

COMMUNION

Understanding Its Meaning and Practice

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Scriptures taken from

the Holy Bible, New International Version.

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When I was twelve years old, one of my favorite sports was baseball. My team was having a great season, and we were on our way to winning the local championship. At that time, my father was a pastor of a large church in the city of Akron, Ohio, and somehow during that summer I became vaguely aware of the teaching that there were consequences to be suffered if you took communion unworthily. The thought occurred to me that it might mess up my batting average and forfeit the team's chance of winning the title if there were some unconfessed sins in my heart when I took the Lord's Supper. Because I did not understand all the positives of communion as a young boy, I decided it would be easier to avoid it altogether. And so for an entire summer, when my father was not looking, I crept out of church before they celebrated the Lord's Supper.

I wonder what your experience has been of communion. Maybe you have unanswered questions about its meaning and practice. The purpose of this booklet is to dispel the confusion surrounding communion by laying out the biblical understanding of its practice. In order to do so, we will focus primarily on a passage from a New Testament letter to the Christians at Corinth. Known for its cosmopolitan population, Corinth was one of the most important cities in Greece, strategically located on a key trade route. The church that had been established there was a place of radical excesses, and while the apostle Paul, who wrote the letter, found much to praise among the believers, he did not shy away from lovingly confronting lifestyles and practices that needed correction.

One of Paul's criticisms was directed at the Christians' treatment – or rather, mistreatment – of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34). By asking the questions employed by an investigative journalist (*Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?*), we will seek to understand the biblical principles of communion so that we can experience the wonderful blessings God has in store for us when we remember Christ in the right way.

Who?

Who can take part in a communion service?

There are two requirements we must fulfill before we can eat and drink at the Lord's Supper. First, we have to be part of the family of God, because communion is a family meal. Second, our hearts must be right before God and other believers.

We become part of the family of God by recognizing that we have fallen short of God's standards and by trusting Christ to save us from our sin. Regardless of church tradition, social class, or age, all believers are welcome at the table because there is equality at the foot of the cross.

The second requirement – that our hearts are right before God and other believers – is seen in verse 28, where Paul emphasized the necessity of examining ourselves prior to coming to the Lord's table. In other words, we must give ourselves a spiritual check-up before we can take communion. If we find that there is an area of our lives that is not fully surrendered to Christ, or if there is anger in our hearts against a brother or sister in Christ, we should not partake of the elements until we have confessed our sin to God and taken steps to restore our relationships with other Christians. We need to come to the Lord's Supper with a sense of oneness and unity.

One of Paul's main criticisms of the church at Corinth concerned their behavior toward each other around the Lord's table (vv. 17-22). It seems they were in the habit of enjoying fellowship meals together before taking communion. At these meals, which should have demonstrated their love and unity in Christ, clear distinctions were drawn between the social classes. While the rich ate like gluttons and some became drunk, the poorer members were given little or no food and may have even been forced to eat in a separate room. These divisive actions destroyed the very notion of the equality in Christ that the Lord's Supper should have represented.

We need to make certain that we understand this particular question correctly, because, according to verses 27-32, ignoring the issue of who can come to the table has serious consequences. If we refuse to heed Paul's warning and persist in taking communion with hearts that are not right before God or our fellow Christians, we are "*sinning against the body and blood of the Lord*" (v. 27). It is difficult to imagine anything more serious, and we would do well to give the matter some thought.

However, we must also guard against the opposite extreme, where rather than dealing with any sin that the Lord reveals to us, we become afraid of taking part in communion services due to their solemn nature and our unworthiness. The balance is to be found somewhere between these two extremes. Although it is right to be fearful to participate in a way that would not honor Christ, we must remember that God is both faithful and gracious, and He will pardon us when we ask (1 John 1:9). The aim of examining ourselves is not to find a reason to stay away but rather to come to the table with clean hearts and clear consciences.

What?

What is the nature of the bread and cup?

For hundreds of years scholars have debated what Jesus really meant when He said, “*This is My body*” (Matt. 26:26). The extent to which the issue has divided theologians is illustrated dramatically by an episode that occurred during the Reformation. Exchanges between opposing theological camps became so heated in the sixteenth century, and the potential for serious religious and political repercussions so real, that two of the leading Reformers, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, were summoned to Marburg, Germany, in October 1529 in an attempt to resolve the conflict face to face.

There they sat on opposite sides of the table. Luther was a former Roman Catholic priest, who had come to the understanding that justification is by grace through faith in Christ alone and had spearheaded the Reformation as a result. Independently, Zwingli, also a former priest, had become convinced about justification by faith and was helping lead the Reformation in Zurich.

The dialogue was extensive, and the two sides were able to agree on many of the doctrinal points that were under discussion. But even after four days Luther and Zwingli proved unable to reach a consensus on a seemingly small item concerning communion, namely the nature of the elements.

