

THE FEAST OF FELLOWSHIP

Celebrating the Lord's Supper

Families celebrate special events in special ways. Anniversaries, birthdays, and religious holidays all have their own unique traditions and rituals. In our family, a birthday is celebrated with some predictable customs: the birthday person can choose the dinner menu and the dessert, a “You Are Special Today” plate is put at his place, and he receives cards and a present from all the other members of the family. After dinner, we go around the table and each one shares something we appreciate about the person or something we are praying for him in the coming year.

In God's family we are also given special ways to celebrate the important events of our faith. These celebrations, and the special traditions that are connected with them, show us the source of our new life and unite us as members of God's family. One of those celebrations is called “Communion” or “the Lord's Supper.” Since Jesus himself established this celebration, it is important for us to understand it and to celebrate it faithfully.

The Signs of True Community

There are actually two special celebrations Jesus gave to us—Baptism and Lord's Supper. These are sometimes called *sacraments*. This term unfortunately carries semi-magical connotations for many people. Another term often used is *ordinances*, which means a practice ordained (or commanded) by Christ. While this name doesn't carry questionable ideas, it isn't a very accurate term. Jesus commanded several practices for his people—prayer, the reading of the Word of God, and fellowship for example—but these are not ritual practices like Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

It might be better to call these practices “signs of true community.”

Both Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that point us to some significant spiritual truth. They also both celebrate the reality of

our “community” (fellowship) with the Lord and with each other. Baptism is the one-time act of commitment to the Lord as a disciple in the fellowship of the church, while Communion is our repeated commitment to discipleship and a celebration of our enjoyment of that fellowship.

The New Testament uses several terms to describe this celebration. It is called *Communion* because, as we shall see, it celebrates our communion, or fellowship, with the Lord and with his

Baptism and Communion are best called “signs of true community” because each point to some important aspect of our fellowship with God and others.

people (1 Corinthians 10.16–17). It is called the *Lord's Supper* because it was during an evening meal that Jesus first introduced it (1 Corinthians 11.20). It is called the *Lord's table*, which emphasizes the family fellowship rather than the act of sharing in the meal (1 Corinthians 10.21). It is called *the breaking of bread*, words that referred to people eating together (Acts 2.42; 20.7). Lastly, it is called the *love feast*, because it was celebrated during a church-family meal among the early Christians (Jude 1.12; see also 2 Peter 2.13).

After the New Testament was written, as the church spread and developed, several other names for Communion came into use. Sometime in the early centuries of Christianity, it came to be called *the Eucharist*, which comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving,” because its celebration is connected with thanking the Lord for the bread and cup. Roman Catholics and Anglicans call it *the Mass*, from the Latin word *missa* (dismissal) because the leader used to dismiss those who had not yet joined the church before the Communion was celebrated.

It is probably least confusing and most understandable to people if we use the words of the New Testament. The words *Communion* or the *Lord's Supper* are the most helpful because the majority of people can identify what they mean.

The Origin of the Lord's Supper

The Last Supper

The practice of Communion was established by Jesus on the last night of his life before he was arrested, tried, and crucified. He met with his twelve apostles in an upper room in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Jewish Passover. During that meal, he shared bread and wine with them as symbols of his body and blood.

The origin of the Lord's Supper was the “Last Supper”—Jesus' celebration of the Passover meal with his disciples on the last night of his life.

The Passover was the central feast of the Old Testament, and is still considered one of the “high holy days” among the Jewish people. Passover refers to the time when the angel of God took the lives of all the firstborn children of the Egyptians in judgment while he “passed over” the houses of those Israelites who had put the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the doorposts of their

houses (Exodus 12). Because this was the chief event connected with Israel's deliverance from bondage, God commanded a yearly, eight-day celebration of the event throughout their generations. The first day was the celebration of the Passover meal in each household (Exodus 13). In the times of Jesus, the Passover meal was celebrated with the reciting of certain truths by the members of the family, the blessing and sharing of four cups of wine, the eating of a roasted lamb and other special foods, and the singing of several psalms.

In preparation for the Passover, Jesus asked two of his disciples to arrange for the Passover meal in the upper room of a home that had been offered to him. All four of the gospels tell us the story of the “Last Supper,” but only the Gospel of John records in detail the teaching Jesus gave to his disciples before, during, and after the meal. The subject of Jesus' teaching was his present and future fellowship with his followers through the Holy Spirit whom he would send to them.

