

# Communion

**Introduction:** Communion and Baptism are the two sacraments instituted by our Lord that are embraced by the Assemblies of God. Given the wide variance in understanding and practice of these rites within the Christian Church as a whole, we feel it is important to put into writing our understanding of this important activity in our life together.

**What Is A Sacrament?** This term is commonly used in the Christian church to denote rites or ceremonies used in worship. It is not a word used in Scripture, or one with a settled meaning in the early church. The original definition of sacrament is attributed to Augustine, summed up in *The Book of Common Prayer* as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Augustine’s categorization of the *sacramenta* included around thirty ceremonies, but by the time of Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages, the Catholic church had narrowed the number to seven. They were baptism, confirmation, communion, matrimony, penance, extreme unction, and ordination. The Reformers sharpened the definition of sacrament by the addition of the phrase “ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel.” This established baptism and communion as the only two rites that had Jesus’ explicit command behind them, and, within Protestant churches, raised them above the other ceremonies as the true sacraments of the church.<sup>1</sup>

**Main Biblical Texts:** Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:15-20, and 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 (in all texts termed the “eucharist”).

**Other NT References:** As “the breaking of bread” in Acts 2:42&46; 20:7&11; as “the table of the Lord” in 1 Corinthians 10:21; as “communion” in 1 Corinthians 10:16; and as the “Lord’s Supper” in 1 Corinthians 11:20. Other allusions include Luke 24:30, John 6:25-59, Acts 27:35.

**The Last Supper in the Context of Passover:** It is very clear from the gospel accounts that Jesus’ Last Supper with the disciples was associated with a Passover meal (see Matthew 26:17, Mark 14:12, and Luke 22:7). Hence, any proper interpretation must seek to understand it in light of this particular context. The Passover was an elaborate ritual full of symbolism recalling Israel’s exodus from Egypt (see Exodus 11-14).

Within the Passover meal there were six main elements. The most significant was the *Passover lamb*. The lamb reminded the participants of the first Passover in which the angel of death was kept from visiting the first-born of Israel because they were protected by the blood of the lamb on their door posts. The *unleavened bread* reminded them of the swiftness of God’s deliverance. His salvation was so swift that the people of Israel did not have time to bake. The bowl of *salt water* reminded them of the tears shed in their captivity and the crossing of the Red Sea. The *bitter herbs* recalled the bitterness of their slavery. A fruit puree called *Charosheth* reminded them of the clay which they used to make bricks during their captivity. Finally, there were four cups of *wine* which reminded them of the promises of Exodus 6:6-7.

During the Passover meal, someone, usually the youngest son, was designated to ask the question “Why is this night different from other nights?” At this point the host would retell the story of Israel’s deliverance out of Egypt and the meaning of the various elements of the meal. As the host of the Last Supper, Jesus would have been the one who retold the story and gave him opportunity to reinterpret its symbols.

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<sup>1</sup> This material is from C.O. Buchanan’s article, “Sacrament” in *The New Dictionary of Theology* published by InterVarsity Press.

The four main accounts of the Last Supper fall into two distinct groups representing two traditions (Matthew & Mark; Luke & 1 Corinthians). When examined together as a whole, it is possible to discern four basic elements which comprise this sacrament.

The first element is the words, “***This is my body,***” which emphasizes Jesus’ physical incarnation. Here he clearly states that he came to give his body on our behalf. As Peter writes, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). Paul, in calling Jesus our “Passover lamb” (1 Corinthians 5:7) also emphasizes that Christ’s offering of his body is to be seen as an atoning sacrifice.