The view held by the Roman Catholic church was that upon consecration at the Mass, the elements became the body and blood of Christ. After searching Scripture, both Luther and Zwingli had come to reject this doctrine, but where they still differed was on the exact relationship of the bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ. Luther believed the elements *contained* the literal body and blood of Christ, whereas Zwingli saw them as purely *symbolic*; he said they could not be otherwise, since Jesus Christ was now in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father.

Luther felt it was just as futile to attempt to rationalize the spiritual and material dimensions of the elements as it was to try to explain the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ. He insisted that Jesus’ words in Matthew 26:26 (“*This is My body*”) were a mystery that must simply be accepted by faith. After the first day of talks, Luther even chalked this text on the table where he was to debate with Zwingli the next day, covering it with a satin cloth, only to unveil it triumphantly when asked to provide just one Bible passage that supported his point of view. Zwingli remained unconvinced, however, and their failure to reach a consensus contributed to further division within the Reformation movement.²

Throughout church history there have been four primary viewpoints on the nature of the elements:

- 1. transubstantiation** – this view is held by Roman Catholics, as well as many from the Eastern Orthodox traditions. It teaches that each time Mass is celebrated, the bread and wine turn into the actual body and blood of Christ at the moment of consecration by the priest. The doctrine is built upon Aristotelian philosophy, which differentiates between *substance* and *accidents*. The substance of an object is its true essence. The accidents are its outward appearances: its shape, texture, color, etc. Roman Catholic theologians maintain that the accidents of the bread and wine

remain unchanged while their substance is transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

2. consubstantiation – this is the view proposed by Luther, which is still held by many Lutherans today. According to proponents of consubstantiation, the body and blood of Christ are present “in, with, and under” the bread and cup. Luther thought it pointless to try to understand what occurred during communion, but used a picture of fire and iron to illustrate his belief. When iron is put into a fire, the iron becomes red hot; yet the iron is still iron, and the fire is still fire. So the bread comes to contain the body of Christ, and the wine the blood of Christ, while remaining unchanged.

3. symbolic–memorial view – this view, which was advocated by Zwingli and is the most popular among evangelicals in America today, states that the elements serve as symbolic reminders of the body and blood of Christ. A pastor or priest has no power to transform the elements into the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ. Neither do the elements contain the literal body and blood. Rather, just as Jesus Christ used many everyday objects as illustrations at other times in His earthly ministry, He was using the symbols of the bread and wine to teach truths about His death on the cross. The bread was no more His actual body than Jesus was a literal vine (John 15:1). Indeed, His disciples must have understood Jesus’ words figuratively, since during that Last Supper, He was with them in person.

4. symbolic–spiritual presence view – this is the belief that although the bread and wine serve as symbolic reminders of Christ’s body and blood, that is not to deny that Christ is present spiritually in a very real way when we remember Him in communion. At the outset, Zwingli favored the symbolic–memorial view, but later in life he – along with many of the second generation Reformers – leaned in the direction of the symbolic–spiritual presence view.

Differences of opinion on the substance of the elements should not exclude someone from the Lord’s table. Regardless of conviction about the nature of the bread and wine, those who are one in Christ need to demonstrate that oneness around the Lord’s table. Since Jesus often taught in symbols and the disciples could not have interpreted Jesus’ words literally, the current author favors a symbolic understanding. Yet he would want to maintain that communion is far more than merely a historical memorial. Jesus Christ is alive and at work today. He comes among us in a very special way when we remember Him by eating the bread and drinking from the cup. We can invite Him to move among us, spiritually nourishing our souls as we feed on Him.

Where?

Where is the proper location for communion?

The Lord's Supper can, in fact, be celebrated wherever Christians are gathered together. One extreme example of this is in the case of a Roman Catholic priest named Father Jenco who was taken hostage in Lebanon by Shiite Muslims in the mid-1980s. For most of his nineteen-month captivity, he remained blindfolded and chained to a radiator. Among his fellow-captives were a Presbyterian minister, Benjamin Weir, and the American journalist, Terry Anderson, who actually came to Christ through this difficult ordeal. Although much of their captivity was spent in solitary confinement, Father Jenco and Terry Anderson later shared a cell, where, still wearing blindfolds and chains, they would gather up scraps of bread, take water, and celebrate the communion meal with Benjamin Weir and a few other hostages. They would not have agreed on every doctrinal point, but God knew their hearts, and it was their only source of joy in the midst of their painful trial.³

Some Christians, if they are not careful, come to adopt a church-building mentality toward the Lord's Supper. For them, it has to be celebrated within the four walls of a church structure and offered solely by a pastor or priest. From the example of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2:46 ("*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts*"), however, it appears that corporate gatherings took place in the temple, whereas the breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper) was celebrated in homes. It is worth considering therefore, whether we can offer communion, on occasion, within a smaller context of a fellowship group or family unit.

When?

How often should we take communion?