The main course of the Passover meal began with the blessing, breaking, and sharing of bread by the head of the family. To this bread Jesus gave a new significance—it represents his body that was about to be broken in a violent death. The Passover meal ended with the blessing and sharing of the third cup of wine, the “cup of blessing.” Jesus gave this a new significance—it represents the blood he was about to shed on the cross as a sacrifice for sinners. (Note that Paul calls the communion cup, “the cup of blessing” in 1 Corinthians 10.16.) When he invited his disciples to share in these elements, Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22.19–20; 1 Corinthians 11.24–25). Paul summarizes the institution of the Lord’s Supper in these words:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11.23–26).

The record of Jesus’ establishment of the celebration of Communion is extremely simple. Yet it is the words, “Do this in remembrance of me” that tell us why it became a regular practice of the early church. Jesus designed it as a way of remembering him in his sufferings and death.¹

The Early Church

About fifty days after the Last Supper, the Apostle Peter stood in Jerusalem at the feast of Pentecost and preached the gospel for the first time to the Jewish people. On that day many people believed the gospel message, were baptized, and “there were added [to the church] that day about three thousand souls.” Immediately after that, we are told that the early believers, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2.41–42).

The “breaking of bread” referred to the celebration of Communion. From that point on it became the regular practice of Christians to commemorate Jesus’ sufferings and death through sharing the bread and cup (Acts 2.42, 46; 20.7; Luke 24.35).

First Corinthians 11.17–34 contains the fullest picture of the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper among the early Christians. Paul’s instruction makes it clear that they met on the evening of the first day of the week (Sunday) and that their weekly meeting involved an evening meal, a “potluck dinner” to which each believer brought something. The bread and cup were shared as a part of this fellowship meal. Paul was concerned that their supper was not really the *Lord’s* supper because the wealthy were eating before their poor brothers and sisters, and some were getting drunk at the dinner—in other words, they were not observing the Lord’s Supper with the proper conduct fitting for such an event. He reminds them of the words Jesus spoke when he established the meal. He exhorts them to celebrate the Lord’s supper with proper dignity because those believers who participate “in an unworthy manner” (meaning flippantly and thoughtlessly) are guilty

The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament churches was a full meal eaten in a family setting in a home; the meal started with the bread and ended with the cup.

of making light of the sufferings and death of the Savior and will experience God's discipline as a result (1 Corinthians 11.27–32).

According to 1 Corinthians chapters 12–14, it appears that the meal was followed by an open meeting where different worshipers participated audibly in praise, prayer, teaching, and exhortation. He gives detailed advice on how a meeting that is led by the Holy Spirit should also be conducted “decently and in order.” It appears that things we divide into different meetings today—potlucks, prayer, Bible study, Communion, and teaching—were all a part of the weekly, Sunday evening meeting of the early church (1 Corinthians 14.26, 40).

The Later Church

As the church developed over the centuries, the celebration of Communion became separated from the fellowship meal, and the elements of bread and wine became the sole focus. Its celebration became surrounded by more and more ritual and visual display. Some early church leaders were concerned with the increasing formality. For example, around 200 AD, the North African church leader, Tertullian, spoke and wrote against the increasing formality and ritualism in Christian worship.² However, as the church made inroads into the Greek world, it began to lose some of its Jewishness and to slowly assume many of the elaborate customs of the pagan temples in order to attract Gentiles to the faith. Certain practices—like the necessity of a “priest” to consecrate the communion elements, receiving only the bread without the wine from the hand of the priest, or bowing before the elements—were things that arose long after the simple “love feast” of the New Testament church.³

Through the centuries, as the church grew in power and prestige, the simple “love feast” of the New Testament was lost.

What Happens in Communion?

The first followers of Jesus would have found the question, “What happens in Communion?” a strange one. The Jewish people had many significant rituals—the Passover meal being most central—but they never invested them with any kind of supernatural quality. The first Christians were Jewish people who believed Jesus was the Messiah (Christ). They saw the Lord's supper as a new Passover for the Christian church, and as an event that powerfully brought the saving event of the cross to mind and allowed the participants to share in the benefits of that redemption. They wouldn't have thought it conveyed something to a person.

The earliest Christians would have never thought that Communion had any kind of supernatural quality.

