



# Communion 101

| “Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)

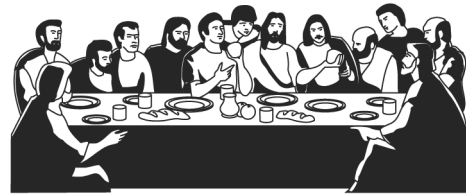
## Introduction

Around the world, Christian churches offer constant thanksgiving to God when they celebrate Communion together and remember Jesus Christ. By eating and drinking, Christians follow Jesus’ command when he broke bread at his last supper and said: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Christians practice sharing bread and wine in many different ways. We also call the practice by different names: Lord’s Supper, emphasizing the last meal of Jesus with his disciples; Holy Communion or Communion, emphasizing the communion of the church of Christ; and Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. Because Communion is the most commonly used word, we will primarily use that term in this study, although all are equally valid.

This ritual of thanksgiving for God’s gift of life to us has been practiced since the very beginning of the church and has helped define the faith and the practices of Christians throughout time. But why is this eating and drinking so important in the life of the church? In this study, we will learn about how the early church celebrated Communion. We will then consider historical interpretations of this practice and think about the relationship between Communion and hospitality.

## New Testament

It was a common practice in biblical times to eat with friends. The Gospels often tell of meal events where Jesus eats with his friends. Eating together played a strong social function in society. The last meal of Jesus with his disciples in the upper room was done around the celebration of the Passover, the celebration of the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt.



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Besides the New Testament, another important document that served to give shape to the practices of the churches was the *Didache*, which means “teaching.” In this document, composed around the end of the first century and beginning of the second, we find directions for prayers, songs, preparation of the believer, how to drink from the cup and partake of the bread, and the order of liturgical gestures.

What is most important for us to know is that there were a variety of practices among the early Christian churches around Communion and there was no uniformity. These practices attest to the fact that the churches dealt with it according to their constituency, place, and particular needs. This plurality of practices and

consequently theological understandings can also help us comprehend why the celebration of Communion in our days varies so.

At this Table we follow Jesus' commandment to eat and to drink together as a way to remember Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. At this Table, a new covenant between God and God's people through Jesus is established. At this Table, we, the people of God, pray, sing, hope, and practice our faith as we share life together with one another. At this Table, the people of God remember the eternal covenant with God and the universal bond with the body of Christ. At this Table, we remember God's creation, God's salvific acts in history, and how God intervened in the world and our lives through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. At this Table, we are reminded that we are servants of God and that we are God's presence in the world.

## Early Church Practice

As we consider historical accounts from the second century, it is important to keep in mind that the early Christian churches gathered in the houses of believers. The variety of practices in these diverse settings created some confusion and an array of theological inclinations with which the church struggled.

Communion was celebrated amid other practices, namely, the reading of the Scripture, a sermon based on the reading, prayers, and songs. From the second century, we have a more extensive description of the Eucharist by Justin Martyr:

Then we stand up together and offer prayers. And, as we mentioned before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is presented, and wine with water; the president likewise offers up prayers and thanksgiving according to his ability, and the people assent by saying Amen. The elements which have been "eucharistized" are distributed and received by each one; and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who are prosperous, if they wish, contribute what each one deems appropriate; and the collection is deposited with the president; and he takes care of the orphans and widows, and those who are needy because of sickness or other cause, and the captives, and the strangers who sojourn amongst us—in brief, he is the curate of all who are in need.<sup>1</sup>

As we can note, there is a fuller sequence of practices around the Eucharist. Bread, wine, and water

are mentioned. In other descriptions, honey and milk are also present. In this description, there is a leader present, and a new movement that turns the elements into *Eucharistic elements* is also mentioned. One can see that there is a structure of the act of Communion and a powerful connection is made at the end of the description: the practice of the Eucharist is intimately connected to the care of orphans and widows, those who are sick and in need, captives, strangers, and sojourners.

This connection dissolves any understanding of the sacrament as a ritual done for the sake of the participant or the gathered community only, or even for the sake of God! The sacrament has a deeper connection to God that includes the neighbor and the world. Moreover, it actually serves to transform not only its participants but also the world beyond the table. Thus, since the very beginning, to participate in the Lord's Supper requires the participant to engage deeply not only with the tenets of the Christian faith but most importantly, in practices of solidarity, love, and mercy.

