



THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF COMMUNION

Helpful guide to understanding Communion

ABSTRACT

What should be used for Communion? How can it be received? What should be said? Who should administer Communion?

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Explaining the Nuts and Bolts of Communion

The form of the elements used in Communion is bread and wine/juice. When it comes to using bread, the proper consideration is to be basic bread that is nourishing, edible, breakable, and with no yeast, if possible. Wafers are an acceptable form, but a whole loaf is a better choice. This is based on the Gospel accounts of the loaves of bread that Jesus made use of when feeding the five thousand (John 6), the Last Supper (Mark 14), and Paul's teaching to Corinth (1 Corinthians 10). Furthermore, the significance of using bread comes from Jesus' discourse on himself being the Bread of Life (John 6). Jesus analogized himself to the edible manna that Israel received from God. Though manna was not literal bread but a simple substance from God to sustain natural living and Jesus is our spiritual sustenance, it is fitting that simple bread should be used in Communion.

The bread also needs to be breakable. In addition to Jesus breaking the bread at the Last Supper as a prophetic word to the brokenness of his body in the Passion, the apostle Paul also directs the church to use breakable bread. He wrote that the Body of Christ is one loaf and we all share the one loaf as we participate in the body of Christ. "And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16b-17 NIV)" Sharing one loaf amongst those worshiping in Communion is symbolic of our unity in Christ and the brokenness of Christ for each of us. While yeast is a contextually relevant connection to the Passover (Exod 12:15), its bearing upon the significance of Communion is overshadowed by the role of the bread through the New Testament and the forward movement of church history.

Wine or grape juice should be used in Communion. Wine can be substituted with grape juice since the alcohol in wine does not bear significance to its sacramental role. Both options are a product of grapes and grapes are contextual to Jesus' promise at the Last Supper. "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the *fruit of the vine* (emphasis mine) until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. (Mark 14:25 NIV)" However, preference should be given to darker color juice as it serves to remind communicants of Christ's red bloodshed during the crucifixion.

There are optional methods for communicants to receive the elements in Communion. One option is to distribute the elements to communicants at their seats. A second option is each person leaving their seat to come to receive the elements. This movement is preferable and

significant in two ways. First, it is an intentional act of obedience to Christ's invitation to eat and drink. Second, it is a dialectical response to Christ in the dialogue of congregational worship. This would be noticeable when Communion is placed immediately after the proclamation of the Scriptures (Cherry). Another mode is allowing communicants to pull their piece of bread off a common loaf (1 Corinthians 10). While this is highly symbolic it should not be a requirement since the mode of distribution varies in the New Testament and Christ's emphasis is more on the distribution itself versus the means. Next, the wine or juice should be made available in a culturally relevant way. A common cup for intinction or drinking can be symbolic (1 Corinthians 10) but is not required.

Since the words and actions of participants in Communion declare their theology of Communion, the presider's words and actions are important. Their words should define the role and significance of both elements and the methods employed. As John Calvin (1541) would argue from his *Short Treatise on the Supper of the Lord*, the Scriptural basis for Communion should be presented to the communicants. Recommended texts would be accounts of the Last Supper from the synoptic gospels (e.g. Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-23) as well as Paul's instructions regarding the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 10:17-34). As the presider speaks, he/she should take the elements in hand, bless them (i.e. give praise and thanksgiving to God), break the bread in some way, and hold the elements out towards the communicants (i.e. expressing that the elements are being given to them). In those four steps, the Holy Spirit is present in the act of worship. The elements have not become Christ (i.e. transubstantiation) nor has Christ been joined to the elements (i.e. consubstantiation) but become mystically present through them. Therefore, Communion is not solely symbolic but sacramental because we experience the presence of God in the act of worship.

At this time, the presider should present the requirement of being a Christian to participate in Communion. Given the sacrament's heritage and its objective to remember, honor, and experience Christ in an ordained act of worship, the communicant needs to be reconciled to God through faith in Christ before consuming the elements. Otherwise, the person is sinning against God because the sacrament is taken out of order. It was offered to those who currently embrace the salvific work of Christ, who will be returning one final day (1 Corinthians 11:26). Moreover, since baptism does not carry a salvific (saving) function but is an expression of association with Christ and His Body, it is recommended but not required before receiving

Communion. A person could have received salvation and understand Communion but not yet had the opportunity to be baptized in water.

The location of communion in a worship service is another point of consideration. Ideally, Communion should be celebrated in conjunction with a corporate worship service where the Body can confess its common faith together. Yet, at a bare minimum, there should be two or more Christians gathered so that a common faith can be agreed upon. This honors Christ's promise that where two or more gather in his name, He is there with them (Matthew 18:20). A minimum of two also reflects harmony with Jesus breaking bread with the two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). In that breaking of bread, which holds a semblance to Communion, Christ has taught that the sharing of a common faith takes primacy over the requirement of a corporate worship gathering.

Lastly, the person administering Communion does not need to be an ordained pastor. However, this person should be recognized as a spiritual leader (pastor/elder) in his/her family/fellowship (2 Timothy 2:2). This is because of the need for sound, consistent teaching of doctrine for the perpetuity of the faith. Calvin (1541) mandates the need for competency in his *Short Treatise on Supper of our Lord* by declaring that a sacrament with no sound doctrine to accompany it becomes an empty act. This is because God's Word is full of life and truth through which God brings efficacy to the consecration and words of institution during the worship act of Communion. Therefore, the administrator should have a sound grasp on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the Gospels. He/she should also be viewed as trustworthy. Throughout God's story, He has invited His people to speak the truth and uphold integrity, knowing that such character builds trustworthiness in relationships. Integrity would also present God's character in the world and serve as a constant evangelical thread in the salvation story. The truthfulness of those telling that story to others is vital to the world believing that God is trustworthy, and salvation is true. Consequently, since Communion is the Body coming together to retell the salvation story within which God is the main character, it serves that the person administering Communion be trustworthy. This is critical because their words and actions among other communicants at the Table are to be a true witness to the historical and spiritual truthfulness of Christ.

References

Calvin, J. (1541). *Short treatise on the Supper of our Lord*. Retrieved from http://www.the-highway.com/supper1_Calvin.html

Cherry, C. (2010). *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.