

Why Communion?

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Preacher: Ian Naismith

[0:00] Thanks very much, Sean. Good morning, everyone. It's lovely to have you with us, whether you're in the building, watching the live stream, or listening to the audio recording. We're in a series where we're thinking about why church? Why do we do the things that we do as a church? And the question, as you may have guessed today, is why communion?

I think I need to start by talking a little bit about terminology, because I don't want you going away saying, well, I didn't really understand what he meant when he said that. So there are quite a number of ways in which communion is commonly described. We might talk about the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread, communion or Holy Communion, remembering the Lord, the Eucharist.

These are all different ways of describing the same thing. I hope we'll see as we go on how they bring out different aspects of what we do. Well, all of them describe when the church comes together and remembers the Lord Jesus in his death by taking bread and wine together.

And in a sense, I will say bread and wine. I realise it may be crackers or grape juice, but I'll just refer to bread and wine. And we also refer to the elements, and that is just the bread and the wine taken together.

So hopefully that will avoid some confusion. Now, about 50 years ago, a Baptist called Donald Bridge and an Anglican called David Piper wrote a book about baptism.

[1:25] They called it *The Water That Divides*. And it was an examination of the biblical basis for and the historical development of different practices and beliefs on baptism.

That's the first edition which I have. It's still available today. Encouraged by that, they went on and wrote another book about communion. And they called it *The Meal That Unites*.

The Water Divides, *The Meal That Unites*. So you might think, well, communion, therefore, is not as controversial as baptism. But that's until you notice the question mark.

Because what they're saying, the meal that unites is a meal that you should unite, and indeed does, as we'll see later on as we take it together as a church. But down the centuries, it has been at least as divisive as baptism in terms of people's views of it in the church.

The three great theologians of the Reformation, Martin Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, had very different views on the Lord's Supper.

[2:31] Particularly on whether Christ is present in the elements, the bread and the wine, physically or spiritually, or is present simply in the hearts of those who come and take communion together.

And that issue has divided the Protestant church since it started. And there are lots of other things that divide us. Who is able to take communion?

Is it only members of a particular church or denomination? Is it only people who have been baptised? Is it only people whose faith is in Jesus? Who can lead communion?

Do you need a priest to administer it individually to everyone who is there? Should it be led by an ordained minister or a church elder? Does it need to be led at all by a human being?

And how often should we do it? Is it daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly? You find all these practices very common in the church today. It really is an issue that has divided the church.

[3:36] Now, I think as we go along, my views on many of these things will become very clear to you. But I want today to focus not on what divides us, but hopefully on what unites us.

And from the two passages that Sean read, I want to think about five reasons for why communion is important to us.

So let's get into them. And the first reason I want to think about is that it's an act of obedience to the Lord Jesus. Sometimes we call it an ordinance.

That just means an act of obedience. The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, said, do this, took the bread, do this, and took the wine.

Now, we'll think about what he says alongside that in a minute and the significance of it. But for the moment, let's just focus on the command and the background.

[4:29] You may well know that the background to the first time that the Lord Jesus took communion and instructed his disciples to take it was on the night before he died.

It was the night that he was betrayed, as Paul said. We now know what they did then as the Last Supper. But it was actually the Passover meal that the Jews celebrated every year.

When they remembered the exodus from Egypt and how God had redeemed his people from slavery and made them his own. So Jesus went with his disciples to the upper room.

He went through the normal Passover rituals. They would have talked about and discussed the exodus from Egypt and all that that meant to them. And then as part of the meal, as was normal, he took bread, he broke it, and he gave thanks for it.

All that would have been normal in a Passover meal. What wasn't normal is what Jesus then said.

He said, as Paul records it, This is my body, which is for you.

[5:37] Do this in remembrance of me. The group then ate the Passover meal together. The bread was the start of the meal. They ate the meal together.

And then at the end, there was a grace said, and there was a cup passed round. This was the third of four cups from the Passover. And there was one then they particularly remembered that God had redeemed his people from Egypt.

And Jesus says something different again. He says, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.

Now, as I say, we'll come back to the meaning of Jesus' words. But let's focus on the command. Do this. Do what? Well, there's not a lot of detail in the instructions that Jesus gives to us.

Beyond saying that we are to take the bread and drink the cup and remember him, the only real instruction he gives is that we are to remember him as often as we drink from the cup.

[6:43] Now, again, the frequency isn't specified just as often as you do it. But he doesn't say how you should do it, where you should do it, who should do it.

That is not in this passage, at least on the surface. It seems that in Corinth, at least, the Christians continued to practice that Jesus had the Passover, not a Passover meal, but they had a meal together.

