

## **Study Guide #11: Holy Communion**

### **Introduction**

There are many beliefs and practices concerning the communion service among Christians. We examine the most important ones in this Study Guide.

### **Question #1: What is the Christian communion service?**

**Answer:** All Christian churches celebrate what is variously called communion, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. In general, this service is understood to be the Christian replacement for the Jewish Passover, because it was instituted by Jesus at Passover time, and the regular Passover meal was immediately followed by the presentation of the bread and wine as either representing or becoming the body and blood of Jesus. How this service and its bread and wine is understood, who participates in it, and how often it's celebrated all differ among the various churches.

### **Question #2: Why do a few churches have a foot-washing service just prior to the communion service itself? And is that necessary?**

**Answer:** A few conservative Protestant churches have such a service, variously called the Ordinance of Humility or the Ordinance of Foot-washing, usually just *prior* to the actual Holy Communion service. This spiritually prepares the participants to engage in communion with Jesus by each one washing someone else's feet. Usually, the men and women do this separately, so that men wash men's feet and women wash women's feet, although sometimes married couples wash each other's feet.



Foot-washing

This service *should* be observed for 2 reasons. *First*, Jesus told His apostles to wash one another's feet in the future 3 times in succession during the first communion service (John 13:14, 15, 17). This emphasis suggests that it was very important to Jesus. *Second*, apparently Jesus washed their feet before the Passover supper had ended because John 13:12 says that afterward, He “**sat down again**” (NKJV). According to Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:22 (neither gospel mentions the foot-washing), Jesus' statement about the bread and wine came while they were still eating but apparently near the end because it is said that they left the room right after that (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). Normally, a servant washed the guests' feet *before* the meal, so this suggests that Jesus intended the foot-washing to be a *spiritual* exercise rather than merely a matter of *physical* cleanliness. [NOTE: This evidence from John 13 strongly suggests that the foot-washing occurred *just before* Jesus' pronouncement about the significance of the bread and wine and their consumption.]

### Question #3: What kind of spiritual preparation is the Foot-washing service?

**Answer:** According to John 13:10, the act of Jesus washing the apostles' feet was a symbol of the ongoing cleansing from post-baptismal sins. In this way, it's a kind of mini baptism, but only in the sense of cleansing from sin (*not* in the sense of being a door to church membership or marriage to Jesus). The willingness to allow someone else to wash your feet symbolizes the recognition of the need and the desire for continual cleansing from sin. Jesus' reference to a person who has already bathed (John 13:10, that is, has already been baptized) and needs only to have his feet washed represents the truth that a person who has already been baptized only needs his feet washed to be completely clean. And the willingness to wash someone else's feet symbolizes the humility of a servant (John 13:16). After this service, the participants are then more fully cleansed, making them fit for a closer communion with Jesus in the partaking of the bread and wine.

### Question #4: Why do some churches call the Holy Communion service the Eucharist?

**Answer:** The word "Eucharist" comes from a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving" and is used by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and a few Protestant churches. Particularly among non-Protestant churches, the priest offers the bread and wine on behalf of the congregation as a thanksgiving offering to God, who then is believed to respond by changing them into the real body and blood of Jesus. This view gradually was adopted because of the false understanding that the clergy function as *priests*.

### Question #5: What is Transubstantiation, and how does it affect the understanding of the Holy Communion service?

**Answer:** Transubstantiation is the doctrine that says the bread and wine in the Holy Communion service actually become the body and blood of Jesus in a mystical way (because even this view acknowledges that they also remain as bread and wine). This doctrine is particularly taught by the various Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. In this view, the Holy Communion service constitutes a reenactment of the sacrifice of Jesus, which is why the table on which the bread and wine sit is called an altar (as in the Altar of Sacrifice in the Old Testament). This is also the reason that this sacrament is considered the primary way in which the believer receives God's grace, and that the Church is the conduit or channel for God's grace. See Explorer II, Study Guide #5, Question #2 for a discussion of the Church as a channel for God's grace.



