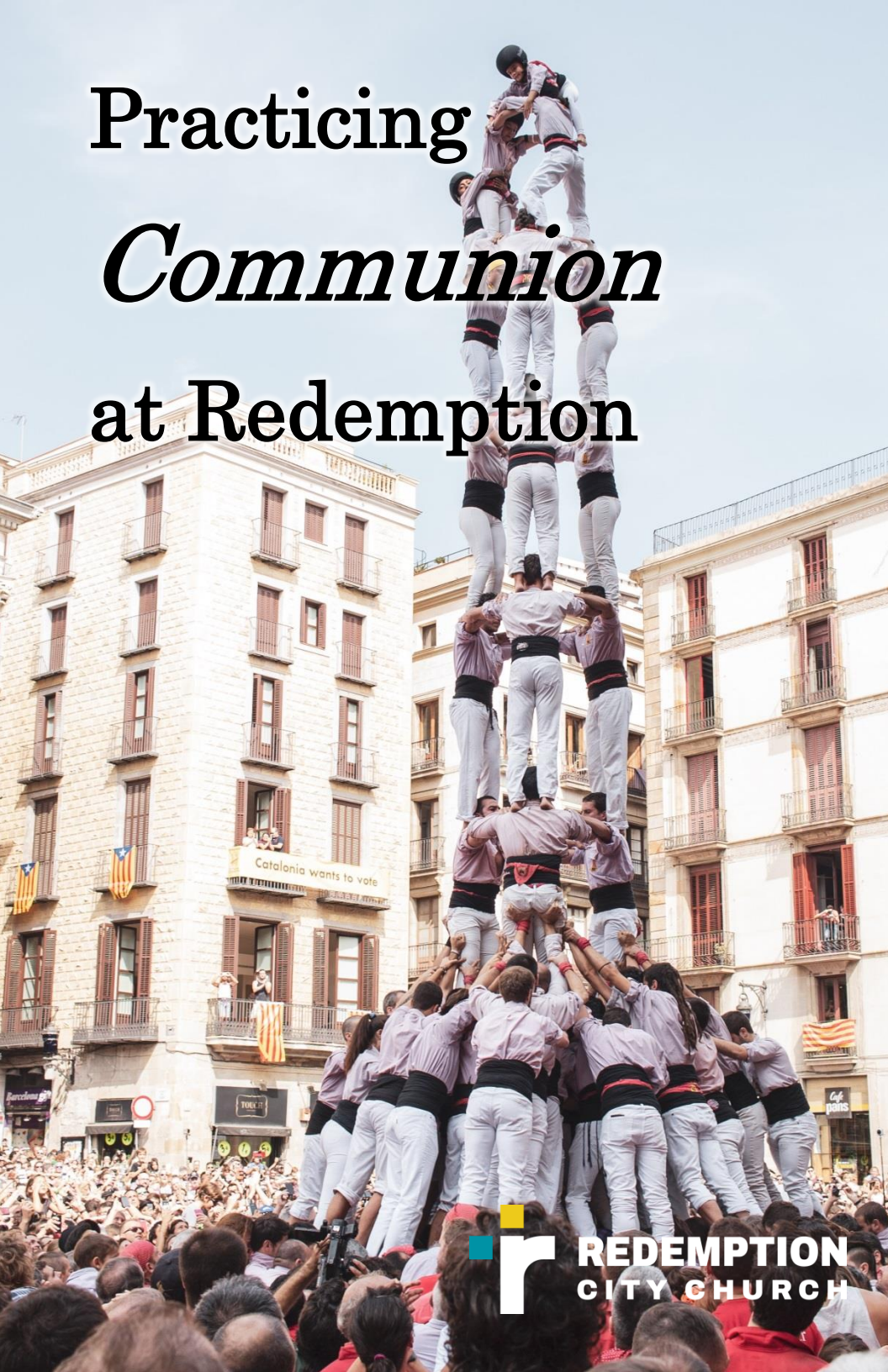


# Practicing *Communion* at Redemption



**REDEMPTION**  
CITY CHURCH





## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
1. A People-Defining Historical Event .....	3
2. A Unifying Experience .....	4
3. How has the Church Understood Communion? .....	8
4. Who Can Take Communion?.....	11
5. How Should I Take Communion? .....	13
Appendix 1 – Additional Resources .....	18

## Introduction

In your church experience, when the time for communion comes and you approach the table to collect your bread and wine, what is it that is running through your mind? Some struggle with guilt believing that their sin makes them unworthy to partake in this meal. Some see communion as the way to get rid of that guilt by bringing their sins to the table to be forgiven. Many simply see it as a personal expression of faith, a way to declare my identity as a Christian.