And as part of that meal, they broke bread, they remembered the Lord Jesus and thought on his death. It also looks as if in Corinth, at least, the service, if we can call it that, was quite unstructured. There were opportunities for all sorts of people spontaneously to contribute to it. Ultimately, though, the key thing I think we should take from this is that the important thing is obeying Jesus' command. And that, in many ways, is more important than how we do it. Some churches have very structured services. And perhaps that reflects the structured nature of the Passover meal, that it was very much a set way of doing things.

[7:52] Other churches is much more spontaneous and informal, which may reflect what the Corinthian church did. And for many of us, maybe there's an element of finding what most aids us in our worship of the Lord Jesus, rather than saying that one way or another of doing it is better.

The only thing I say, though, normally these days there's not a full meal involved, usually the communion is taken, just the bread and the wine, as we remember Jesus together.

And also normally not separated as they were at the Last Supper. We normally do it one after the other. But it is an act of obedience. Second reason for why communion, it's an act of remembrance. The words that Jesus, that we've already read, explain that. This is a memorial of Jesus' sacrifice.

He takes the bread and says, This is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. Now, with Jesus sitting there bodily with them, I'm sure the disciples didn't in any way think that the bread that he was passing around became the body of Jesus.

[9:06] That would be ridiculous. It was a symbol rather than the reality. But the significance of it is really important. Jesus' body would be nailed to the cross at Calvary.

All our sins would be placed on him. And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, God made him who had no sin, that's Jesus, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As our substitute, he took the punishment, which should have been ours for rejecting God's way, so that by faith in him we can be forgiven and come into a loving relationship with God.

We remember together the body he gave for us as we take the bread of the Lord's Supper. Then after the meal, Jesus took the cup and said, This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. So the central thought here is the covenant that's sealed by Jesus' blood and the contrast with what went before.

[10:17] As you read through the Bible, there are many different covenants. When God promised blessings to his people and told them what was required of them to receive those blessings.

In the Passover, the one that was particularly remembered is the covenant with Moses. After God redeemed, rescued his people from Egypt, they went to Mount Sinai and God gave Moses the commandments.

Ten commandments you think of is a bit wider than that. On the tablets of stone, God said, Here is what I require from you if you are to receive my blessing and to have me with you.

So the old covenant had two elements to it. One was that there were laws. That God said, This is what you have to do and you need to do it if you want to have me with you.

But then there's a second element that recognised that actually the people weren't always going to keep God's laws. And so there was a system of animal sacrifices that had to be repeated time and time again as the people recognised their sin and came to God for forgiveness.

[11:39] Jesus says, as he introduces the Lord's Supper, Things are different now. There's a new covenant, a covenant in my blood.

As I am going to shed my blood on the cross. That means that the relationship God has with his people will be different. The sacrifice of Jesus was once for all.

It wasn't like animal sacrifices had to be completed time and time again. The sacrifice that Jesus made when he shed his blood was enough to cover all our sins as we confess them and as we seek his forgiveness.

And instead of being bound by a written down law on tablets of stone, Paul tells us that the law now is written on our heart. That doesn't mean we should ignore the Bible and all the instructions in it.

But fundamentally, God through his Holy Spirit has changed those who know Jesus and they're not bound to the fine detail of the law as the Israelites were in the time before Jesus.

[12:46] And so as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remember, as Peter says, that we are redeemed from an empty way of life, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

And that precious blood of Christ is symbolized in the wine that we drink. Now you might think, do we really need these symbols to remember Jesus' death?

Would we ever as Christians forget that Jesus died for us? Well, in one sense, no, I'm sure we wouldn't. But it's so easy for us to lose focus on the center of our faith, to lose focus on the fact that the cross of Christ is the only basis for our salvation and almost to take it for granted.

The bread and wine bring us back to the cross. They recenter our thoughts on the Lord Jesus and what he's done for us. And that brings us, I think, to the third answer I'd give to the question, why communion?

And that, that it's an act of thanksgiving. You might have noticed that in both the passages that Sean read. In chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells us that Jesus gave thanks before breaking the bread.

[14:10] And in chapter 10, he refers to the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks. If I can be a little technical for a minute, the two Greek words used here are actually different.

In chapter 11, the word is the one from which we get Eucharist, which is the way some people refer to the Lord's Supper. And it means expressing thankfulness.

So when people talk about the Eucharist, it's about coming to give thanks to God as together they take the bread and the wine. In chapter 10, the word that's used is the one from which we get our English word eulogy.

It's got more of a sense of speaking well or of blessing something. Both of them, though, represent what our response should be as we come together to take the Lord's Supper.

We should thank and praise God for the realities that these symbols represent. I suggest that that is our primary purpose in coming to the Lord's Supper.

[15:13] To remember Jesus and to bring our worship and thanksgiving as we reflect on his death for us. We come with a love for our saviour that we want to express, an enormous gratitude for what we've done.