The later church developed the idea that Communion is a “sacrament,” which became defined as a channel of God's saving and strengthening grace. Jesus Christ was considered to be present, not simply in the worship of the participants, but in some unique way in the very elements themselves. This is called, “sacramentalism.” As such ideas developed, the bread and wine were given a special and holy quality. Rather than being the opening and closing ingredients of a sacred fellowship meal, they became channels of divine grace. The words “real presence” began to be used to describe how Christ was connected to the elements. While the various sacra-

mentalist churches (like the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox churches) have defined “real presence” differently, they all believe that Christ becomes really, literally and physically present in the elements when they are consecrated by a priest. As a result, the Communion was celebrated with increasing ritual and ceremony, and those who could distribute it to the “laity” became a separate class of clergy.⁴

The New Testament doesn’t contain any of these ideas. In the New Testament, the Lord’s Supper is three things: A remembrance, a communion, and a commitment.

A Remembrance

Jesus said that when Communion is celebrated we should, “Do this in remembrance” of him. To “remember” in the Bible is more significant than merely drawing to mind some event or experience from the past. The Old Testament contains constant promptings for the Israelites to “remember the LORD.” At the Passover Celebration, they were to, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place.” And Moses went on to say, “And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery’” (Exodus 13. 3, 14).

In Communion, we must apply to ourselves Jesus’ words, “My body broken for you...my blood shed for you.”

The following generations were not told to say, “the LORD brought *our* ancestors out of Egypt” but rather, “the LORD brought *us* out of Egypt.” To remember redemption from bondage in Egypt was the act of each Israelite in every generation by which he or she acknowledged being one of those people the LORD had redeemed.

In the same way, to remember the Lord Jesus in Communion is to acknowledge that we belong to those people he has redeemed. We place ourselves at the table of the Last Supper, eating and drinking, and hearing the words of Jesus, “my body broken *for you*...my blood shed *for you*.” We acknowledge that the saving event of our faith—the cross—was not just for some people long ago who heard and saw Jesus; it was for all of us through the centuries who share the same faith they had in the crucified and risen Lord.

A Communion

In 1 Corinthians 10.16, Paul wrote, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, it is not a participation in the body of Christ?”

Communion celebrates our fellowship with the LORD and with each other as his redeemed people.

The word translated there as “participation” is the Greek word *koinōnia*. This word means “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.”⁵ Of these definitions, the word *fellowship* most summarizes it’s meaning. It refers to the deep experience and enjoyment of a relationship. The Bible tells us that marriage—the most intimate of human relationships—is only a *dim reflection* of the relationship between Christ and his people. It is the closest we can come to understanding of the oneness of heart, mind, and soul that Christ wants us to have with him. This fellowship is what Communion celebrates.

To have fellowship in the body and blood of Christ, means two things in this passage. First, it means to enjoy a sense of family commitment and closeness with other believers. In the following verse, Paul writes, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” In other words, those who share together in Communion are enjoying a family meal that unites them as “one body” in Christ (1 Corinthians 10.17).

It also means to enjoy a sense of intimacy with the Lord Jesus himself. Later, in the same passage, Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that those who share in the sacrifices of the pagan temples, are having “fellowship with demons!” (1 Corinthians 10.20, literal translation). In other words, even though there is no reality to the Roman or Greek “gods”, there *are* evil spirits that stand behind the spiritual blindness of pagan worship. To eat of pagan sacrifices in a pagan temple would be to have fellowship with the demons that use false worship to keep lost people in spiritual bondage.

The word *communion* is an older English word for fellowship. It best describes what the Lord’s Supper is about: a celebration of our fellowship with Jesus and his people.

A Commitment

Communion is also an act of commitment. Just as baptism is the one-time act in which a believer acknowledges himself as a disciple of Jesus, and the church publicly receives him as such, so also Communion is the repeated act in which a follower of Christ enjoys his discipleship. When a loving family joins in a holiday meal, the family members are showing their continued commitment to each other and to their shared values. In a similar way, Communion allows believers to demonstrate their commitment to each other and to the pursuit of discipleship in the family of God.

The New Testament is not clear whether Judas left the Upper Room to betray Jesus before the main course of the Passover meal began (Mark 14.17–25; Matthew 26.20–29; John 13.21–30). If he

In Communion, we recommit ourselves to discipleship.

did, then obviously there were no unbelievers present at the Last Supper. Whether or not that is true, the New Testament clearly pictures the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as an *act of believers* when they meet together, not an act conducted in public meetings of evangelism or teaching (Acts 2.44–46). Jude says

that it was regrettable that certain false teachers have “crept in unnoticed” and are “blemishes on [your] love feasts” (Jude 1.4, 12). Communion is for believers who are seeking to follow Christ in discipleship to renew and strengthen their commitment to pursue the Lord with energy and enthusiasm.