The second element is “***This do in my remembrance.***” Although not found in Mark & Matthew, it would have been quite natural for Jesus to say this in the context of the Passover. The Passover had as its purpose that “[Israel might] remember the day when [she] came out of the land of Egypt” (Deut. 16:3). Likewise, the early church clearly understood the institution of the Lord’s Supper as an act of remembrance. Their practice of coming together for communion on a much more frequent basis than yearly can be attributed to Jesus having said something like “Do this in my remembrance” as well as the parallel to “remembering” in the Passover. Hence, the Lord’s Supper is a recounting of Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice which brought us our salvation, just as the Passover meal recounted the events of the Exodus which resulted in Israel’s deliverance. Paul adds an interesting twist when in 1 Corinthians 11:26 he writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you *proclaim* the Lord’s death until he comes.” Paul’s choice of words leaves open the possibility that he anticipated unbelievers to be in the midst of church gatherings, and that he saw the Lord’s Supper as an opportunity for presenting the gospel, even though it is primarily a memorial intended for the church.

The third element is, “***This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many.***” At the third cup of the Passover meal, after the traditional blessing or in lieu of it, Jesus said, “this is my blood of the covenant poured out for many.” The imagery recalls Exodus 24:8, where Moses seals the divine covenant by pouring half of the “blood of the covenant” upon the altar and sprinkling the other half on the people. In referring to his “blood poured out”, Jesus again indicates that he understood his death as sacrificial, as well as the sealing of the new covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31:31-34. References to the “body” and “covenant” of Christ by means of the “bread” and “wine” are not simply two ways of referring to the same thing, viz., Jesus’ death for the sake of others. The term “body” describes the death of Jesus, but the term “covenant” goes on to identify the great benefit that results from that death – a new relationship with God and one another.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note here that the disciples understood Jesus to be speaking metaphorically when talking about the bread and wine as his body and blood. If asked, “Where *is* the body of Jesus?” they would have pointed to Jesus rather than the bread. Jesus’ frequent use of metaphorical language would have provided the context for understanding “is” non-literally (see John 6). This metaphorical interpretation of “is” is supported by the fact that the elements are always called “bread and cup” (1 Corinthians 11:26-28). It also seems clear that the words “this *is* my blood” would not have been interpreted literally by any of the disciples in light of the OT prohibition against drinking blood. If we remember the difficulty Peter encountered in Acts 10:6-16 with regard to non-kosher meat, it is hard to conclude that the disciples would have no qualms drinking what they thought was real blood.

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community, pp. 82-83.

The last element is the words, “**Until... the kingdom of God.**” Even as the Passover celebration involved anticipation and longing for the final day when Israel would share in the messianic banquet, so all four accounts of the Last Supper contain a word concerning the future. The Synoptic gospels bear unified witness to Jesus’ words: “I say to you, I shall not in any way drink any longer from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Like the OT, this word points triumphantly to the future messianic banquet when Jesus will eat once again with the disciples. The Pauline word about the future does not come from the lips of Jesus but is a comment from the apostle in which he says that when the church celebrates the Lord’s Supper they “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Thus the Lord’s Supper, while not itself the realization of the messianic banquet, is a kind of earnest or first fruits of that banquet.

In the early church the celebration of the Supper was almost immediately separated from the Passover in that the “breaking of bread” was practiced far more frequently than once a year. There are indications that it was celebrated weekly (Acts 20:7, 11; 1 Cor. 16:2) and even daily (Acts 2:46-47). No rate of frequency, however, is prescribed within the New Testament. In summary, the Lord’s Supper contains a two dimensional focus. It recounts the passion of Jesus and his sacrificial death by which he seals a new covenant for humankind. One cannot celebrate communion without looking backward to the cross and suffering of Christ, our Passover. As a result a certain solemnity and sadness is present at this celebration. But there is a forward-looking dimension which does not permit participants to remain in this place. Since the final dimension of the Supper looks forward to the messianic banquet, the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in faith and hope. In this celebration the church joyously awaits the final consummation when faith turns to sight at the table of the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

**The Pauline Lord’s Supper:** It is interesting to note that had there not been abuses of the Lord’s Supper in Corinth, we might never have heard about its practice in Paul’s churches. Likewise, it is important to remember that Paul’s instructions are intended to correct problems in the church’s celebration of communion and not to give a complete accounting of the sacrament. Since Paul was the founder of the church in Corinth, and since he refers to what he had told the church, it follows that the church meal had been introduced by Paul himself but had developed characteristics in his absence which he could not approve.