There may be elements of truth in these sentiments, but they barely scratch the surface of the depth of identity shaping meaning passed on through this ritual that has been repeated by Christians every Sunday for the last 2,000 years. When Jesus Christ sat with his disciples and told them to eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of his broken body and shed blood, he grabbed all of that identity defining imagery from the Exodus (Exod. 12; Deut. 6:20–25) and gave it a new focus in himself.

Communion ties together dozens of different themes, concepts, events, and ideas in one person and the people who come follow him. It has marked the church since its inception, defining the church for millennia as the Passover did for Israel. Understanding where communion came from and what Jesus intended it to accomplish is what makes this weekly practice come to life with meaning.

## 1. A People-Defining Historical Event

The Exodus from Egypt is *the* identity defining moment for Israel. The stories of the Patriarchs are leading up to it. The law is shaped around it. Israel's history flows from it. And all the Prophets refer back to it.

Up to the time of Christ the Jews had been celebrating the Passover every single year. It wasn't an empty ritual, but it was a way to draw every successive generation into that experience to remind them that they need saving from wickedness just as much as that first generation leaving Egypt did. Moses wrote that these rituals were to remind them that "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us." (Deut. 6:21–25)

Even if they weren't part of that generation that walked through the Sea, these rituals tied them to everything that generation experienced. It brought the history rushing forward into the present so its truths had the same effect on every contemporary participant as though they were there.

During the feast, everyone cleaned out leaven from their homes like God cleaned sin out. Bitter herbs reflected the harsh slavery they experienced in Egypt. The lamb pointed to a sacrifice to die in their place. Salted parsley reminded them of the Red Sea crossing as the birth of a new creation people for God. Unleavened bread had to be made to quickly leave behind this old life in order to dwell with God. The wine recalled the blood that was required for God to purchase a people for himself. The Tabernacle gave them a way to have fellowship with God in their midst.

On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus went through the feast as they had done every year before for 1,450 years and explained that the entire thing pointed to him. He is the only one who is perfectly pure. He took upon the bitterness of this life. He was the sacrificial Lamb to die for sins. His death and resurrection is the judgment and rebirth that we must follow to become his people. His body is the tabernacle where we have fellowship with God.

And so, just as Israel repeated the Passover to remember that Exodus identity, now the fulfilled Israel (God's people in Christ) repeat communion to remember our identity in his body.

## **2. A Unifying Experience**

Looking back on the Exodus 500 years before, Hosea said that God called Israel out of Egypt to be his son, not sons, but one son. Israel was a singular people. Certainly

individuals needed to be saved, but they were saved to be one people under their one God (Deut. 6:4). All of the laws and rituals God gave them were to mark out all of those individual parts as one people. Every generation saw themselves as the one people of Israel who were birthed out of the Red Sea.

Reflecting on the Last Supper 30 years before, Paul wrote to the Corinthians telling them that communion is meant to express a similar unifying purpose. Chapter 10 starts with the imagery of the Exodus to set up the unity theme. He explains that participation in communion is a statement of participation of a common Exodus out of slavery to idols through Christ. The meal unifies us, “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17).

In chapter 11 Paul rebukes the Corinthians because they are taking communion in a way that expresses division, not unity (11:17–22). The whole point is to say that each of us needed to be redeemed from sin and each of us is now an equal member of Christ’s body. Jesus broke his body in order to unify the church as his one body. Communion isn’t just about a personal union with Christ, but a corporate union with his people, his body.

Paul warns the church not to eat or drink in an unworthy manner and bring judgment upon themselves (11:27–34). In the flow of his argument, Paul isn’t saying this “unworthy manner” is harboring private, unconfessed sin



(as terrible as that is). He's not saying that you need to make yourself clean before you can eat and drink.

