lord GOD. (Ezek 15:6-8)

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# *PUBLIC LORD'S SUPPER*

Here in early 2020, the corona virus is making people rethink many things. We have learned a new term: social distancing. Many are facing self-imposed or government-imposed quarantines. Even congregations have had to ask important questions. Do we continue to assemble, even when it is not recommended by medical experts? If we do not assemble, do we stream some version of the normal worship on our computers? How do we balance the health threat to individuals with the aspects of congregational worship? For many groups, this is somewhat simplified by broadcasting a sermon or Bible lesson. In the Churches of Christ, however, one of the central aspects of our assembling together on the first day of the week is the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. How does social distancing affect such an observance?

We really don't get an answer from the gospel accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper. We see the elements of the Passover that have been incorporated into a memorial. Jesus made one comment that might

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We are in communion with Christ; however, we are in communion with each other as well.

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apply. In Luke 22:19 he commands that the breaking of the bread (and according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:25, the taking of the fruit of the vine which followed) be done "in remembrance." So, other than that it was a memorial, we have to look elsewhere for details. That elsewhere is Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 11.

When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this

cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another. And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation. (1 Cor 11:20-34)

## **Communion**

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread. (1 Cor 10:16-17)

It is from this passage that we get the other common designation that the churches of Christ use for this memorial. It is communion. Paul is here saying we are in communion with Christ when we partake. However, in the passage in chapter 11 he indicates that it is a communion with one another as well. He chided the Corinthians for not waiting for each other in their eating the Lord's Supper. Instead he commands them to "tarry for one another."

If Acts 20:7 is a mention of the Lord's Supper, then Paul and his companions apparently waited most of a week just so they could partake with the congregation at Philippi. That would seem to indicate further that Paul felt that the communion with other Christians was important.

In the passage in 1 Corinthians 11 (verse 29) Paul says that in our participation in the Lord's Supper we should, in addition to examining ourselves, discern the Lord's body. Most people take this to mean that we should be aware of the physical suffering of Jesus, in the words of the rabbis "as if we were there." That might be part of what he is saying. On the other hand, what is the current body of Christ? Are we not the body? (1 Cor 12:27) If we are to partake of the Lord's Supper "discerning the Lord's body," and if we don't do so we will become sick, how are we to do so without being assembled with that body?

In the Churches of Christ it is not uncommon for someone to take the elements of the Lord's Supper to

someone who is unable to attend the assembly because of illness. This is because of the importance we place on the communion. Often the person visiting the sick individual will pray over the elements and give them to the other person, but not partake themselves at that time. Failure to join with the other person in the observance of the Lord's Supper is not communion. It would be like those to whom Paul wrote that failed to "tarry for one another."

For many years it has been common in the Churches of Christ to prepare the communion on Sunday night for those who were unable to attend on Sunday morning. At least one congregation has stopped this practice. Their reasoning is that if one partakes, all should partake. Therefore, setting up in another room, or even having those desiring to be served stand, is, in their thinking, a violation of 1 Corinthians 11. Are they wrong? That is for each congregation to decide.

## Proclaim

In verse 26 of 1 Corinthians 11, Paul gives another reason we partake of the Lord's Supper. We do so to proclaim publicly (show or show forth in some versions) the Lord's death until he comes. While many churches do not hold weekly observances of the Lord's Supper, what then is the point of their assembly? Is not the death and resurrection of Jesus the central dogma of Christianity? This is the opportunity for every member to preach. This is especially true if there is a visitor to the assembly who is unfamiliar with what we do, and why. This is the opportunity to explain to them that Jesus lived as a man, died as a sinless sacrifice to take away the sins of men, and arose in power to validate his standing as the Son of God.

It is not just to visitors that we proclaim the death. We proclaim it to each other. This is an opportunity to tell fellow congregants, "I still believe." We ask for a public confession of our faith before immersion; and we continue that public confession through partaking in the Lord's Supper. Faith is not a one-time thing. Neither is our proclamation of that faith.

## Isolation

Some states have not exempted churches, synagogues, and mosques from their closure orders during the current crisis. Some congregations have no choice whether or not to continue to assemble. We have entered a time of live-streamed or recorded sermons and, theoretically, online assemblies in real time. How does that affect these stated purposes of the Lord's Supper?

