

COMMUNION OR LAST SUPPER

A study of the background, initiation, and practice
of the communion meal, and its spiritual significance
to our spiritual walk and relationship with Jesus

Its Origin

Communion is an ordinance in the Christian Church, initiated by Jesus on the night of His betrayal, when He shared the first communion meal with His disciples the night before His trial and crucifixion. Jesus ordained communion as a fellowship meal of believers with Himself, as a perpetual reminder of His sacrificial death, and all that it had attained for them.

Its Various Names

The ordinance of communion has been given several names by various Christian fellowships since Jesus first instituted it.

Communion and Holy Communion -- a name drawn from 1 Cor 10:16. **“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? It is called communion because it is a fellowship supper, first shared by Christ with His disciples, and still conducted in His midst by fellowships of believers. “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” Matt 18:20.**

The Lord’s Supper --“Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper.” 1 Cor: 11:20.

The breaking of bread --The early Christians met regularly in their houses for “the breaking of bread.” Acts 2:42.

The Eucharist -- the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” **“Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it.” Mark 14:23.**

The Background of the Old Testament Passover

All gospels connect the Lord’s Supper with the taking of the Jewish Passover Festival. John’s gospel places the time **“before the Feast of the Passover,”** on the night before the Passover, making the supper prepared by the disciples an anticipatory/memorial meal. On the next day, the day of the Passover, Jesus Himself became the eternal Passover Lamb when He died on the cross, initiating our New Covenant relationship with God.

The Passover Feast was the Old Testament forerunner to the New Testament ordinance of Communion. To fully understand the spiritual significance of Communion, and the words spoken by Jesus at its institution, we should be acquainted with the background and conducting of the Passover Feast.

God initiated the Passover Feast as a perpetual reminder that it was He who had provided deliverance, when the Destroyer, used as His instrument, passed through the land of Egypt slaying the first born of every family. To ensure that the families of the Israelites would be spared, Moses was given these specific instructions.

“Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: ‘On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbour next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man’s need you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted in fire -- its head with its legs and its entrails. You shall let none of it remain until morning, and what remains of it until morning you shall burn with

fire. And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." Ex 12:3-13.

THE NEW COVENANT PASSOVER—COMMUNION OR THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Gospel Accounts

Luke and Paul, present the most similar accounts of the institution of the communion supper, "on the night of His betrayal."

Luke's Account

"When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you." Luke 22:14-20.

In the other gospels it is also mentioned in Matthew 26:26-30, and Mark 14:22-26.

Paul's Account

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." 1 Cor 11:23-26. Even though Luke's and Paul's records are alike, Paul introduced his account as handing on what he had "received from the Lord," indicating that the Lord gave it to him directly.

The Similarities Between the Passover and the Lord's Supper

We may observe several parallel points that connect the Passover meal of the Old Covenant with the Communion meal of the New Covenant.

The Passover lamb, which was without spot or blemish, was a substitutionary sacrifice for every Israelite family. It was because of the blood of the Passover Lamb, signifying a life poured out, that the destroyer had to pass over each house.

"For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you. And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever." Ex 12:23-24.

Similarly, we are redeemed from every legal claim of Satan through the blood of Jesus, our Passover Lamb. "For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us." 1 Cor 5:7.

"...you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." 1 Peter 1:18-19.

Jesus the only begotten Son of God became our Passover Lamb, so that he who believes in Him is delivered from Satan's kingdom, and transferred into Christ's kingdom, inheriting everlasting life. "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29-30.

Old Testament Jews took the Passover with the hope of a greater deliverance to come, when they would find fulfilment as a nation in the Messianic kingdom. The Lord's Supper expresses the fulfilment of that hope, with the further blessing of eternal life in the Lord's everlasting kingdom.

Other Significant Likenesses

The Passover Lamb was killed around 3 pm, to allow time to dress and cook it for the evening meal. This was the time that Jesus, our Passover Lamb died on the cross.

In preparing and eating the Passover lamb, the Israelites were told that it should be, "**roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.**"

"Roasted in fire," with "bitter herbs," speak of the intense suffering experienced by Jesus of the cross.

The unleavened bread, eaten without waiting for the process of leavening, and being fully clothed with staff in hand, speak of being in a state of haste and readiness to depart. "**And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand** [as if to go on a journey]. **So you shall eat it in haste.**" This instructs us not to procrastinate in accepting our salvation, and coming out of Satan's kingdom with its worldly bondages, and embarking on a new spiritual journey and path of holiness.

The Israelites were told to eat all of the lamb, burning any left overs so that nothing remained. Similarly, in partaking of the wine, they were told, "**Drink ye all of it...**" Matt 26:27 (KJV). The consuming of all of the Passover sacrifice differed from normal sacrifices, in which part of the lamb was eaten, and the rest offered to God as a burnt offering.