Paul's argument is that you must look around you and be certain you are in good fellowship with the believers around you; that you are committed to their well-being in Christ and your life is open to them. To eat judgment upon yourself is to say you are unified with the people of God in this identity defining moment when you aren't. Eating "in an unworthy manner" means coming to the table misrepresenting what it is all about: blood bought people unified into one family sharing a meal as equals in Christ. If you are harboring sin, especially toward others in the church, then you aren't unified with Christ's people and are making a mockery of his sacrifice represented in the meal. Jesus makes a similar statement in Matthew 5:23–24 telling people not to come into the temple to make an offering if they are out of fellowship with a fellow Israelite. The sacrifices are meant to bring unity with God among his people, and if you have division, you are not making the sacrifice in a worthy manner.

The person who takes communion yet holding sin and divided from his church is like the Egyptians trying to get through the Red Sea right after Israel holding onto their sin, but the waters crashing down on them. You can't sneak into fellowship with God and his people. You must come in proper order.

That order is faith in the Passover Lamb (trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ), then going through a baptism signifying judgment on your old life and birth into a new life unified with a group of people who hold you accountable (in modern terms we call that church membership). When you are in the family, then you are welcome to eat the Father's provisions at the family table.

This pattern follows the Old Testament pattern reflected in the Tabernacle experience. In order to enter God's home and have fellowship with him, one would first turn his back on the world by entering the complex from the east (representing the direction away from God). The first experience in the tabernacle is the altar where a sacrifice was made to cover the worshiper's sins. Next the worshiper washed in the large basin called "the sea" to wash away those sins and enter into God's presence. Inside the Holy Place looked like a garden paradise with decorations of a tree of light, flowers, angels guarding the entrance, and a table with bread where the worshiper could finally share a meal with God in his place. The priests did this alone as a singular representative of the collective of Israel. The point is: you can't enjoy bread with God until you've turned from the world, put your faith in the sacrifice, gone through the water, and entered the New Creation.

A less scriptural parallel of the limits of these covenantal experiences is marriage. You can't have intimate, one-flesh fellowship with your spouse until you first experience the public ceremony unifying two as one. But you don't have a

public ceremony every time you want to re-affirm your commitment. That reaffirmation is private, only between the members of the new covenant relationship.

In the New Covenant age, baptism of believers is the public ceremony unifying the believer with Christ and his body. That only happens once for a Christian, after putting your faith in the sacrifice (remember the tabernacle: faith in the sacrificial offering comes before the washing). Communion is the ongoing reaffirmation that happens only between the members of the new covenant relationship. Communion is meant for the unified people who have committed to each other's good under the headship of Christ.

### **3. How has the Church Understood Communion?**

Much of this meaning has been lost or ignored throughout much of church history. Church traditions have imported many different meanings into communion trying to make sense of isolated texts to fit into other previously committed doctrines. The debate commonly revolves around what Jesus meant when he said, "This is my body" (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19).

#### **Catholic**

The Roman Catholic Church places a huge emphasis on communion as the physical presence of Christ's body in the elements. Catholic dogma teaches that communion (or Eucharist as they call it) is a re-presentation of Christ's

sacrifice. The bread and wine literally become the flesh and blood of Jesus during the mass (called “transubstantiation”). It is a way of pulling the event forward into the present so we can experience it again and have its forgiving effect on us now. It’s not simply a remembrance, but an experience of being forgiven. To the Catholic, the elements must be Christ’s literal flesh and blood or the forgiveness it offers cannot be effectual in the present time.

## Lutheran

Martin Luther rejected much of this Catholic mysticism, instead saying that the elements don’t transform into flesh and blood, but Jesus is literally “in, with, and under” the elements. Luther really wanted the believe to know the presence of Christ was with him, even if the bread was still bread. Luther argued with other Reformers over how literally to take, “This is my body,” understanding Jesus to mean that the bread truly is Christ’s body in some way.

## Reformed

A short time later, John Calvin pressed the Reformation further away from Roman Catholicism bringing his careful biblical exegesis into the communion debate. He shifted the focus from Christ’s own fleshly presence to Christ’s Spiritual presence in communion. Christ truly is present in communion not by some magic in the elements, but by his Spirit filling his body (the church).

## Baptist

Baptists have traditionally followed the direction of Ulrich Zwingli, another Swiss reformer who followed Calvin. Zwingli argued with Luther that just as Jesus didn't literally mean that he was a door (John 10:9), he didn't literally mean that the bread is his body. Zwingli emphasized doing this "in remembrance of me" saying that communion was simply a symbol to point us back to Jesus. The ritual is simply a time for personal reflection on Christ's sacrifice.