And God delights in his son and therefore delights in his people's appreciation of the Lord Jesus. Now that's not to say that we don't get blessing as we come together.

The primary purpose, I believe, is to present our worship to God. But we also are blessed through being there. As we remember and reflect on Jesus' death, our faith will be strengthened, our relationship with God will be deepened, our love for Jesus will grow.

He's not physically present with us, but through the Holy Spirit he's among us and we are fed spiritually as we take the physical elements.

Not that the bread and wine are anything special, but we have the real, present, spiritual interaction with the living Christ through his Holy Spirit.

[16 : 25] That, I think, brings us to the fourth reason why communion, and that it's an act of fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 10, verses 15 and 16, Paul talks about a participation in the blood and body of Christ.

Older versions, like the King James, talk about it as a communion in the blood and body of Christ, hence why what we do is sometimes known as communion. The word that's used, though, is actually very common in the New Testament translated as fellowship.

It's the word that's used in Acts 2 when it talks about the priorities of the church. We'll come back to that a bit later. The priorities of the church, the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.

The word there that's used as translated fellowship in most translations is the word that's translated participation in 1 Corinthians 10. So there's an idea in it of sharing, of having something in common. So what's our participation or our fellowship when it comes to the blood and body of Jesus? Now this is something people write doctoral theses on, and there's a lot of disagreement.

[17 : 38] Let me just make a brief suggestion. In Philippians 3, Paul talks about participating, same word, participating in the sufferings of Christ.

In Galatians 2, he says, I have been crucified with Christ. In Romans 6, he says that we have been baptized into the death of Christ.

And it seems to me that what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 10 is very similar to these. We haven't been physically crucified or died with Christ or suffered as he did.

And yet in baptism, in communion, in our daily lives, we share in the spiritual effects of his death and resurrection. And we enjoy fellowship with him.

And we're particularly aware of that fellowship with the Lord as we take the bread and the wine in memory of his body and his blood. But if there's one aspect of fellowship with the Lord Jesus in communion, there also is very strongly an aspect of fellowship with each other, with those who have come together as believers in the Lord Jesus to remember him.

[18 : 57] Paul says, we who are many are one body for we all share the one loaf. Now let's note first that the Lord's Supper is for those who already trust in Christ, who are part of his body.

It's not the means by which we achieve salvation. But Paul says, the Lord's Supper, taking it together, has a unifying effect on us as a church.

And how can it not? When we remember together everything that the Lord has done for us, it should reinforce to us what we have in common and especially what we share together as his body, the church.

But sadly, that's not how it's always been. Both chapters 10 and chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians were written not so that Paul could give an expedition on the Lord's Supper, but to correct mistakes, errors in the church in Corinth.

They were being inconsistent in the way they lived with what they were declaring in the Lord's Supper. In chapter 10, the issue is that some people were coming to their service on a Sunday, they were taking the Lord's Supper with everyone else, and then during the week they were going to meals which involved sacrifices to idols.

[20 : 21] Perhaps they were part of a trade guild and their participation that would come with an obligation to take part in these pagan feasts.

And they didn't seem to see that there was any inconsistency there. Paul says you can't have a part in both the Lord's Table and the Table of Demons.

I hope no one here is likely to be involved in demon worship, but the lesson for us is that our actions during the week need to be consistent with the fact that we've taken the communion on a Sunday, or indeed that we've been to a service and joined together to worship on Sundays.

We mustn't try to excuse or to ignore practices that really we know are wrong and are inconsistent with being someone who has a faith in Jesus.

We'll never be perfect. We're not going to fully put the sins of this life behind us, but our participation in the Lord's Supper and communion must affect how we act during the week as we understand how much Jesus suffered for our salvation, how terrible our sins were in the cost that he bore for us, and we should try to be more like him.

[21:41] Second issue in Corinth was that when they came together for communion, they displayed disunity prosperity, even in the meal that should have united them. Now it looks as if there was a group of fairly, probably fairly wealthy people in the church at Corinth and they would come and they would bring a lovely meal with them and they would share it with their friends.

They would even get drunk during the Lord's Supper. Meanwhile, there were others and perhaps they were largely slaves who were excluded from this. They came along needing food and they weren't given any.

How could a church declare its unity together when it displayed such discrimination in practice? Paul said this is unacceptable and he details how God has judged the church for it.

Very important lesson for us here, I think, too. The unity of communion of our worship more generally must be reflected in our personal relationships.

We need to be kind, considerate, supportive, generous in our dealings with our fellow Christians. We need to deal well when we disagree on different matters.

[23:04] And above all, in the church we need to avoid snobbery and elitism, saying that some people are better or are more highly regarded than others. All of us are sinners saved by the grace of God and we should never forget that.