Nowhere does Scripture speak directly on the frequency of communion. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul's only references to the timing of communion leave the matter open (vv. 20, 25, 26). The apostle has far more to say about *how* the Christians were to approach communion than *how often* they should celebrate it. There is strong evidence that indicates the early church met every week for the Lord's Supper. Some scholars have also suggested that the church took it on a daily basis. In history there has been a wide variance of practice, ranging from a daily, weekly or monthly communion service to seasonal or even annual services. We need to take care that the Lord's Supper never becomes a ritualistic or superstitious practice, while equally making certain that it remains a central part of local church life.

Why?

Why should Christians take communion?

First and foremost, we take communion out of obedience, because it is a command from Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that

communion had its origins in the last evening Jesus spent with His disciples before He went to the cross (11:23-25). It was Passover time, and after they had all eaten the special meal together, He offered His closest friends words of comfort and instruction ahead of His departure (Matt. 26:17-30; Luke 22:7-23). At the close He passed around the bread and cup and told them to continue the practice in remembrance of Him. Notice the particular reason behind the instruction that Jesus revealed: *“do this in remembrance of Me.”* Jesus was aware that the disciples would be prone to forget Him. He fully understood human nature and knew that they needed reminders.

It is important to realize that the word *“remembrance”* does not only mean reflecting on what Christ has done in the past by dying on the cross, although that is of course an essential part of the Lord’s Supper (v. 26). Our *“remembrance”* also has present and future dynamics. When we take communion, we celebrate Jesus Christ as a risen Savior! We should therefore spend time thinking about how He is at work today in the world and in us. We also need to consider the future, because Jesus Christ is coming back one day. As verse 26 makes clear: we proclaim His death in this way *“until He comes.”*

How?

How do we approach the communion table?

What is the result of all that we have learned about the Bible’s teaching on communion? How does it affect us in practical terms? There are at least four attitudes we should remember when we approach the Lord’s Supper.

1. We come with humble repentance.

The attitude of humility is all-important, especially at communion. Not to be confused with low self-worth, humility is rather the recognition of how great God is and how dependent we are on Him. Although there is a one-time act of salvation when our sinful nature is forgiven by God, we continue to act selfishly at times and stand in constant need of His forgiveness (1 John 1:8-9). Before we partake of the elements then, we should invite His Spirit to work on our hearts and, in humble repentance, seek His forgiveness for our sin.

2. We come with humble respect.

Christians sometimes lose the sense of awe in worshiping a holy and mighty God. The way in which we approach the Lord’s table shows what we think of Him. We should therefore come with dignity and honor, demonstrating our reverence.

Furthermore, our respect means we will take care in following the instructions Christ gave us. When Jesus chose the bread and wine, He did so for a special purpose. His intention was to connect His upcoming death with the original Passover, the defining moment in Israel’s history (Ex. 12:1-50). The bread was unleavened, signifying Jesus’ sinlessness (Heb. 4:15). The blood spoke of sacrifice

and covenant, and reminds us of the Passover story, when on the eve of their liberation from Egypt, the Israelite slaves followed the LORD's instruction to sacrifice a perfect young lamb, sprinkling its blood on their doorposts. That night a curse of death passed over the land, taking the firstborn in each household. Only those who sheltered under the blood were safe (Ex. 12:12-23). The parallels are clear: Jesus was the perfect Lamb, whose blood would be shed on the cross; and just as the Israelites experienced redemption from slavery and death in Egypt, Jesus would accomplish redemption from slavery to sin and eternal death.

Some Christians advocate bringing communion into the modern era by using items from a normal meal today – a Big Mac and Coke, maybe. While it is always good to evaluate and change our practices in order to avoid meaningless tradition, our behavior has, at times, become far too casual toward what is an extremely serious church ordinance. If Jesus chose the unleavened bread and fruit of the vine to speak of His sacrifice, we ought to demonstrate our respect and appreciation by following the appropriate symbols and taking care to honor His table.

3. We come with humble gratitude.

Thinking about the Lord should immediately bring thankfulness to our hearts. During communion we express gratitude for all that He did on the cross for us. We take time to thank Him for what He has done in the past, for what He is doing today, and for all He has promised for the future.

4. We come with humble expectation.

When we come to the communion table with pure hearts, Jesus Christ will minister to us in love. He left us very few commands, and there is always special blessing in following Him in obedience. He meets us at the table in a special way, nourishing us spiritually for the days to come.

My prayer is that this booklet answers many of your questions about communion and its practice. What is more, I hope that this knowledge does not remain a head knowledge only, and that you are reminded in your hearts how important communion is. May we all experience His presence in very real and special ways as we remember Him at His table.

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and his wife, Faith, have two children.

Footnotes:

- 1 Although Martin Luther was a wonderful Christian leader to whom we owe a great gratitude, not all of his remarks can be supported by the current author. In particular he would wish to distance himself from Luther's inappropriate comments about our Jewish friends. For a fuller description, see also Graham Keith, *Hated Without a Cause: A Survey of Anti-Semitism* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1997), 149-194.
- 2 Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1988), 144-158, 239-240, 318-320; Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (2nd edition) (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 165-181.
- 3 Lawrence Martin Jenco, *Bound to Forgive: The Pilgrimage to Reconciliation of a Beirut Hostage* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1995).