## Pentecostal

Pentecostals try to blend the symbolic perspective with their modern understanding of the Spirit's presence. Believers who receive communion are going to remember the sacrifice of Jesus in order to receive more filling of his Spirit.

## Summary

Aside from the Catholic perspective—which is a heretical denial of the gospel that Jesus died once for all time (Heb. 7:27)—all of these perspectives contain elements of truth, but miss the bigger picture of a new exodus in Christ into fellowship with God with a New Creation people. Calvin is correct that the presence experienced is Spiritual, but that is because communion is a meal with God in his temple (the church – 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:5) which had been filled by God's Spirit in the Old Testament. But Zwingli's corrective is necessary to keep us from a mystical focus on the elements themselves.

## 4. Who Can Take Communion?

While the Reformers and the Catholic Church debated over how Christ is present during communion, a more modern debate occurs over who is welcome to partake in communion. There are three general practices (two most common) that Christians experience today.

### Open Communion

Open communion refers to the practice that all professing believers are welcome to participate in the meal. The person administering the ordinance will give a general call that all who profess the name of Jesus are welcome, but will tend not to offer any warnings or prevent anyone from partaking. This is traditionally a Baptist practice as Baptists have emphasized the Zwingli view of communion which focused more on personal reflection on the meaning of Jesus's death for individual sinners. This practice feels most comfortable in modern American society which devalues authority and community preferring individual autonomy.

### Closed Communion

Confessional Lutheran and Reformed churches tend to practice closed communion which limits participation to only those who are members of that particular local church. These churches focus on the warning passages in 1 Corinthians wanting to make sure nobody is taking communion in an unworthy manner and inviting judgment upon themselves. These pastors don't want to be complicit

in that judgment and can only be confident in a person's worthiness to receive the elements if they have gone through that church's membership process and remain in good standing.

Closed communion draws from the Old Testament practice of the temple priests who would examine a worshiper and his sacrifice prior to accepting him into the temple complex. Nobody was allowed to march in and worship as they pleased (not a good idea: cf. Leviticus 10). The priests had to protect the holiness of God's place and protect the people from God's holiness. Peter calls New Testament believers priests (1 Peter 2:5) so we have a responsibility to examine one another personally before allowing another to fellowship with God in communion (for the purity of the gospel and the safety of the participants).

## Close Communion

Close communion strives to draw a balance between the two major practices. On the one hand, individuals must come to Christ on their own. Nobody but Jesus can represent you before the throne. On the other hand, individuals are saved into a community of faith. You submit yourself to the accountability of other believers. The church father Cyprian said, "No one can have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother."<sup>1</sup>

At Redemption City Church we understand that we are not the only local church in the world. It would be arrogant to

---

<sup>1</sup> Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*

say that we are the only ones qualified to assess somebody's profession of faith. We have many people regularly visit our church from other churches in town and other cities. We want to emphasize the importance of submitting to the oversight of a local church body while trusting another church to provide that oversight. We warn of the dangers of participating in an unworthy manner, but leave it up to visitors from other churches to determine if their commitment to their own local church matches the spirit of all that communion represents.<sup>2</sup> In every way possible in modern times with the resources we have available, through communion we want to display the gospel of Christ at work through his sacrifice to wash us by his blood and birth us into a community who regularly enjoys fellowship with God by his Spirit alive in the body.

## 5. How Should I Take Communion?

Having explored the biblical and historical experiences related to communion, we now return to our original question: when the time for communion comes and you

---

<sup>2</sup> Throughout Reformation history churches have practiced closed/close communion with “communion coins.” Upon being examined by a local church authority, a person received a coin stamped with the name of that church as proof of their membership. In order to receive communion, one would need to present the coin as proof of membership. If someone was excommunicated for refusal to repent of sins, the church would take his coin away and bar him from communion.

<https://www.presbyteriansofthepast.com/2017/06/12/communion-tokens/>



approach the table to collect your bread and wine, what is it that is running through your mind? What should you be thinking about when you hear the blessing on the elements, see others going forward, and you carry your own part of the bread and wine back to your seat? How do I take communion in a worthy manner?

A practical way to apply all that we have seen is to open your eyes and look. Many people close their eyes in order to focus on that personal relationship with God. But we invite you to open your eyes and look all over. To look in the wrong direction is to eat in an unworthy manner.

