What is communion and who should receive it?

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Communion (also called the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or the Lord's Table) is a gift Christ gave to His Church in which believers receive bread and wine together with the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of faith, and fellowship with Him and one another (Matt. 26:26–28; 1 Cor. 10:16–17).

Communion is far more than a memorial meal. While it certainly calls believers to remember Christ's death, the New Testament presents it as a means through which Christ actively serves His people. Jesus did not merely say, "This represents my body." He said, "This is my body" and "This is my blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:26–28). For that reason, Christians throughout history have viewed Communion as one of the most sacred acts of Christian worship.

The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus on the night before His crucifixion during the Passover meal (Matt. 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:14–20). Just as the Passover commemorated God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, Communion proclaims and participates in the greater deliverance accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection.

Paul writes:

> "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16).

The Greek word translated "participation" is *koinōnia*, meaning fellowship, sharing, or communion. Paul presents the Lord's Supper as a genuine participation in Christ and His saving work.

What happens in communion?

Christians agree that Communion was instituted by Jesus and is important for the life of the Church. However, different traditions explain Christ's presence in the Supper differently.

Some traditions teach that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ in a substantial sense. Others teach that Christ is spiritually present through the elements. Still others

view Communion primarily as a memorial act of remembrance.

Despite these differences, historic Christianity has consistently affirmed that Communion is much more than an ordinary meal. It is a sacred gift given by Christ to His Church.

The New Testament repeatedly connects the Lord's Supper with forgiveness, fellowship, proclamation of the Gospel, and unity among believers (1 Cor. 10:16–17; 11:23–26).

Paul writes:

> "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

Every celebration of Communion points backward to the cross, upward to Christ's present reign, and forward to His promised return.

Who should receive communion?

The New Testament teaches that Communion is intended for baptized believers who trust in Christ and are able to examine themselves concerning the faith.

Paul warns the Corinthians:

> "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28).

Because Communion is a sacred gift, Christians have historically practiced some form of pastoral oversight regarding who receives it. The goal is not exclusion but loving care. Just as a physician would not prescribe medicine without understanding a patient's condition, the Church seeks to ensure that those receiving Communion understand what it is and receive it in faith.

Most Christian traditions therefore reserve Communion for baptized Christians. Some churches invite all baptized believers regardless of denomination. Others limit participation to those who share a common confession of faith concerning the Lord's Supper and related doctrines.

The New Testament does not present Communion as an evangelistic meal for unbelievers. Rather, it is a family meal for those who belong to Christ and His Church.

Why does self-examination matter?

In Corinth, some believers were treating the Lord's Supper carelessly. They were dividing into factions, neglecting the poor, and approaching the meal without recognizing its sacred nature (1 Cor. 11:17–34).

As a result, Paul gives one of the strongest warnings in the New Testament:

> "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27).

Notice that Paul does not say a person must be *worthy* to receive Communion. If that were the requirement, no one could come. Rather, he warns against receiving it in an *unworthy manner* —without repentance, faith, discernment, or love for fellow believers.

The Lord's Supper is ultimately for sinners who know they need Christ's mercy.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Matthew 26:26–28 — Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper.
- Mark 14:22–24 — Christ gives His body and blood for His disciples.
- Luke 22:19–20 — "Do this in remembrance of me."
- John 6:51–58 — Jesus speaks of His flesh and blood as life-giving.
- Acts 2:42 — The early church devoted itself to the breaking of bread.
- 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 — Communion is participation in Christ's body and blood.
- 1 Corinthians 11:23–32 — Paul's teaching on worthy reception.
- Hebrews 10:19–22 — Believers draw near through Christ's sacrifice.
- Revelation 19:6–9 — The Lord's Supper anticipates the marriage feast of the Lamb.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "Is Communion just a symbolic memorial?"

Response: Communion certainly includes remembrance, but Paul also describes it as a participation (*koinōnia*) in Christ's body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16). Most Christian traditions have therefore understood it as more than a mere symbol.

Common Objection: "Do I need to be perfect before receiving Communion?"

Response: No. Communion is given precisely because believers need Christ's forgiveness and strength. The issue is not perfection but repentance and faith (1 Cor. 11:28).

Common Objection: "Why do some churches restrict who may receive Communion?"

Response: Historically, churches have done this out of pastoral concern, based on Paul's warning about self-examination and discerning the body (1 Cor. 11:27–29). The goal is not exclusion but faithful care of souls.

Common Objection: "Can children receive Communion?"

Response: Christian traditions differ. Some churches commune baptized children at a young age, while others wait until children have received instruction and can examine themselves according to 1 Corinthians 11:28.

Why This Matters

Communion places the Gospel into tangible form. We do not merely hear about Christ's sacrifice; we receive the gifts He promises through this meal. The Lord's Supper reminds believers that Christianity is not fundamentally about what we do for God but about what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

It also strengthens Christian unity. Paul writes, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (1 Cor. 10:17). Communion visibly expresses the fellowship believers share in Christ.

Finally, the Lord's Supper directs our hope toward the future. Every celebration anticipates the day when Christ returns and His people gather at the great marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6–9). Until then, the Church continues to receive this gift in faith, proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes.

Recommended Resources

- *The Lord's Supper: Five Views* — Gordon T. Smith (editor)
- *The Eucharist* — Alexander Schmemann
- *Given for You: Reflections on the Meaning of the Lord's Supper* — Keith A. Mathison
- *The Lord's Supper* — Thomas R. Schreiner
- *A Simple Explanation of Christian Faith* — John Theodore Mueller (sections on the Sacraments)