Muslims are required to wash their hands before the daily prayers. What if no water is available, as in a desert environment? A special dispensation has been granted that they may go through the motions of washing using sand as the cleansing agent. (That would probably work for the corona virus, too.) People find ways to fulfil an obligation under difficult circumstances. Is weekly

observance of the Lord's Supper one of those obligations that requires a special dispensation?

Jesus did not specify how often the apostles were to break the bread and take the fruit of the vine. Many people see in Acts 20:7 a weekly observance, since every week has a first day. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that since it was a Passover meal, the observance of the Lord's Supper should be an annual event, on Passover. Paul simply said, "as often as you eat." There is even some indication that the earliest Christians may have had daily observance (Acts 2:46), although this may have ended when they were dispersed from Jerusalem.

If the aspects of fellowship and proclamation are rendered impossible by an isolation order (or by personal illness), is it wrong to skip the Lord's Supper? In those cases where a whole congregation can see each other online, is that the same as being together and proclaiming

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## If a church does not observe the Lord's Supper, what is the point of their assembly?

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the death? Perhaps in such a case. But in the case of a streamed sermon where the congregants have no interaction with each other, one runs the risk of not discerning the body while partaking in private.

One other phrase Paul uses may be helpful here. "Let a man examine himself." If one is taking the Lord's Supper by himself or in the privacy of their family only because we do it every Sunday, then there may not be any self-examination. If one examines himself in the light of scriptures and decides that it is acceptable to partake of the Lord's Supper in private, then he should do so. What Paul said in a different context applies here, as well. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." (Rom 14:5)

This is a time when many churches are streaming their sermons. Some may even be managing some form of mutual singing, although many people would hesitate to sing in their homes who would have no problem joining in with the congregation in one room. The issue for the Churches of Christ that partake of the Lord's Supper every week is how to do that in isolation. Perhaps, like the Muslims in the desert, they may make some sort of dispensation. Perhaps they can distribute the bread and the fruit of the vine during the week so that all may take it together. Others may purchase their own supplies. Still others may choose not to participate because they cannot be in communion with the congregation and cannot proclaim the Lord's death.

Disclaimer: The opinions and conclusions in this article are those of the author alone. They are not the position of any specific congregation or group of elders.

# *IN A RELATIONSHIP*

If you choose to set up a profile on Facebook, one of the questions is Relationship. It has the expected options: Single, Engaged, Married, Divorced, Widowed. It has some seemingly off-the-wall choices: it's complicated, in a civil partnership, in a domestic partnership, in an open relationship. And then there is the catch-all "In a relationship," which could mean anything from going steady to what used to be called "living in sin." It is a vague term that can mean pretty much what the person choosing it decides that it means.

Being "in a relationship" lacks commitment. Choosing this option means that you have not chosen, or will not admit to, marriage. It is the "one of the above" option, without committing to which of the above applies. It is like a married man introducing his wife as "my partner," "my significant other," or "my roommate."

And these days we hear a lot of people talking about wanting to be in a relationship with Christ. They don't explain what sort of relationship they want. It lacks any real commitment.

The Jews just before the Babylonian Captivity would have admitted to being in a relationship with God. They offered sacrifices. They sought advice from the prophets. And yet Ezekiel condemned them.

Thus saith the Lord GOD; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the LORD will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols. (Ezek 14:4-5)

Hosea said that the people set up altars to their idols, and continued to bring their offerings to the Temple. And God told him, "I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Hos 6:6)

To their credit, many who seek to be "in a relationship" with Christ don't want to maintain their relationship with sin. They want to change. They want what many who choose that option on Facebook mean by it. "I am committed to that person and they are committed to me, for now. We choose not to make a permanent commitment, but will leave our options open. We want a marriage without being married."

Back in the sixties, some people called marriage "just a piece of paper," or "inkstains that are dried upon some line." They denied God's plan for a family. Many people look at immersion in the same way. They want a relationship, but they deny the requirements of a real commitment. They want to be associated with Christ, but not be joined with him. "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal 3:27)

In Ephesians 5, Paul writes at length about the relationship between a husband and wife. Some people don't like what he said, at least about the wife being subject to the husband in the same way the church is subject to Christ. He also says that the husband must love the wife to the point of giving his life for her, because that is what Christ did for the church. The church is the bride of Christ. Jesus lists his status as married. How would he feel about his bride listing her status as "in a relationship?"

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