Celebrating Communion Today

It is evident that Christians today should seek to have the same faith, to experience the same life, and to witness to the same truth as the early followers of Jesus. Obviously that doesn’t mean that we must slavishly try to recreate everything they did. Nevertheless, their worship was meant to reflect the foundational truths of their faith; it wasn’t merely a cultural expression of their experience. So

New Testament practices and principles should form the basis of our worship today.

while the practices of the early church are not binding on us today (unless they are directly commanded in the New Testament), it is wise to use them as a basis for our worship. The following principles can be drawn from what the New Testament teaches us about the Lord's Supper.

Communion should be celebrated frequently

When the church began on the day of Pentecost we read this of the early believers: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people" (Acts 2.46–47). It seems that such was the initial enthusiasm of believers that sharing in the sacred meal ("breaking bread in their homes") was a daily practice.

Later, at the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey, he stopped in Troas and met with the church there. Luke records the following about his visit: "On the first day of the week, when

The apostles apparently did not fear that the frequent celebration of Communion would make it commonplace.

we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight" (Acts 20.7). Now, this statement *implies* that it was the weekly custom of the church in Troas to break bread on the evening of the first day of the week, but it only strictly says that they were breaking bread on that *particular* Sunday. First Corin-

thians, however, seems to indicate that the Lord's Supper was celebrated weekly in Corinth in a Sunday evening meeting (1 Corinthians 11.17–14.40 with 16.1–4).

The New Testament contains no command as to how frequently Communion should be celebrated. The example of the church in Acts 2 shows that Communion can be celebrated on *any* day of the week. The example of the church in Acts 20 reveals that it is appropriate to observe it on the *first* day of the week. The practice of the Church in Corinth demonstrates that celebrating it on the *first day of every week* is also proper. There is, however, no command as to its frequency. The faithfulness or spirituality of a church cannot be measured by how often communion is celebrated, since the Lord didn't indicate how often it should be done. The example of the churches established by the Apostles, however, should guide us in recognizing that it should be frequent. They apparently had no fear that the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper would make it commonplace.⁶

Simplicity, Informality, Dignity

These words express three basic ideas about celebrating the Lord's Supper. Increasing the ceremony and ritual surrounding Communion tends to obscure the meaning of Communion rather than enhance it. If anything is clear from the writings of the Apostles it is that Communion was a simple act connected with a family meal. The setting was informal, the elements were simple, and the people were natural in their clothing and speech. Everything about the act was familiar and comfortable.

That doesn't mean, however, that the meal was undignified. Informality and dignity are not opposites. The remembrance of Jesus'

The celebration of Communion should be both simple and informal and serious and reflective.

betrayal, suffering, and violent death, coupled with reflection on the fact that it was for each one of us who believe in him, should never be observed with any kind of shallowness or flippancy. There needs to be the proper recognition about what we are doing when we meet in this way. While the elements are not special in themselves, they are “set apart” for a special purpose by the command of Christ and by our thanksgiving. We come to the meeting seeking Christ’s presence with us in our worship and remembrance of him. We shouldn’t be “straightlaced, sober, and sad” about our worship, but we should be serious and earnest about what we are doing.

A family celebration

Since the Lord’s Supper is a celebration of our relationship with Christ and a re-commitment to our discipleship, it should be a practice that is reserved for the family of God. Often, when communion is celebrated in a large, public meeting those who are exploring the Christian faith or believers negligent in discipleship may feel pressure to participate. This is a special danger to careless believers since Paul warns them against taking the bread and cup without proper recognition of their significance (1 Corinthians 11.27–32). Paul’s warning, “Whoever, therefore, eats

Christians should give priority to participating in the celebration of Communion.

the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11.27), were written as a warning to believers. Non-believing people are guilty for their rejection of Christ, not their improper attitude at Communion (John 3.36). This fact should lead us to allow ample time at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper for

exhortation, for reflection on one’s lifestyle, attitudes and relationships, and for personal commitment to discipleship.

At Grace, we periodically celebrate Communion in special meetings at the church building. Generally, however, we have found it helpful to use small group meetings as the usual venue for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In this setting, those who wish to participate must make an effort to be there. This reduces the possibility of Communion being confusing to those who have not yet trusted in Christ or being a superficial routine to careless Christians. A small group meeting in a home also provides the setting for a fellowship meal if the group chooses to celebrate communion in that way.