It is remarkable that in a brief description of Christian gathering, Justin spends so much time talking about the importance of linking the food at the table with the actions of providing for the hungry. It is a sign that the early church avoided the distinctions that we often make between worship and mission. There was no separation into committee structures and interest groups. Instead, the central act of gathering around the table is the foundation for providing food for those who otherwise would go hungry. Widows, prisoners, and the sick—those whom, outside of relatives, had few if any resources—were fed by the offerings at the table. More than just a bit of bread and sip of wine, the Table was a place of feeding for those who gathered around it and for those who couldn't come, but whose well-being depended on the further distribution of the Table's food.<sup>2</sup>

## Transubstantiation

A huge change in the life of the Christian churches and the way Communion was practiced occurred in the fourth century, around the year 330 when the emperor Constantine made the Christian faith the official religion of the Roman Empire. With this change, the worship gatherings moved from houses to big basilicas



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where liturgical practices became official and lost some of their diversity.

From the fourth to the sixteenth century, the Eucharist was developed in several ways. A major debate in the understanding of the sacrament can be seen in the establishment of the Eucharist as a sacrifice. At the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century (1545 to 1563), the Roman Catholic Church decided to adopt the doctrine of the transubstantiation, which meant that the words of institution said during the Mass would actually change the bread, the host, and the wine into the body and blood of Christ. In other words, the bread and the wine would take on another substance, that of the body of Christ, and through the work of the Spirit, these elements, bread and wine, would be transubstantiated into the very body and the very blood of Christ.

How would that happen? In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was to be reenacted, that is, the death of Jesus would happen again at the altar every time the Eucharist was to be celebrated. Through this ritual action, the elements would become the real body of Jesus present at the Table. This understanding of the body of Christ brought some concrete changes around the Table: it gave more power to the clergy, since only clergy could officiate; it meant less lay participation in the liturgy and required more explanations by allegories (illustrations and paintings on the walls, liturgical objects, the altar as a place where Christ is sacrificed, the bread being held up by the priest, etc.); and Communion was viewed as a magical mystery. The festivity of the Corpus Christi, still popular in places around the world, absorbed all of these changes. This feast usually takes the consecrated elements of the Eucharist, bread and wine but most often only bread, and takes it to the streets for people to see, be healed, and gain salvation.

## Reformed Understandings

With the advent of the Reformation, this understanding of the Eucharist was challenged. Martin Luther, Guillaume Farel, John Oecolampadius, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and many others preached and wrote about their disagreements with the Roman Catholic Church in regard to the Eucharist. Their writings were not only about theological differences but also political as well, because the eucharistic altar was at the center of the control of power. Those who controlled the altar were seen as having direct access to God, a holy power, and, consequently, the religious leaders and secular leaders worked together to rule the world.

Reacting against the Catholic Church, the reformers formulated their own understandings of the Eucharist and found support in different cities from people and/or political authorities who wanted to break political ties with the Catholic Church. Calvin's sacramental theology, for instance, is, in many ways, an answer to the many mistakes that he believed were associated with the Eucharist, especially from the Catholic Church but also from the Anabaptists and the Libertines.<sup>3</sup>

The Reformers' main theological objections to the Eucharist as proposed by the Roman Catholic Church were the following.

1. No human vessel, including bread and wine, can become God, that is, no transubstantiation.
2. The Eucharist was not a sacrifice but a sacrament of thanksgiving.
3. Against the Council of Trent's emphasis upon the sole authority of the priest over the administration of the "sacrament of the altar," they were against the non-participation of people in the liturgy. The Reformers proposed the universal priesthood of all believers. John Calvin took this to mean that all the believers were equal before God and the church was to have governing offices with specific vocations within the body of Christ. He advocated for different kinds of leadership (pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons), none of which was to be higher in importance before God. The pastors, among other things, were supposed to minister to the people of God and celebrate the Eucharist. Calvin also taught that people should

## TABLE OR ALTAR?

The celebration of the Eucharist is understood by Roman Catholics to be the reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ. Thus, every time the Mass is said, Christ's sacrifice is enacted and offered to people. Due to that, the Eucharist is called the "sacrament of the altar" since the passion and sacrifice of Christ is to be enacted through the transubstantiation of the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Protestants, on the contrary, affirm that the rite of the Eucharist is not a propitiatory sacrifice but an act of thanksgiving, which means that no sacrifice happens on an altar but rather, the food of God, bread and wine, are placed on the eucharistic table, and are to be shared by all God's people.

obey the pastor. Pastors functionally spoke with the authority of God, if they followed the Word of the Scripture.

4. The Council required people to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least once a year for the sake of their personal salvation, and the Reformers said that the sacrament of the Eucharist had no power in itself to save anybody. It was the power of the Holy Spirit through the eucharistic sacrament that would produce the encounter with Christ. The Eucharist itself could not offer salvation.

Around these issues, there were not only theological statements for the formation of inner beliefs but also key points to structure the political arena and the configuration of power in churches, cities, and countries. Against these charges, the Roman Catholic Church used the Council of Trent to propose a counterreform to respond to the Reformers. This council was able to hold the growth of the Reformation in check and established the division between Catholics and Reformers.