From a spiritual point of view, to eat all and drink all, is to receive and walk in the light of the fullness of all that Jesus has procured for us through His sacrificed body and shed blood.

Eat My Flesh and Drink My Blood

In the Sixth Chapter of John, Jesus' audience asked Him for a sign of His divinity—that He came down to earth from God. "**Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'**" John 6:30-31

In answering them, Jesus shed more light on what we receive unto ourselves as we partake of Communion. The first part of His answer tells us that those who receive the blessings of sacrificed body and shed blood will receive salvation and eternal life.

"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world..."Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. **Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.**" John 6:48-51& 53-54.

The second part of Jesus' answer informs us that if we eat Christ's flesh and drink His blood, we abide in Him and He in us. Furthermore, that if He abides in us, we can partake of His indwelling life here and now. He called Himself "**the living bread,**" and "**the bread of life,**" bread being a symbol of that which sustains. He told us that this was the way that He lived on earth—by continually drawing on the Father's indwelling life. Similarly, if we feed on His indwelling life we will have abundant life to meet our needs.

For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live [on earth] because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me." John 6:55-57.

Jesus repeats this same truth in the analogy of the vine and the branches. "**Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.**" John 15:4-5.

Words and Actions at the Institution of the Lord's Supper

Jesus indicated that the bread and the wine were symbols of His body and blood. His instruction was to eat the bread and drink the wine as a perpetual reminder of His sacrificial death on the cross for mankind. To eat and drink is to receive within oneself all of the spiritual blessings He had purchased for us by His sacrificial death.

“This is My Body”

Jesus took the bread and gave thanks to God. Giving thanks was not invoking God's blessing on the literal bread itself, but for its reception as spiritual food, to be received by all for their spiritual nourishment. Jesus calls the bread His body in the same sense that He called Himself a door (John 10:9), and a vine (John 15:1), and by many other metaphors in Scripture. The bread was an emblem of the life that He would impart to any who fed on Him, or received His Spirit by faith as “living bread,” or the “bread of life.”

Mathew and Mark's gospel say, **“Take eat, this is My body.”** Luke and Paul add, **“do this in remembrance of Me.”** The instruction to take the bread in remembrance of Him was not so much to remember His ministry, or His suffering death on the cross. It was to remember Him as **“the bread of life,” “the true vine”** that gives life to His branches, **“the way, the truth, and the life,”** He who has **“come that (we) may have life, and that (we) may have it more abundantly.”** John 10:10.

“And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” 1 John 5:11-13.

“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.” John 8:12.

“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” John 1:4

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.” John 5:21-22.

The words He has spoken to us, and the words He gives us to speak are Spiritual words producing life. **“The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.”** John 6:63.

The tragedy of the worldly church is that Jesus is remembered for His miracles and agonizing death on the cross, but few have experienced and known Him as the LIFE.

He gave His body, that through Him, we might have life, here and now, and at our death, eternal life. As we take the bread, we remember that He desired to impart His life to us, so that we might bear lasting fruit through Him. But He cannot live and reign in us if we retain our self-will and our self-determination. That is why He said, **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”** Luke 9:23. This means that taking bread at communion is an act of self-denial and commitment. “Lord, I take this bread as an act of dedication, giving up my self-life so that You can manifest Your life through me.” The bread itself is a symbol, but the taking of it in remembrance that Jesus is called “the bread of life,” we are opening our hearts to receive and renew that life.

An Avenue to Receive Healing

This reading shows that Satan and his evil spirits are the originators of many sicknesses. **“...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.”** Acts 10:38.

The Scriptures show that Jesus bore the punishment for our sins IN HIS OWN BODY on the cross, to remove every legal claim of Satan to afflict us. **“...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree [cross], that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness -- by whose stripes you were healed.”** 1 Peter 2:24. [Isa 53:4-5, Mtt 8:17].

On the cross, Jesus bore our sins with their punishment of sickness, diseases and infirmities, in His own body. We are now set free from the law of sin and death, which has been supplanted by a higher law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. **“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the**

law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.” Rom 8:1-2.

In the spiritual realm our bodies are set free and healed. That is why Peter and Isaiah conclude by saying, “**by whose stripes you were healed.**” Spiritually we have been healed. Our bodies have been made righteous, and sanctified as God’s property, made temples of the Holy Spirit. “**Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.**” 1 Cor 6:19-20.

The way is now opened for us to ask God to make the spiritual healing Jesus procured for us a living reality in our bodies. If we are led by the Spirit during communion to lay claim to this blessing procured for us by Christ’s sacrificed body, we can declare our sickness borne by Jesus on the cross in our stead, and receive the Spirit of life as a fountain of healing.

