

Communion

Remembering Christ

For thousands of years Christians have practiced the ceremony of communion. Sometimes called the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or the Lord's Table, what it represents is far more important than what it is called. Communion uses symbols, the bread and cup, to represent the body and blood of Christ¹. Participating in and rightly understanding communion leads sinful humanity to an occasion where God's grace can impact them so intensely that it causes the gospel to take deeper root in their hearts and lives.

Instituted by Jesus as he ate the Passover meal with his disciples², communion is a command to "remember." It is not a coincidence that Christ chose the Passover meal to institute communion. For centuries God's people had observed the Passover³—a celebration where the children of Israel would remember and proclaim their redemption from slavery in Egypt. Now, communion calls children of God to remember the sacrificial death of Jesus and proclaim its power to deliver humanity from sin and the fear of death.

Open or Closed?

Many churches practice *open communion*—meaning all who are present and confess Christ are welcomed and encouraged to participate in the ceremony. Other congregations practice *closed communion*—meaning only those who have been baptized, have a credible and ongoing profession of faith, and are formally committed to a local church are welcomed and encouraged to take communion. Should communion be a ceremony that is made available only to those who have been baptized and are committed to a local church? Should non-Christians be excluded from participating in communion? Some say yes and others respond with no. And there are solid gospel-loving, God-honoring, and Bible saturated churches on both sides of this question.

We *do not* practice closed communion at Abundant Life. We do not see the Bible encouraging our leaders to step between those in the church and the communion table. Paul leaves the matters of participation and examination up to each individual person⁴. Some say practicing communion in this manner is dangerous and unwise. Using Paul's instructions concerning communion in 1 Corinthians⁵, they believe open communion may lead some non-believers to wrongly think they are followers of Christ because they are welcomed at the Lord's Table.

It is a serious matter and the elders of a church should give much thought and prayer to how their church practices this ceremony of remembrance. At Abundant Life, we do not see that God holds our church responsible for unbelievers who ignorantly partake in communion. Furthermore, we believe communion is an appropriate occasion to invite unbelievers to hear and respond to the gospel. Not only do they get to *hear* about Christ's sacrifice, its benefits, and the joy of Christian unity, they get to *see* it on display. For some, this

¹ Luke 22:19-20

² Matthew 26:20-29

³ Exodus 12:14-27

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:28

⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:15-22; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

means that their conversion testimony would involve in partaking of the Lord's Supper and how the Holy Spirit used the ceremony to draw their hearts and welcome them to the family of God.

We do understand the importance of conveying and modeling that there is an inside and outside to the church of Jesus Christ. We know that communicating such a truth is a way to love those who are outside of the church and encourage them to seriously consider their commitment to Christ. But concerning our observance of communion, we choose to trust the Holy Spirit to do that work in the individual hearts and lives of those present. However, in a loving manner, every time we celebrate communion we aim to communicate that participation has no saving effect.

The Significance and Meaning of Communion

When considering the implications, significance, and meaning of communion that is presented to us in the Scriptures, some may be overwhelmed at just how big of a deal this sacrament⁶ is. When believers reduce communion to an empty ritual, they do a disservice to the Kingdom of God and their own souls. We believe God intends for us to be overwhelmed with the significance of communion so we approach the Lord's Table with a sense of awe, gratitude, and worshipful wonder.

Communion is a celebration proclaiming the Lord's death. We are not talking about celebration in the sense that we fill the sanctuary with streamers and balloons. Rather, there should be a joy present in the hearts of God's people after partaking—our souls have been refreshed, our burdens lifted, and our sins forgiven. Often communion is a serious ceremony. This is fine so long as we don't forget about the joy and benefits that thinking of Christ's death should bring. On the surface, the death of an innocent man seems like an odd thing to celebrate. Although we are remembering the death of our Savior when we participate in communion, we celebrate what that death *means for us*. We have been forgiven and cleansed of our sin before God; made righteous and freed from the fear of death and the just outpouring of God's wrath. If there is anything worth celebrating, it is these truths. We also observe communion in the light of Jesus' resurrection. His triumph over the grave assures us that His death was sufficient payment for our sin and that one day, because of the sacrificial death of Jesus we are remembering, we ourselves will rise to celebrate and honor Christ for eternity.