## Current Issues

Communion practice continues to polarize churches. In each question that follows, churches vary in their beliefs. It can be a good exercise for your group to share what your church believes and inquire how it is different from other churches in your community.

## 1. Who Can Celebrate Communion?

Only priests are allowed to officiate the sacrament of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church. Since transubstantiation occurs during the rite, only those who learn properly how to do it and receive God's blessing through the church can officiate. Most mainline Protestant churches will also only allow ordained ministers to preside at the Table. Some of these churches say that the minister who presides at the Table must be at the table in order to keep the order, but he or she does not necessarily say the words of institution. Some other churches will allow any member to lead the Table prayer. At stake here is how each church understands access to God. Some churches do not allow women to celebrate the Eucharist, and some others do not allow gays and lesbians to preside. For them, women, gays, and lesbians do not have God's blessing to lead this sacrament. Do you agree?

## 2. Can Only Baptized People Participate in Communion?

For many Christian churches, baptism is a requirement for anyone to participate at the Table. Baptism means the entry door to the family of God. However, some Protestant churches debate this understanding by saying that the Table is open to any person who wants to participate, since the Table does not belong to any church in particular but to Christ. Thus, no one can say yes or no to those who wish to participate, no matter what the situation or who the person is. Moreover, once the recommendations as to how one should approach the Table are issued, it belongs to the individual to make the decision of whether to take the bread and the wine or not. This participation at the Lord's Table may also cause the participant to commit fully to the Christian faith, changing the movement from baptism to Table and shifting it from Table to baptism. Do you agree with that?

## 3. Can Anyone Be Excluded from Communion?

Again, each church will have its own rules of participation and also of exclusion, even excommunication. These rules are based on moral aspects that define norms of life and conduct. Breaking the rules can place the believer in a difficult situation. Some sins can exclude the believer for a determined time, while other sinful actions can

lead to total banishment. The understanding behind it is that once one participates in a community, one must follow its rules. To break the rules is to place the community in danger. What do you think about having rules to exclude people from Communion? How do you think your own church deals with it?

#### 4. What Elements Should the Church Use for Communion?

The New Testament always mentions bread and wine. Can churches use another type of food? Bread and wine were staple food and drink for people at that time, and when Jesus uses bread and wine he is signaling to us the very basic elements that feed us and keep us alive. Based on that, to use chips in the Eucharist would be wrong. However, if a community use potato or yucca or mango juice as their daily food, these elements would be able to represent the eucharistic elements, since they are the chief elements of a community's diet. Another question we should ask: "Why do some churches use wine and others use grape juice?" The change from wine to juice is recent and has to do with problems of alcoholism and people taking medicine that cannot be mixed with alcohol. Some churches acknowledge these difficulties and have decided to offer both wine and grape juice. Others have abandoned wine for good. What does your church use? Do you agree?

#### 5. How Often Should Communion Be Celebrated?

Some people ask: Why don't we celebrate Communion every Sunday? The Roman Catholic Church celebrates Eucharist every mass. For some churches, the emphasis of worship is around Communion and other sacraments, and for others, mostly Protestants, their emphasis is on the word, namely the sermon. However, some churches don't celebrate Communion every Sunday because they believe it to be a special ritual and to do it too often causes it to lose its meaning. However, if that is so, if the fear of doing it every week is to lose its power, why don't we think the same way about prayers and sermons? Calvin wanted the churches in Geneva

to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, but the City Council, afraid of being seen as copying the Roman Catholic custom of celebrating mass every Sunday, said no. To celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday is to be fed by God, it is to connect the Word of God to the Table of God. Do you agree?

#### 6. Is Communion a Sacrament or an Ordinance?

Some churches call Communion a sacrament and others call it an ordinance. The difference lies in how one stresses God's role in the practice. Sacrament stresses God's act of bestowing grace on us. Through enacting the sacrament of Communion, Christians participate in God's grace. Ordinance puts more stress on the individual Christian's belief about God and the believer's response to what God has done. Ordinance means that Communion (and baptism) were not only practiced by Jesus but also commanded (or "ordained") by Jesus, and so Christians practice the ordinances to demonstrate their allegiance to Christ through obedience. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, United Methodists, UCCs, and Presbyterians call Communion a sacrament. Others, such as some Methodist churches, Disciples of Christ, and Baptists, call it an ordinance.

#### About the Writer

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#### Endnotes

1. "The First Apology of Justin Martyr," in *Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1961), 9.
2. Paul Galbreath, *Leading from the Table* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008).
3. Anabaptists were radical Christians that were persecuted during the Reformation. Hussites and Waldensians were some of them.
4. For the Catholic Church, the altar became also a place where not only the death of Christ was presented but also the death of Christian martyrs.