Though the Lord’s Supper is intended for believers only, the idea of the church leaders determining which believers can participate in Communion is clearly unscriptural. In correcting some abuses at the Lord’s Supper in Corinth, Paul said, “Let a person *examine himself*, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11.28). Self-examination by a believer, not examination by others, before participating, is to be the general practice of the church. Only in cases where the church is seeking to restore an erring member should it be otherwise (1 Corinthians 5.9–13).

One final note: Members of God’s family should give priority to attending the Lord’s Supper. In a close family, the different members make every effort to get together on important holidays. It should be no different for Christians. We must never forget that throughout history, believers have risked their lives to meet together to remember the Lord in Communion. Even today in

places of adversity and persecution, we have brothers and sisters who long for the freedom we enjoy to meet together. We should take advantage of our freedom.

Allow for participation

The Love Feast of the early Christians was not a spectator event in which the only participation was receiving the bread and wine. Not at all! It was a meeting of worship in which there was singing, praying, eating, teaching, sharing, and serving. While the meeting was most likely noisy at times (as seen in any middle Eastern worship service to this day!), the New Testament implies that there was a dignity and order to the proceedings. Many people were involved in bringing their particular spiritual gifts to the meeting of God's people. No one was required to participate; all were free to participate. The leaders were not there to do all the talking but they were to help the others assure that "all things [were] done for building up" the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 14.26, 40). The Lord's Supper should be conducted in a way that allows for participation. It is most helpful to have a setting in which the worshipers can see each other as well as the table.

Communion should be celebrated in settings where those present can contribute to the worship.

Be Focused and Flexible

The writers of the New Testament evidently felt that the worship of Christians was of great importance. That makes it all the more surprising that they left us so few clear instructions about how to conduct worship meetings. They left no detailed directions on seating arrangements, who should lead the meeting, the place of singing, who should give thanks for the bread and cup, or how the elements should be distributed among the worshipers. Since the early church met in homes in the context of a meal and the bread and wine were used to open and close the meal, some of these format issues may have been assumed. Yet it is evident that their chief concern was that Christ be honored by those who come to participate and that everything contribute to the shared remembrance of his death. The setting and details of the meeting were arranged to best accomplish those goals. If people bring their hearts to God in worship, all of the other things will find their proper expression. That same focus and flexibility is what is important today as well.

In the celebration of Communion, the most important concern is that Christ be honored.

An example of the need for flexibility concerns the content of the Communion cup. Some argue that it *must* be wine, some that it *can* be wine, and some that it *must not* be wine! Jesus called the contents of the cup at the Last Supper, "the fruit of the vine" (Matthew 26.29; Mark 14.25; Luke 22.18) which referred to fermented grape juice (wine).⁷ While Jesus undoubtedly used wine, grape juice *is* "the fruit of the vine," strictly speaking, and may appropriately be used in the celebration of Communion. The use of either grape juice or wine in communion today is a matter of choice by the participants—maintaining the proper understanding of what the cup signifies is the important thing.

Bringing Your Heart to the Table

In worship we are asked to bring not just our bodies and minds to the Lord but also our *hearts*. This is especially important when we celebrate the Lord's Supper because of what we are remembering in the act. There are a number of ways we can seek to bring our hearts to the Lord in Communion.

Seek a clean heart

The Lord knows our human weakness and frailty. Because the power of sin remains in us, we need frequent cleansing so that we can enjoy fellowship with him. So he tells us: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1.9). When we come to the Lord in repentance and confess to him our sins, relying on the power of his atoning blood, we have confidence that he will forgive us and restore us to fellowship with himself.

Communion allows time for personal confession and repentance.

Communion is not a time when perfectly obedient Christians rejoice in their spirituality. Neither is it a time when spiritually indifferent Christians enjoy fellowship with the Lord. As noted above, self-examination is necessary. Time at the Lord's table provides an ideal setting for reflection and confession. It is even better, however, to spend time in self-examination before coming.

Reflect on your relationship with Christ

The most important words Jesus spoke when he established the Supper are the words *for you*—"this is my body given *for you*...this is my blood of the new covenant shed *for you*." These words teach us that everything Jesus did was for us as individuals. We receive all the benefits of who he is and what he did for us by faith.

Communion allows time to reflect on your relationship with Christ.