“**And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him [God] who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” Rom 8:10-11. (Mortal means, ‘subject to death’—alive bodies but subject to death).**

This is My Blood

Jesus took the cup of wine and handed it to His disciples, asking them to divide it amongst themselves. In Luke’s gospel, this happened before and after supper—in the other gospels and Paul’s account, the cup was taken after the bread. Jesus described its purpose in these words. “**This is My Blood of the New Covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**” This is confirmed in Paul’s letters to the Churches. “**He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.**” Col 1:13-14. [Eph 1:7].

It is described as the “**Blood of the New Covenant.**”

Under the Old Covenant, the priests offered “**repeatedly the same sacrifices.**” (Heb 10:11). “**But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.” Heb 9:11-15. Under the Old Covenant, repeated sacrifices were necessary to maintain the righteousness of the Israelites before God.**

Jesus offered His blood once for all as an eternal sacrifice, so that under the New Covenant, from a spiritual point of view, we are eternally righteous, eternally sanctified, and eternally saved.

From an earthly point of view, God, in His grace, has made provision for maintaining our righteousness whilst living on the earth here and now. The writer of Hebrews states that “**with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place**” to place His blood on the mercy seat in the temple in heaven.

Now when we sin, we “**do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**” Heb 4:15-16.

And we have God’s irrevocable promise--

“**But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive**

ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**” 1 John 1:7-9.

Fellowship with Christ and One Another

In Chapter 10, Paul writes, “**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, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.**” 1 Cor 10:16-17. “Communion,” is the translation of the Greek word ‘*koinonia*’ meaning fellowship. We partake of the communion meal with Christ as the Host, inviting us to share with Him.

Paul is saying that to partake of the bread and the wine, we are partaking of Christ Himself, bonding us together in one fellowship. Later in Chapter 11, he warns us about taking communion “**in an unworthy manner... not discerning the Lord's body.**” That is, not honouring the love of one another that the Lord requires of us. He further warns that “**...he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [have died]. For this reason “let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup...”** Paul warns that if our communion meal is to be a fellowship of love with Christ and one another, we should examine ourselves, and not partake of communion whilst harbouring ill feeling towards another.

The Practice of Communion

Open or Closed Communion?

It was the universal practice of the early church to conduct ‘closed’ communion. No one was permitted to partake of it, except one who had accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Some modern churches have ‘open’ communion, serving anyone who desires to participate, but how can we receive the blessings Jesus procured for us on the cross unless we first believe in Him as Saviour and Lord?

How Often May we Partake of Communion?

There is no specific teaching about how often we should take communion, When Jesus said, “**this do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me,**” there is no hint of restriction. The openness of His invitation suggests that we may take communion when we are led by the Spirit to draw close to Christ, and be renewed in His strength.

Who May Preside Over Communion?

Clergymen were not a part of the early Church, so the man made restriction that it must be presided over by an ordained minister is not valid. In the Book of Acts, we are given this account of the practice of communion by the early disciples. “**So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house...**” Acts 2:46. Most likely an elder or leader ministered communion, but again there are no specific instructions that we must be bound to. This reading also negates the opposition to communion being taken outside of a church, or being distributed from a church communion table or altar.

We Should Not be Bound by Tradition

In the original communion meals, the wine used was that normally used in their households—a red alcoholic wine mixed with water. The bread was especially baked without leavening, each person breaking a piece off of the loaf. Once again, man has placed undue importance on the way the elements were used and served. They were meant to be symbols of the body and the blood of the Lord, and the importance was in their reception. We are to receive all the spiritual blessings Jesus procured for us on the cross, without attaching unwarranted significance or power to the symbols themselves.

The first communion gives us a picture of Jesus instituting a memorial fellowship supper, open to all those who had the desire to share with Him and fellow Christians with an attitude of love, commitment, and thanksgiving.

The multitude of the traditions, restrictions, and instructions are man-made, depriving many from participating, who have an honest desire to have fellowship in communion with one and another and the Lord

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

The Lord is the true host of the communion meal, and the Holy Spirit is His representative. It is so easy to be comfortable in a traditional or accepted mould in conducting communion, forgetting that we are, “...**ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**” 2 Cor 3:6. Set ideas and traditions may stifle the Holy Spirit, negating the spiritual life that communion is meant to impart to us. We should always be open to the Holy Spirit interrupting our usual practice to initiate a new procedure to meet a current need.

For instance there may be a spirit of heaviness due to sin in our midst, and He may direct us to take the wine before the bread. If a fellowship is confronted by an overwhelming tragedy, we may be led to conduct open communion. Perhaps the head of a family may be led by the Spirit to conduct communion with his family in his home through the week. There should be no constraints on the leading of the Spirit, as the Lord initiated communion as a blessed partaking of His life in fellowship with Him.

Individually, we should be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The leaders should pray for His anointing on their prayers. Recipients of communion should open their hearts to His guidance in receiving the blessings Jesus acquired for them to meet their special needs.