There was a complicated mix of religious practices in Corinth. But it is important to notice that the very strong explicit criticisms that Paul makes of the Corinthian church meal do not appear to be connected in any way with pagan beliefs or practices that had been carried over into it. Rather the abuses at the meal were of a social character and reflected the practices of the secular world in general rather than of pagan religions in particular. The basic problem appears to have arisen out of tension between the poor and the rich. Whether the particular problem was the lack of sharing food or of the poor being excluded from a portion of the meal, the main point stands out quite clearly. There was over-indulgence on the part of the rich and feelings of envy on the part of the poor who were made to feel inferior (cf. 1 Cor. 12:15).

Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 was directed against these practices which meant that the meal had lost its character as the *Lord’s* meal. In order to stop the abuse, Paul commanded that the church members should welcome one another when they came together for their meal. The occasion was still to be a meal, but the implication was that there was to be sharing of the food, so that nobody felt disadvantaged. Further, Paul laid down that the rich should eat

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<sup>3</sup> All the material connecting communion to the Passover meal and most of the wording is taken from R.H. Stein’s article, “The Last Supper” found in the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels published by InterVarsity Press.

privately in their own houses if they wished to have a larger meal or more expensive fare, and thus avoid importing social divisions into the meeting of the church.

Paul's main point, which provided the theological undergirding for the practical advice, was made by citing the tradition which he had received concerning the meal. The tradition described what happened at the Last Supper. It followed that conduct which was contrary to the spirit of self-giving seen in the death of Jesus would negate the significance of the meal. Hence it was the contempt and lack of love for the poorer members of the church which specifically aroused Paul's anger. The members of the church should stop before taking part in the meal to be sure they were not committing this "sin" which would bring judgment upon them. Such conduct was "unworthy" and represented a failure to "discern the body," that is, it failed to recognize that the people gathered together for the meal are present as the body of Christ (made one by sharing in the one loaf, 1 Cor. 10:17) and must be treated in Christian love.

This is an important point to understand for a couple of reasons. First of all, taking part in communion in an "unworthy manner" is a serious matter. Paul indicates that it resulted in serious judgement from God. Secondly, some have misunderstood this passage. Believing that "any" unconfessed sin - even sins one could not remember - would constitute eating unworthily, they have been reluctant or even fearful of taking communion. This is not what the passage teaches and is antithetical to the spirit and purpose of the Lord's Supper. Any person who humbly desires to be in relationship with God through Christ and is not behaving in a manner that is harmful or divisive to the church is welcome at the Lord's Table and need feel no hesitation whatsoever about participating.

There has been much discussion, arising out of contemporary theological differences in the church, as to whether Paul's teaching indicates that the Lord himself is present in the elements of communion. The debate turns on 1 Corinthians 10:20-21 where there appears to be an analogy between being partakers with demons through sharing in their cup and table and what happens at the Lord's Supper. However, there is no indication that the two events are precisely parallel, and in any case it is not suggested that the worshippers eat the demons or that the demons are present in the food. Rather, the parallel suggests that, just as those who share in idolatrous feasts are brought into a relationship with demons, so those who share in the Lord's Supper are brought into a relationship with the Lord who is present as host. This language of "hosts and guests" admittedly goes beyond what Paul says explicitly, but fits in with the background concepts of feasts held under the patronage of a god in paganism and feasts celebrated "in the presence of the Lord" in the OT and Judaism (cf. also Rev. 3:20).<sup>4</sup>

