



Holy Communion

- at table with our Lord

Holy Communion is special. It is the most important service in many churches; in some of the smaller congregations it is often the only time of public worship when the minister can be present. This is why church members go to a lot of effort for Holy Communion. They prepare themselves, dress in their best clothes, put money aside for thanksgiving...

Different views and observances

Communion is understood and celebrated in different ways. Some churches celebrate Communion every Sunday while others do it less often. In some churches it is a solemn occasion with readings of formularies and customary observances; in others it is a spontaneous, joyful feast of song and dance and movement.

The particular significance given to the wine and bread also differs. In the Roman church, the belief is that the bread and wine of mass actually do become the body and blood of Jesus; the sacrifice on the cross is repeated. In African Independent Churches the belief is that the bread and water act like a remedy bringing health, prosperity and vitality.

Churches also use different symbols. Wine and bread are the most current. Some churches prefer grape juice or coloured juice. There are also churches using other

foodstuffs from their everyday life, for example, a small cake of maize flour, potato or banana and water or honey. Jesus used bread and wine, ordinary things from his world when he instituted Holy Communion. The signs are not in themselves special, but must point in a meaningful way to his body and blood.

Churches attach a lot of value to who may officiate during Holy Communion. Sometimes, only the priest uses the wine on behalf of the congregation. In other churches the sharing out of the sacraments is vested in the office of being minister; only the minister may officiate. However, it happens increasingly that any believer, for example, the father in a home administers Communion.

There are different ways of preparing for Communion. Most churches have a special preparatory service the preceding Sunday. This is in order to explain why Holy Communion is so important and church members are encouraged to examine their lives carefully. Members of the Zionist Church are required to humble themselves before God, they must pray and fast, and they must confess their sins before the bishop or in public. Because the preparations are so strict, some members do not partake of Holy Communion; they feel too unworthy and impure.

Regrettably, some churches turn Holy Communion into something legalistic. They think that Communion is only meant for people without any sin and it becomes a way of meting out punishment: if you did something wrong or did not pay your tithes, you are excluded from Holy Communion!

It is a pity that the different views on Communion often result in tension and division between churches – exactly what Jesus did not intend with the Lord's Supper!

What does the Bible teach about Holy Communion?

The first three gospels tell us about the institution of Communion (Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26 and Luke 22:7-23). The night before Jesus was betrayed and given over for crucifixion, he instituted the use of Holy Communion himself. He told the disciples to continue to observe the *"Lord's Supper"*. In the gospel according to St John reference is made to the breaking of the bread (John 6:25-59) through describing Jesus Christ as the *"bread of life"*. In Luke 24:13-35 we are told how the eyes of the Emmaus-goers were opened to see the risen Lord once he broke the bread for them.

In Acts we read that the first congregation gathered regularly in one another's homes after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit to observe the shared meal (Acts 2:42). On other occasions, too, bread was broken (Acts 20:7 and 27:35). In the early church the service of Holy Communion, the most important service on Sundays, was called the *"breaking of bread"* or *"fellowship"*. It was a shared meal and the believers at table listened together to the reading and teaching, and they also prayed together. The meal ended in a point

where Jesus' acts during the Last Supper were repeated. This was done in order to remember the death and rising of Jesus. Praise and thanksgiving were important to their worship during these services. The meal itself later fell away and the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine became the most important signs.

The most detailed description of the institution and celebration of Holy Communion is given in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The Lord Jesus Christ himself instituted the use of bread and wine. This message is conveyed in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26: "*For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me'. In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, 'This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me'. This means that every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*". In the Lord's Supper we celebrate our fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16) who has risen and we eagerly wait for complete union with him when his kingdom comes in all its fullness. It is also the celebration of our fellowship with one another – through Christ we are joined together in one body. In 1 Corinthians 14:16 the focus is on thanksgiving (Eucharist), praise is given to God for the gift of redemption through Jesus Christ.

What are the roots of Holy Communion?

The roots of Communion reach far back into the history of Israel when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Because the Pharaoh refused to let Moses lead the Israelites to freedom, the Lord punished Egypt through plagues. During the night of the last plague the firstborn son in every Egyptian home died. But, on God's command, the Israelites slaughtered a lamb for each household and its blood was painted on the doorframes. The angel of death would not enter the homes where blood was painted on the frames, but pass them over. This feast was called "*Pesach*" which means to "*pass over*". The Israelites celebrated "*Pesach*", or Passover, every year in remembrance of the night that death passed them over and they were freed from slavery in Egypt. It also foreshadowed the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, through whose blood all people would receive redemption and life.