It can also be dangerous! 1 Corinthians 11:29-32 details how participating in the ceremony of communion without examining and thinking upon your commitment to Christ and other believers can result in sickness⁷. While not all sickness is a direct result of sin⁸, Paul's instructions to the Corinthians lets us know that some sickness is. It is important to note that this type of judgment from the Lord is to be understood as *discipline* that is for our good⁹. It refers to the chastisement God brings about in the life of his children, not the damning judgment that awaits unbelievers. This sounds intimidating and would lead some to believe that they are never morally fit to receive the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner. But "unworthily" must be understood relative to human ignorance and imperfection. If the right to take communion was based on our own righteousness, every person that had ever participated in communion would have done so in an unworthy manner. Rather, the text, the gospel message, and the entirety of Scripture steers us towards understanding unworthy as being *content with our unworthiness*. The Corinthians were seemingly fine with the fact that there were divisions among

⁶ Sacrament is a term that describes an outward sign or ceremony that is used to illustrate or point to an inward spiritual truth.

⁷ Our elders see it as a possibility that the sickness mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:29-32 could refer to a spiritual sickness, happening in the heart and soul of a person, rather than only meaning physical sickness.

⁸ John 9:1-3

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:32; Hebrews 12:6

them¹⁰. They saw no need to change their behavior; they almost seem to be celebrating it. What qualifies us to take communion in a worthy manner is not our own moral righteousness. We are qualified when we come to the Lord's Table *wrestling* with our sin—when we are *not content* with our disobedience to the Word of God, the divisions in our church, and the dishonoring of our Lord Jesus. If those are present in our lives, we are grieved by their presence and are compelled to repent and seek the Lord's help.

It points to the restoration of all things. As we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are anticipating and pointing our hearts towards the marriage supper of the Lamb¹¹. This is when the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness and Christians will no longer wrestle with the desire and temptation to sin. From that point on into eternity, believers will glorify and honor the slain Lamb, Jesus, as the One who provided them the opportunity to enjoy God's presence! Followers of Christ, as they rule and reign with Christ himself, will never forget the costly sacrifice that made it possible for the grace of God to flow into their broken and selfish souls. Each time we partake of communion, we are reminding ourselves this is what the future holds for those covered by the righteousness of Christ. This should bring hope to our hearts as we go about our lives in a world filled with brokenness, sin, suffering, and pain. We are eagerly awaiting the restoration of all things and communion is a reminder that it is coming.

It reminds us of Jesus' death in our place. Communion reminds us of the manner in which Jesus died in our place for our sins. The bread and cup as symbols force us to think of the broken body and spilled blood of our Savior. When thinking of Jesus on the cross, we are reminded of what put Him there—our sins. And when thinking of our sins, we are reminded of who should have hung on that cross—ourselves. The central message of the Bible is how God Himself came to earth to sacrificially die and reconcile sinful humanity back to their Creator. Communion reminds us to make the main message of the Bible the central focus of our lives and worship.

It calls Christians to put their sin to death. Communion compels us to examine our hearts and lives for moral impurity and disobedience to the Word of God¹². The Christian life is an examined life, and communion aims to ensure that we do not forget this truth. Considering what Jesus did for our sins, we should not want to continue the very actions, attitudes, and sinful behavior that caused Him to give up His life in order that we may be saved. Communion reminds us of how costly our salvation was, how big of a deal our rebellion is, and where to look for freedom from the devastation of sin.

It brings unity to God's children. Communion is a *corporate* ceremony. We are called to participate and observe in this sacrament with and alongside other believers. Unity in a church body is not merely important because it makes church life more enjoyable. Unity is important because it provides a biblically accurate picture of Christ for the world to see. Instructions concerning the observance of communion come in Paul's letter to the Corinthians—the clearest picture in the New Testament of a church's corporate worship service¹³. We find Paul instructing the Corinthians on how to rightly observe communion and informing them of the significance the ceremony has on their local church body. This leads us to understand communion as primarily a corporate ceremony. Although each church body is diverse and consists of individuals with many differences, communion displays the unity that identifying with the person and work of Christ brings to a body of believers. Communion is where believers renew their commitment to Christ *and* to each other. It is those we regularly take communion

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 1 Corinthians 3; 1 Corinthians 6; 1 Corinthians 11:18

¹¹ Revelation 19:9

¹² 1 Corinthians 11:28

¹³ Paul directly addresses how they were conducting themselves, and *should* conduct themselves, when they gathered for worship. No other portion of the New Testament addresses specific corporate worship practices in such detail.

with we are responsible for and to. Communion takes *many* and transforms them into *one*¹⁴. It takes the concept of a local church and gives it definition—the church is those whom we take communion with. And each individual life that Christ has added to a body of believers matters and is extremely significant. Not one person is more needed or more important than another.