No priestly celebrant is in view in any of the contexts where the meal is discussed; indeed, there is no suggestion that its management was in the hands of officials of any kind. Most probably general arrangements were in the hands of the "host" in whose home the meal was held, but Paul's comments indicate that responsibility for proper conduct lay upon all. The presence of children in regular meetings of Christians (Col. 3:20; Eph. 6:1-3) suggests that they participated in it. A precedent here would be the Passover meal which included education of the young in the fundamentals of their religious heritage (Exodus 12:21-27).<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 Paul gives a warning against the danger of assuming that mere participation in the Lord's Supper (and in baptism, 1 Cor. 10:1-2) guarantees the participant a

<sup>4</sup> Except where otherwise footnoted, all the material in this section and most of the wording on Paul's conception of the Lord's Supper is taken from I. Howard Marshall's article, "The Lord's Supper" found in the Dictionary of Paul and his Letters published by InterVarsity Press.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Banks, Paul's Idea of Community, pp. 82-83.

favorable standing with God. Paul clearly rejects a crass sacramental view of communion. As in the case of circumcision, the Lord's Supper (and baptism) is of value only when accompanied by faith and obedience (Romans 2:25).

**Issues of Practice:** The sacrament of communion has been divisive down through the history of the Christian Church so that, today, practice among denominations varies widely. It is not our desire to be contentious about communion, and our hope is that the preceding discussion gives a clear presentation of our understanding of this rite. However, we feel it is necessary to be specific about how this sacrament is to be observed in the life of our church.

We do not see any reason for limiting the celebration of communion to Sunday morning worship services. In the New Testament, the Greek term *ekklesia*, which we translate "church," simply refers to a gathering or meeting of Christians. Whenever "two or three" believers are gathered, Jesus promises to be in our midst (Matthew 18:20), and whenever the church is gathered it is appropriate to celebrate the sacraments. Therefore we do not wish to limit the settings in which communion may be celebrated. In fact, we encourage people toward the appropriate celebration of communion in different settings like conferences, core groups, ministry teams, and other special gatherings.

Because of the "priesthood" of all believers (1 Peter 2:5,9) we also do not see the presence of a pastor or elder as a prerequisite for a group of Christians to celebrate communion. We embrace an "open" stance toward the sacrament, by which we mean that we will not keep anyone who professes Jesus Christ as their Lord from participating in communion because they are not members of our church or denomination. However, if we are aware that a person is under church discipline for unrepented sin, regardless of whether they are members of our church or another, we will prohibit their participation until they are restored.

Although we do not wish to create a rigid liturgy for our observance of communion, given the previous discussion, we believe that "an appropriate celebration" of this sacrament requires some fundamental forms and attitudes. Even in the most informal settings, we expect that the communion elements will be identified as Jesus' body and blood, and that the activity of taking communion will be identified as a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice that assures us of God's forgiveness of our sins and which is the basis for a new covenant (or relationship) with God. The last element we expect to be present is some mention of our hope for the future. This may take many forms, but we see this as important since the sacraments both look back to what Christ has done *and* look forward to what he will do. A simple way of fulfilling all of this would be to read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, but this is not a requirement.

Because communion is "a participation" in Christ's blood and body (1 Corinthians 10:16), the fundamental attitudes necessary for "an appropriate celebration" is a love for Christ and for his body (the church) among those who partake. Obviously, this is a very general statement paralleling the two great commandments of love for God and neighbor. Nonetheless, we feel it is best if an invitation is given preceding communion which makes it clear that the rite is for those who love Christ and the community of faith.

Another important question of practice is whether children should be included in our celebration of communion. As already noted, if we consider the practice of the early church, it seems likely that children were included in church gatherings and therefore were a part of the communion celebration. This would have been a natural carryover from the Passover feasts and an opportunity for their education and formation in the faith. On the other hand, it also means that they would have been old enough to be able to ask questions and understand something of the

meaning of the “meal.” So we think it is best for children to be included when they are able to receive instruction as to the meaning of communion and to be self-consciously Christian, that is, that they believe in Jesus. This does not mean, however, that they must have the same level of maturity or self-understanding that we believe to be appropriate to baptism. We believe that the determination of when a child is ready for communion is best made by their parent(s).