### Question #6: Is the doctrine of Transubstantiation a Biblical concept or not?

**Answer:** No, which is the reason that nearly all Protestants reject it. *First*, Jesus calls Himself the “**manna**” or “**bread**” from heaven (John 6:31-35; 48-48) that people should eat (John 6:51). He also states that people should eat His flesh and drink His blood (John 6:53-56). Then He explains that His flesh and blood are His “**words**” (John 6:63). Therefore, when Jesus declared that the bread and wine of the Holy Communion service were His body and blood, we should understand that as metaphorical—His very words

or teachings. Besides, Jesus was present in the room with His disciples at that time, so He could hardly have meant that He was also the bread and wine at the same time. *Second*, the book of Hebrews clearly teaches that Jesus **“was offered once”** (9:28, NKJV) or **“had offered one sacrifice for sins forever”** (10:12, NKJV). Furthermore, the entire Holy Communion service points back to that one-time sacrifice of Jesus by use of the term **“remembrance”** (Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24-25, NKJV). *Finally*, we have already shown that there is no special priesthood within the Christian Church (see Study Guide #9, Question #6), so it’s difficult to understand how this service could be a reenactment of Jesus’ death. Therefore, (a) the bread and wine are only symbols, albeit important symbols, of the body and blood of Jesus, and the service is a way to remember His once-for-all sacrifice for sins; and (b) the table on which the bread and wine sit is a communion table and *not* an altar. In addition to pointing *back* to the cross-event, this service also points *forward* to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Jesus, after which we shall enjoy a personal, literal communion with Jesus, and He will once again drink of the fruit of the vine with us (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18).

### Question #7: What is the nature of the bread and wine in this special service?

**Answer:** As practiced by Roman Catholics and almost all Protestant churches, the bread should be unleavened bread (which means no yeast in it). This is based on the fact that unleavened bread was required in the observance of the Jewish Passover (Exodus 12:8), which the Holy Communion service replaces. In using the language of Passover, the apostle Paul commanded that Christians should spiritually and continually celebrate Passover not **“with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”** (I Corinthians 5:8, NKJV). Therefore, leaven must have represented wickedness; of course, Jesus was not corrupted with evil.



Communion Bread & Wine

If the bread must be unleavened, then the wine should be *unfermented* because fermentation is a leavening process. In other words, the wine should be pure grape juice. Note that the Greek word for “wine” (“oinos”) refers to grape juice in either its fermented or unfermented state. This conclusion is reinforced by Jesus’ own words referring the Holy Communion wine as the **“fruit of the vine”** (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18, NKJV). This is an expression referring to the grape or its fresh juice as confirmed by 1<sup>st</sup>-century A.D. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

### Question #8: Are the bread and wine in the Holy Communion service sacraments?

**Answer:** Traditionally, the word “sacraments” has been used to describe the *means* by which God gives His grace to believers. We also point out that not all Christians use that term in this traditional sense; in some circles, it has now become a synonym for a “symbol.” But since Transubstantiation is not Biblical (see Question #6), the bread and wine are symbols, not *sacraments* in the traditional sense of that word. However, the traditional meaning of the term “sacraments” as referring to that which is God’s *means* of giving grace to His believers, makes the entire Holy Communion service itself sacramental in nature—as is *all* worship, because worship itself is an acted-out (liturgical) means by which God gives the grace of

peace, love, and understanding to His people. See Explorer II, Study Guide #12 for a discussion of this fact.

### **Question #9: Who should be permitted to participate in this service, and who should administer it?**

**Answer:** *First*, as a service that experientially brings us into a special holy communion with Jesus, it's logical that only baptized Christians—those who have already officially entered into a relationship with Him—should participate. Note also that the preparatory service of Foot-washing presupposes someone who has already been baptized (see Question #3). *Second*, Christians should participate in a worthy manner (I Corinthians 11:27), which means they should confess their sins and approach this service with the dignity it requires. However, the issue of worthiness is a matter of self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28) and not something that the pastor should attempt to judge. For these reasons, the Church should practice what is called “open communion”—that is, permitting any baptized Christian to participate even if they are members of a different denomination. However, it excludes unbaptized persons (including children of baptized members). [NOTE: Non-Protestant Christians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, and most Lutheran churches practice “closed communion,” which means that only believers of their denomination may participate.]



Although the pastor and all of his elders/bishops are theologically equal, and any one of them should therefore be permitted to officiate in this service, it should be done in coordination with the official *pastor* of the local church.

### **Question #10: How often should the Holy Communion service be celebrated?**

**Answer:** The New Testament doesn't tell us how often to celebrate this service. The apostle Paul simply says that “**as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes**” (I Corinthians 11:26, NKJV). Many denominations celebrate it every week, such as the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and the Christian Church (also called the Disciples of Christ Church). Most conservative evangelical Protestant churches celebrate it on average of once per month, although some of these churches do so only quarterly (4 times per year). It's probably better to celebrate only periodically in order to maintain the special status of this service and avoid it becoming simply a ritual that one does every week.