

Communion: The What, Why and How

By Chris Barksdale

Why is Communion Important?

Here are seven reasons we feel communion is important for the church:

1. Celebration

Communion is meant to be a celebration of the remembrance of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). This is to be the chief goal of all we do on Sundays as well as throughout our everyday lives. It is all about Jesus and He commands us to remember Him! Thus each Sunday we come to celebrate the person and work of Jesus Christ. As believers we need to reflect on this gospel story not just through the preaching of God's Word but also through the taking of the elements in communion.

2. Examination

Martin Luther once said "all of life is repentance". This is also our goal on Sundays. We want to celebrate Jesus and remember Him and in doing so repent of how we have defamed His name, demoted His supremacy in our lives and deflected His Spirit's work on our hearts. Thus Paul tells us to take communion and "examine ourselves" (1 Corinthians 11:28). This provides us with the opportunity to respond each Sunday and seek to be doers and not hearers only (James 1:22-25). I remember as a young believer being in church and hearing the sermon and wanting to respond in prayer but as soon as the pastor was done preaching we were called to stand and sing. The Spirit's work in my heart was deflected because I had no time to respond. Communion provides that time for the church to respond to the Spirit's work in our lives through the preached Word of God.

3. Motivation

In Luke 22:17-19 we find Jesus giving thanks and then having his disciples take part in communion. Thanksgiving is a vital part of our time together Sunday for God always wants to be in the position of giver for the giver gets the glory (1 Peter 4:10-11). We don't come with hands full of gifts, vocal chords in shape and pristine Bibles opened up and think God is going to be impressed. We come with empty hands in need of God to fill us up, wake us up and actually give to us. The result is that we respond in thanksgiving to His grace and then in obedience as we move out and He is glorified. Psalm 50 and Acts 17 makes it clear that God doesn't need anything from us, he wants us to need Him! It is like the hymn "Come ye sinners" which says, "Let not conscience make you linger, Nor of fitness fondly dream; All the fitness He requires Is to feel your need of

Him.” Thus grace we see at the cross, responded to in thanksgiving, empowers us to obey and follow Jesus (Titus 2:11-14). Communion helps us see this grace and work of Christ each Sunday.

4. Proclamation

Paul reminds us that we are proclaiming the Lord’s death till He comes when we take communion (1 Corinthians 11:26). This serves two goals in the church. First it reminds the church of the gospel story, especially that of redemption and restoration. We are reminding ourselves of Christ’s work on the cross as well as His soon to be return! We need this reminder every Sunday. The other goal it accomplishes is that we are proclaiming this story to unbelievers who are with us during that time that this church is about the redemption and restoration of Jesus, it is about Him and what He does, not us and what we do!

5. Participation

Communion expresses the unity of the church and fellowship with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-7, Acts 2:42-47, 1 Corinthians 10:16-18, 11:17-34). The main purpose of Paul bringing up communion in 1 Corinthians 11 is for the sake of them doing it to promote unity instead of disunity as they were doing. Thus in taking communion as a church family we are unifying around the gospel but also communing with God. We call it “communion” for a reason. Wayne Grudem says, “There is a spiritual union among believers and with the Lord that is strengthened and solidified at the Lord’s Supper, and it is not to be taken lightly.”

6. Commemoration

One of the most forgotten elements of communion is the remembrance of our leaders (Hebrews 13:7). We forget that we are not part of something new. The church has been around longer than us and will continue after we are gone. Part of taking communion together as a church is to remember this long line of godly men and women who have gone before us and how the Lord has been building His church throughout the ages despite martyrdom and death.

The English Reformation, which eventually brought Protestantism to North America, was spurred on by not just the gospel but specifically communion. Between 1555 and 1558 (the reign of bloody Queen Mary), 288 Protestant Reformers were burned at the stake. Of these, 1 was an archbishop, 4 were bishops, 21 were clergymen, 55 were women, and 4 were children. They included John Rogers, John Hooper, Rowland Taylor, Robert Ferrar, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, John Philpot, and Thomas Cranmer. Why were they burned by the Roman Catholic Queen? There was one central issue: the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Here are the words of John Charles Ryle to explain: “The doctrine in question was the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated elements of

bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Did they, or did they not believe that the body and blood of Christ were really, that is corporally, literally, locally, and materially, present under the forms of bread and wine after the words of consecration were pronounced? Did they or did they not believe that the real body of Christ, which was born of the Virgin Mary, was present on the so-called altar so soon as the mystical words had passed the lips of the priest? Did they or did they not? That was the simple question. If they did not believe and admit it, they were burned.”

