

# UNDERSTANDING COMMUNION

## ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES OF THE REFORMATION

Wycliffe (in the 1300s) challenged Rome's understanding of communion. Later, Martin Luther (in the 1500s) challenged the Roman position even further. At the same time, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, while agreeing with Luther that Rome's understanding was incorrect, differed from Luther's position — and each other!

Differences of opinion about the Lord's Supper were grounds for excommunication from the Roman Catholic church, and grounds for separation even among Protestants. I do not bring up this brief history lesson to promote or celebrate division in the Body of Christ. Rather, I bring it up to point out how important the Lord's Supper has been, and therefore should be, to we who believe. In this article, I would like to address the following issues concerning the Lord's Supper, or communion.

## WHY COMMUNION IS SO IMPORTANT

Our Lord left His church with two sacraments, or ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is usually a one time experience in the life of the believer, done soon after conversion. Communion is a recurring sacrament that Christians partake of numerous times throughout their lives. Both of these sacraments were given in the form of commands from our Lord. Although they do not confer salvation, they are "means of grace," meaning that through their observance, believers receive spiritual benefit.

The Lord's Supper is important and should be held in high regard by all believers. All four gospels make mention of the Lord's Supper. It is referred to in Acts. It is taught in 1 Corinthians. It was a major topic addressed by the Reformation. These facts are reminders of the importance of communion.

## WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT COMMUNION

There are four main schools of thought on communion. I will briefly explain each, indicating which one we at Grace Bible Church hold.

*Transubstantiation* is the Roman Catholic view that says the bread and the wine actually become the flesh and blood of Christ.

*Consubstantiation* is the Lutheran view that says the bread and wine do not actually become the flesh and blood of Christ, but that Christ is *physically present* in the Supper. (Some argue that this is not much different from the Roman view.)

The *Memorial view* was held by Ulrich Zwingli and is probably the most common view held by American Protestants in this day. This view, like its name implies, says that the Supper is merely a memorial.

The *Dynamic view* was championed by John Calvin and is retained by Reformed Christians. This view says that although Christ is not *physically present* in the communion elements, He is *spiritually present* in the Supper. This view teaches that Christ *spiritually* nourishes those who partake of the Supper in faith.

The view that is taught at Grace Bible Church is the dynamic view. We do not believe either the Roman or Lutheran view, but we believe more than the memorial view. The dynamic view rejects what seems to be the overly mystical positions of Rome and Luther, but chooses not to remove the spiritual significance as the memorial view does. This again underscores the importance of communion and the need for Christians to partake of the Supper as regularly as possible.

## HOW OFTEN SHOULD BELIEVERS RECEIVE COMMUNION?

Some Christian traditions celebrate communion every week as a part of the standard worship service. This often places greater priority on the communion service and less on the preaching of the Word of God. Since the Reformation, Protestants have typically placed a higher emphasis on the preaching and less on communion. This is why most Protestant churches celebrate communion on a monthly basis. Should Christians celebrate communion weekly or monthly?

The only instruction we can derive from the Bible concerning how frequently believers should receive the Supper is that it be received at, the

*very least*, annually since New Testament Communion is related to the Old Testament Passover which was to be observed annually. While Christians should receive communion annually, *at the very least*, it is such an important sacrament, we ought to desire it far more frequently.

While some harshly accuse those who celebrate communion in every worship service of worshipping the sacrament instead of the Lord, sadly many Protestants have allowed communion to slip into the background of their faith. Let us not make the error of placing too little emphasis on the Supper as a reaction to those who may place too much emphasis on it. Let us endeavor to receive communion every month.

### **WHY WE CELEBRATE COMMUNION THE WAY WE DO**

The Lord gave the sacrament of communion to His disciples, so communion is for believers *only*.

Paul seems to make it clear in 1 Corinthians 11 that only believers who are right with God and are discerning the Body of Christ should partake of the Supper. Historically, many have held the position that a person must be baptized to receive communion. For these reasons, some churches practice what is called “closed communion,” while others practice “open communion.” Churches that practice closed communion permit only members of that church to receive the elements. These churches either tell their guests they cannot participate, or they have the Supper at the conclusion of the service, after having dismissed any guests. Churches that practice open communion allow all who profess to be Christians to partake.

At Grace Bible Church we see merit in both positions. Because the Word of God teaches that only believers in good standing who discern the Body of Christ should partake of the supper, we do not want to invite or encourage non-believers to participate. However, we know that the Body of Christ is larger than our local church and therefore we do not want to exclude any true believers.

There are almost always guests in attendance at our Sunday services. We invite all Christians present to partake of the Lord’s Supper with us,

regardless of whether they are members of our church. We ask non-Christians present in our communion services to honor our convictions that the Lord’s Supper is only for believers, by observing , but not partaking of the Supper.

We celebrate the Lord’s Supper twice each month, as a part of one Sunday morning worship service and one Thursday evening worship service each month.

### **WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN AND COMMUNION?**

Those who believe that a person must be baptized before they are eligible to receive communion obviously exclude small children from receiving the supper. At Grace Bible Church, we believe that children and young people be old enough to understand that communion is a serious sacrament, not a snack or meaningless ritual. We leave the decision of when a child is mature enough to receive communion up to the child’s parents.

### ***“TAKE EAT . . . DRINK FROM IT, ALL OF YOU.”***

As your pastor, I strongly encourage you to partake of the Lord’s Supper, being obedient to Christ’s command to eat and drink, and thereby receive the spiritual nourishment He offers.

*Lord, please give us understanding,  
appreciation and the desire to participate  
regularly in the Sacrament of Communion.  
May we receive spiritual nourishment as we  
obey Your command to eat and drink it.  
Amen.*