### **Look Up**

First, look up to the God who is holy, who demands perfection. Jesus began the meal by giving thanks to the Father (1 Cor. 11:24) who invites you into his presence to have fellowship with you. He is sovereign over all things, orchestrating history to overcome every dominion set against him in order to gather a people to glorify him forever. Look up and surrender to the God who provides your sustenance in Christ.

### **Look In**

Next, look in to realize that by your nature you are unclean, unholy, unworthy to come into his presence (1 Cor. 11:28). Humble yourself beneath the mighty hand of God. You were born into sin. You have continued to sin throughout your life.

But don't stay there. Look in to see if Christ is the treasure of your heart. Have you cast all your sins before the cross? Does your heart sing with delight at his word preached? Have you been growing in holiness, knowledge of the word, victory over sin?

Do you think you are too weak, ignorant, ordinary to receive such promises? The plain, unleavened bread and the simple, cheap wine in a tiny cup that are both full of all this meaning remind us that God in all his eternal divine fullness is delighted to dwell in regular people like us by faith in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

### **Look Around**

It is good to ask yourself those questions, but you are not the best judge of your own heart. Don't spend too much time looking inward. Pick your head up and look around (1 Cor. 11:18–19, 21, 33). Look at the saints to your right and left, in front of you and behind. Do you know them? Do they know you? Are you unified with them? Is there conflict between any of you? Are you hiding anything from them? Is your life intertwined with theirs that others know the body of Christ is your priority? The word “communion” literally means “union with.” When you are unified with Christ by his death and resurrection he unifies you with his body. If you are not unified with your church family, then pass on the meal and go make things right first (Matt. 5:23–24). If you have not submitted yourself to them in membership, pass on the meal and make that happen first. To eat and drink without being formally and experientially

committed to unity a church is to eat and drink in an unworthy manner.

## Look Out

As you partake in communion, look out to the world around us in need of union with Christ. God sends us out to make disciples of them. And one of the primary ways we put that gospel before their eyes is through worship (especially baptism and communion). Every time we partake in communion we “proclaim the Lord’s death” (1 Cor. 11:26). It forces us to center our worship on his sacrificial death and resurrection. It reorders our life around the gospel. It shows non-Christians among us how to have fellowship with God. It shows our neighbors that nothing is more important in our week than fellowship with God among his people by the blood of Christ. Think of the people outside of Christ that need his forgiveness and pray for them while you partake in his body. Don’t eat and drink judgment upon them by forgetting their need for the gospel.

## Look Back

“Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24, 26). The Israelites rehearsed the Passover in remembrance of the Exodus. Likewise we rehearse communion in remembrance of Christ fulfilling the promises of the Passover in his death and resurrection. During communion we look back upon redemptive history and marvel at all the ways Jesus fulfills every detail. He is the sacrifice, the priest, the tabernacle. He is the Red Sea crossing, the sustenance in the wilderness, and the Promised Land. He is the Prophet

giving us God's direction, the Priest bringing us near to God, and the King overcoming all our enemies. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. He loved his people with a supernatural, eternal, undying love. As you humble yourself in this moment and bring all your burdens to the table, remember all that he has done to free you from them.

### **Look Forward**

It is this love that gives us confidence in the future. When we partake in communion we look back to see how Christ fulfilled the law and satisfied God's wrath on our sin and this gives us confidence that he will also fulfill his promises for our future. We proclaim this hope during communion every week "until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Jesus promised we will eat and drink again with him when he returns in his Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29). Taking communion is a statement of trust that one day soon Jesus is coming back. Perhaps this is the last meal we partake together as a shadow before he returns and we eat in the fullness of his presence. For 2,000 years the church has gathered every week to eat this meal in faith that very soon Jesus will return. This promise along with all these other aspects should be on our mind as we partake in this ordinary bread and wine together.

In all these ways we eat and drink in a worthy manner, bringing the fullness of the bread and wine to bear on the moment for the glory of our risen King Jesus and our unified, joyful, enduring faith in him.

## Appendix 1 – Additional Resources

Schreiner, Thomas R., and Matthew R. Crawford, eds. *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ Until He Comes*. Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2011.

Gros, Jeffrey, John R. Stephenson, Leanne Van Dyk, Roger E. Olson, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. *The Lord's Supper: Five Views*. Edited by Gordon T. Smith. IVP Academic, 2010.