Theologians use the words "union with Christ" to describe the fact that, by faith, we are joined to Christ so that all of the benefits of his death and resurrection are ours. It is natural to focus on the cross at the celebration of Communion. Yet we should go further and reflect on the fact that *his death is our death to sin* and *his resurrection is our resurrection to a new life*. As Paul said, "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6.6, 11). In other words, our reflection on Christ's death should lead to a recognition that it has changed our whole course of life.

Be attentive to the teaching and worship

Bringing our heart to God requires that we bring our minds as well. In our busy lives, focusing our attention on any one thing is difficult. Yet the Lord's Supper provides a time of quietness when we can re-center our lives. When you sing, pay attention to the words you are saying

We must pay careful attention to the Word of God as it come to us in two forms—scripture and sign.

to God. When others share or someone teaches, seek to be attentive to what God is saying to you through his word.

God's word comes to us in scripture. In Communion, we might say that God's word comes to us in sign. The elements of the bread and cup are visible expressions of Jesus' words, "my body broken for you...my blood shed for you." It is important that the word of God in both scripture and sign be received seriously and attentively.

Seek to live in peace with all people

Since Communion is a sign of family fellowship, it is not appropriate to celebrate it while at the same time harboring anger, grudges, or bitterness against others. Paul said, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12.18). This doesn't mean that every relationship in our life must be perfect and every conflict resolved—that is not possible in a fallen world. But it does mean that *from our side* ("so far as it depends on" us) we are seeking a loving spirit and restored relationships.

The Lord's Supper is an experience of fellowship in the family of God. In Communion, we are committing ourselves to each other.

We are saying that we want to provide encouragement, instruction, love, physical and emotional support, counsel, prayer, and correction to each other. When there are unresolved conflicts between brothers and sisters in the church, the body of Christ is wounded and division can result. The meeting of Communion is meant to keep us healthy in our mutual relationships because it is not possible to enjoy fellowship with the Lord while being bitter and angry toward others in the family. The Lord's Supper provides an opportunity to reflect on the health of your relationships with others and to seek, "so far as it depends on you," to live peaceably with all.

Communion helps us focus on the quality of our relationships with others as well as with the LORD.

Share your heart with others

Lastly, the Lord's Supper is a time when people can participate audibly. This doesn't mean every person must share but it means all may share. Anyone may tell how God is working in his life. Those with gifts of teaching or exhortation may open the word of God and bring out its truth. Those who are moved may worship the Lord in prayer or song. When you come with a willingness to share your heart with others in prayer, sharing, or teaching everyone benefits.

King David said of his worship in the Temple,

"With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng"
(Psalm 109.30).

We have that same opportunity today. Our freedom in worship can be expressed in tangible ways when we meet for the celebration of Communion

Participation requires the willingness to share your spiritual gifts with others.

Conclusion

Once a student asked the aged German theologian, Karl Barth, to articulate the most profound truth he had ever learned in his long life of deep study and prolific writing. In reply, he simply quoted the following words:

“Jesus loves me, this is know, for the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong.”

There are no deeper truths under heaven than contained in those words. You can study all your life and never encounter more profound thoughts than the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is the simple way that Jesus left us to remember how he loved us “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2.8). Your appreciation for him will flourish as you spend regular time reflecting on your sin and his grace. Your relationship with the Lord will be strengthened and your enjoyment of him increase as you worship and rely on him. As you bring your heart to him, you may even find victory in some of your struggles. But even if you don’t, you will certainly find the strength to keep struggling well. When you come to his table seeking forgiveness, cleansing, fellowship, and strength, you will find him there in all of his beauty, holiness, and power. And you will find others there as well—your brothers and sisters in God’s family—to uphold you in the pathway of discipleship. You need him. And you need each other!

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ENDNOTES

¹ *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, by Joachim Jeremias (Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 84–88.

² *Early Christian Doctrines*, by J. N. D. Kelly (1978, Harper & Row) pp. 200–201.

³ *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, by Edwin Hatch (1880; reprint 1999, Wipf and Stock).

⁴ *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, by Leonard Verduin (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 132–159; *The Spreading Flame*, by F. F. Bruce (1958, the Paternoster Press), p. 207.

⁵ *Koinōnia* (“fellowship”) in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by W. Bauer, edited and revised by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (1979, University of Chicago Press), pp. 438–439.

⁶ *The Churches of God*, by G. H. Lang (1958; reprint 1985, Conley & Schoettle), pp. 58–80.

⁷ “Wine” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey Bromiley (1988, Eerdmans), Volume 5:1068–1072.