In taking communion together as a church we are remembering that the freedom to take part was passed on by the shedding of blood. The remembrance is that of Jesus' body and blood but we also remember that in history this has been a vital part of church life and people have died to pass it on to us!

7. Delegation

One of the joys of communion each Sunday is to see the saints equipped for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16). We see deacons and others preparing tables (Acts 6), we see gifted artists decorating and creating items for the tables and we see people God has gifted and called to be prayer warriors lifting others up. Communion gives people an opportunity to use their gifts in the church service. I always loved seeing those who had a real passion for prayer being ready and available for people during communion to pray for them and help bear their burdens. This is all part of seeing the body of Christ function in a healthy, powerful way!

How often should we take communion?

There is no specific verse in Scripture that tells us how often to do it (didactic portions of Scripture), but the implication is that it was done every Sunday in the early church (narrative portions of Scripture). When you read passages like Luke 22, Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 11 the implication is that this was a regular part of their worship gatherings. Jesus seemed to teach His disciples to do this every time they gathered. Even in Acts 2 we find the church being devoted to teaching, fellowship and prayer which we do every Sunday. Yet they were also devoted to “breaking of bread” which was communion. If that was the case then why don't we do that every Sunday as well. Also we find Acts 20:7 making it clear that this is exactly what the early church did when they gathered for worship.

When you look at church history you find that most everything took place around a table of food or communion elements. It's not that they sometimes had a church lunch, or that they had some food before or after their meetings. Their meetings were meals. The second-century theologian Tertullian describes a church gathering this way:

“Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it agape, i.e. affection. Whatever it costs, our outlay in the name of piety is gain, since with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy. The participants, before reclining, taste first of

prayer to God. As much is eaten as satisfies the cravings of hunger; as much is drunk as befits the chaste. After washing up, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing. As the feast commenced with prayer, so with prayer it is closed.”

It was so effective that one Roman Emperor (Julian) who hated Christianity and tried to revive paganism said:

"These irreverent Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us. They are welcoming them into their agape, they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes. While the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. See their love-feasts, and their tables spread for the needy. Such practice is common among them, and causes a contempt for our gods."

When you search church history it is hard to find a time when the church did not take communion together every Sunday. It wasn't till modern times and the birth of the mega-church movement that we went away from this practice because of logistics. But are logistics really a good reason for not carrying out a function of the church that seemingly has gone on for two centuries?

How are we Going to Accomplish this Goal?

Simply put, we are going to take communion together as a church every Sunday! No exceptions! This will be an opportunity for the church to respond to the Word of God as well as to have unbelievers respond in repentance and faith! The goal is to have repentance taking place in the hearts of the people, whether saved or unsaved, and to have joy taking place as they remember the person and work of Christ. This will mean that the preachers job will be to exalt Christ and as Spurgeon once said, “make a b-line for the cross”.

Thus, after the sermon is finished there will be a time of instruction and reflection. There will be tables around the bottom of the stage as well as in the back and in the balcony. The call will be made to take time to reflect on what God has said in His Word and for unbelievers to stay seated during this time. There will be deacons and others on a prayer team at each table ready for anyone who wants to respond and need prayer (this will also be an opportunity for unbelievers to come forward for questions and help with becoming a Christian). Instrumental music will be played and people encouraged to take some time to repent and reflect. Dismissal will be organic and as people are ready they may go to the tables. The music team will also sing a song during this time as a response to the Scripture.

What about those who can't make it back to the table? This will be an opportunity for the church to serve one another. If you see someone needing help

then you can offer to serve them by getting elements for them. There will also be ushers assigned to help with this as well. If you need help you may raise your hand and an usher or someone near you will help.

Do I need to take communion each Sunday? No you do not. This is not to be a mechanical act but a responsive act of worship from the heart. There may be some Sundays where you have been pierced by the Word and need to make reconciliation with a brother or sister in Christ. We would encourage you to seek that restoration before taking communion.

Once most everyone has taken communion that is going to do so the music team will lead us in a congregation song of response (just as Jesus did with his disciples in Matthew 26:30). The service will then conclude with final announcements, a benediction and send off. Remember that our goal is the exaltation of Christ and the opportunity to give people the chance to respond to God's word so that we are encouraging folks to be doers and not just hearers only!