It assures us that Christ is with us. In most cultures, and especially the culture the Bible was written in, sharing a meal means sharing close fellowship with those you are eating with. In the Bible, God uses this concept to illustrate His desire for fellowship with humanity¹⁵. The fact that the communion ceremony is one where we consume something together alludes to the fact that Christ is present with us and desires to be in close fellowship with his followers. Although we do not believe the symbols used in communion supernaturally turn into the actual body and blood of Christ¹⁶, they do represent the fact that Christ is present in our lives—especially when we gather with other believers to remember His sacrifice for our sins.

How Often Should We Observe Communion?

The Bible does not give specifics on how often a church body is to participate in communion. Some churches choose to do so weekly, while others allow more time to pass between each observance of communion. It seems as if Scripture leaves it up to each individual church and its leaders to determine how often communion is prepared and offered to the congregation¹⁷. Even sometime between Acts 2 and Acts 20¹⁸ it looks as if the early church transitioned from observing communion every day to once a week. When determining how often we should observe communion, there are several factors that should be considered.

What it communicates. The gospel is the central message of the Bible, the central message of communion, and should be the central message when we gather to worship. This makes observing communion a helpful way to make sure believers are not elevating something else as central to the life and practice of the church. We are finding it more common for churches to become captivated by praise choruses, “how-to” tips, and administration seminars. While these can be counted as good things, none should be the primary focus of the church of Jesus Christ. Communion displays the reason behind why we gather, points out hearts towards gospel-centeredness, and communicates to non-believers what is important for them to consider when thinking of their own commitment to Christ. We should do it frequently enough that our congregation does not start to wonder or doubt just how important the sacrifice of Christ is to our lives and worship.

“Do this in remembrance of me.” These words come straight from the mouth of our Lord. Jesus commands us to remember and observe communion. To not do so could be considered disobedience to the Word of God. This leads our church to ensure that communion is something that is scheduled and occurs with regularity.

It gives believers spiritual strength. Communion is special; our Savior meets with believers in a unique way when we gather to remember and celebrate His sacrifice. This makes the opportunity to participate in communion much more than simply involving oneself in a religious ceremony. Considering how common it is to experience spiritual weakness, the uniqueness of communion transforms it into something that is necessary for believers to

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:17

¹⁵ Exodus 24:9-11

¹⁶ A belief that is held by the Catholic Church called *transubstantiation*.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:26. There are no specific instructions given by either Jesus or Paul concerning how often we participate in communion. Scripture seems to leave it up to us to determine how often. The only option Scripture takes away is to ignore the Lord’s Supper altogether and refrain from practicing the ceremony.

¹⁸ Upon the immediate inception of the early church, they seemed to be celebrating the Lord’s Supper each time they gathered—everyday. When we get to Acts 20:7, the early church has transitioned into observing the Lord’s Supper on “the first day of the week.”

experience and observe. It becomes an occasion where Christ can impart the strength, hope, and forgiveness that is needed to live in this fallen, broken world. For church leaders to refrain from leading their people into such a spiritually edifying practice could be considered unwise and unloving.

Here at Abundant Life, we have chosen to participate in communion *once a month*. We observe the Lord's Supper on the 3rd Sunday, our Family Service, of each month. We want to make sure our children are with us when we take communion so they begin to become familiar with the practice and see how their parents and other adults have been impacted by the sacrifice of Christ. Additionally, we encourage children, led by the discernment and direction of their parents, to participate in taking communion alongside the adult believers.

Be Encouraged

God wisely uses physical symbols to point us to spiritual and eternal truths. A church participating in the ceremony of communion is a beautiful picture—a foretaste of heaven. Believers from all backgrounds, forgiven of all types of sin, uniting together under the banner of Christ to celebrate what they don't deserve—God's very presence! The power of the gospel enables us to focus on what unites us rather than what could divide. Communion reminds us of what is truly important as we deal with busy schedules, appointments, and life in a materially-driven world. Communion declares we have found the true source of joy, satisfaction, and hope. And it is available to all through the broken body and spilled blood of Christ.

We partake and remind ourselves that our lives and decisions matter. Not only to God, but to others. This brings purpose and significance to our existence. We are comforted by the assurance that Christ desires fellowship with us, despite our shortcomings, and is willing to forgive and empower us to have victory in our struggle against sin. Jesus instituted symbols that represent his body and blood, and has them put in the hand and subsequently the body of each believer. It is a stunning illustration of how deeply personal the sacrifice of Christ should be to each person. Jesus did not die for sin—He died for *your* sin. Jesus doesn't just forgive sin—He forgives *your* sin. Be encouraged—Christ has come and He is coming again.