What does it mean to say Communion is a holy sacrament?

Sunday 25 to 28 of the Heidelberg Catechism explains that Christ instituted only two sacraments: the "*holy baptism*" and the "*holy supper*".

The sacraments are signs and seals that God himself appointed. Through these visible signs the Holy Spirit helps us believe and understand the gospel. However, they are more than just signs; they are seals, our guarantee that we share in Christ's deeds of redemption. The sacraments do not emphasise what we do for the Lord or point to any

sacrifice we make for him, but they focus wholly on what the Lord did for us – his sacrifice for us.

What do we celebrate during Communion?

During Holy Communion we celebrate Christ's contract or **covenant** with his congregation; each time we observe Communion the covenant is renewed.

- Holy Communion is a **meal of remembrance**. When the Lord instituted Communion he said: *“Do this in remembrance of me”* (Luke 22:19). Seeing how the bread is broken and the wine poured into the cup reminds us of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, of how his body was broken and his blood flowed. We remember how deeply he suffered – and all his suffering was for us!
- Holy Communion is a **seal, a guarantee**. This is why Jesus says: *“This is my body”* and *“This is my blood”* (Matthew 26:26, 28). As certain as we can be of the reality of bread being broken before us and wine being poured out, as sure as touching, smelling and tasting the bread and wine – as true as we experience this with all our senses – so certain can we be of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection. This guarantee is absolute; it is as if we carried the punishment for our sins ourselves! This knowledge is not based on our feelings or on our own convictions; God himself gives the guarantee.
- Holy Communion celebrates our **fellowship with the living Christ and with one another**. Communion helps us live in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit the living Christ, too, is with us. Furthermore, through the same Spirit we are, how different we may be, joined together in love as members of the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17).
- Holy Communion proclaims **what we expect to come**. Through Communion we are assured of the close presence of the risen Lord in our lives. Nevertheless, the congregation also waits eagerly for the second coming of the Christ. Communion strengthens our hope. We know with certainty that when he comes again he will make everything, heaven and earth and ourselves, new and whole – God will be *“all in all”* (1 Corinthians 15:28). By celebrating Holy Communion, the church as bride of Christ longs for the wedding feast with the Lamb when, in the words of the Good News Translation, we will victoriously drink the *“new wine”* with Christ in his Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29).
- Holy Communion is a **feast of joy**. Although the signs show towards the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of his body and the flowing of his blood, Communion is not a sad occasion. It is a feast of joy! It is the feast at which the Lord shares the fruit of his suffering, death and resurrection with us – unconditionally, by his grace and mercy alone. Furthermore, we may accept this gift of grace and share it with others too. Communion is a foretaste of the heavenly feast that is to come!
- Holy Communion is therefore also a **feast of thanksgiving**. The Holy Spirit assures us through the signs of bread and wine of our salvation in Christ. We

celebrate Communion with heartfelt gratitude, and we cannot but give thanks every day of our lives.

Who may receive Holy Communion?

How must we approach the table?

Sunday 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches who may approach the Communion-table: those who know that they are sinners and who repent and believe that Jesus forgave their sins, in other words, people who accept their redemption in Christ with thanksgiving and joy.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and 2 Corinthians 13:5 teach that everyone must examine their heart before participating in Holy Communion. This process of self-examination consists of three parts:

- I must recognise my *sin*, I must repent of it and humble myself before God.
- I may and must hold on to the *faith and belief* that all my sins have been forgiven for Jesus' sake.
- I must undertake to follow and love Jesus all my life in gratitude; every day must be a day of *thanksgiving* for his salvation.

Holy Communion is our daily point of departure!

Holy Communion has a rich and deep meaning for Christians; we should celebrate it more often and with absolute surrender. It is the heartbeat of worship; this is our meeting-place with Jesus Christ who shares the signs of redemption with us. Here we are joined with him and fellow-believers in Christ, here our souls are fed and comforted. We are sent from the service of Communion out into the world in order to share the signs of God's grace through our words and our deeds. Holy Communion is a feast to celebrate with joy. For the Lord's Supper is the feast over which he himself presides!