Why communion? It's an act of fellowship and if that one speaks largely to our internal relationships, let me end with one that maybe is more externally focused.

Why communion? It's an act of proclamation. In chapter 11, verse 26, Paul says, whenever you eat of this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

It's a visible sermon when we take the bread and the wine together. We're telling each other, but perhaps particularly we're telling anyone there who's not yet a Christian, that the Lord's death is the core of our faith and our only hope of salvation.

salvation. Our responsibility as disciples of Jesus is to proclaim our faith in him and his sacrifice so that those who are lost may realise the importance of trusting in him and may come to put their faith in him.

[24:24] And there's no more powerful way I think to do that than through the symbols of the Lord's Supper. Now as I say that I'm aware that even this morning there may be some people here who haven't yet put your faith in the Lord Jesus.

And I hope I've been able to explain the significance of his death as the only way to be forgiven for the wrong in our lives and to move from being judged by God to being part of his family.

If you haven't already done so I urge you to consider that carefully. But one more thought on the proclamation. Paul also reminds us that remembering the Lord is something we only do until he returns.

One day faith will give way to sight and we won't need to remember or to proclaim the Lord's death because we'll be with Jesus forever if our trust is in him.

The Lord's Supper is a vital part of our life as Christians but it's only temporary. It's only until there's something much much better and when we come to share in the marriage supper of the Lamb when we're with Jesus and with him forever.

[25:40] The one thing that means I think is that the Lord's Supper may well be solemn as we reflect on our sin and on the death of Jesus but it shouldn't be sombre.

We're not remembering someone who's died and who is still dead. Yes we're remembering Christ's sufferings we're aware of our sins but we know that he rose triumphantly on the third day that he's with us through his spirit that he's returning one day perhaps very soon.

We must never lose sight of Christ's suffering for us but as the Passover was a celebration of God redeeming his people from Egypt so the Lord's Supper is a celebration of Christ redeeming us from our sins.

I think it's good when we end a service when we've remembered the Lord by singing about the risen Christ and perhaps particularly by singing something that looks forward to his return.

So why communion? It's an act of obedience it's an act of remembrance it's an act of thanksgiving it's an act of fellowship it's an act of proclamation.

[26:55] Let me finish with something to take away and think about. In Luke chapter 2 Luke says that the first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching to fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Four priorities of the early church. And the question is how can we ensure that we give appropriate priority to each of these? I guess in the context of today how can we ensure that we give the right priority to communion?

I think also prayer is in danger of being undervalued these days. I think it's fair to say that liturgical churches those that use prayer books and set service wordings tend to give priority to the Eucharist remembering Jesus often celebrating it several times a week.

Evangelical and Reformed churches tend to give priority to the word, what's called the Apostles Doctrine in Acts 2. The sermon is the centrepiece of most services and communion is frequently monthly or even quarterly.

Churches like ours coming from the Brethren movement are actually slightly unusual in the evangelical condition of having a weekly breaking of bread service. Frequency certainly isn't everything in this but some of us find it really helpful to start the week remembering the Lord Jesus together and going out hopefully then with a renewed desire to serve him.

[28:36] Others believe that monthly is a very appropriate frequency. But whatever the frequency what really matters is how we come to the Lord's table.

If we come often weekly or even more often there's a danger that we take it for granted and our worship for the Lord becomes routine and potentially lacks sincerity.

When we take communion at the end of a service there's a danger we see it almost as an added extra something we do after the main part of the service. Whenever and however we celebrate the Lord's Supper together we need to recognize a core activity of the church and be wholehearted in our remembrance and worship.

And perhaps for many of us that means that we need to spend time preparing to come to the Lord's Supper. Churches that celebrate communion infrequently often those in reformed denomination for instance the Free Church of Scotland tend to put a lot of emphasis on preparation.

To have meetings in advance for self-examination and prayer and then after that to come together to remember Jesus. That's not our practice but it's good that we examine ourselves and confess our sins before we come.

[30:00] Rather than just turning up perhaps not even realising it's communion this week and just taking part almost without thinking in the Lord's Supper. We should examine ourselves says Paul and part of that we should examine our relationships and we should confess any sins before God and then we can come and give our thanks for our forgiveness.

So the Lord's Supper communion is a duty and a privilege. It allows us to bring our worship to God for his son to recommit us to living like Christ to enjoy the blessings that come from obedience.

We have that opportunity every Sunday at the Breaking of Bread service upstairs at 10 o'clock everyone's very welcome to that and also on the first Sunday of each month at the end of this service we take communion together so that will be in two weeks time.

Let's make sure that when we do we come prepared we've examined ourselves and we bring our worship in a way that glorifies Jesus and so is pleasing to God.

And most important let's make sure our faith is in Jesus that we've been forgiven because of his body given for us and his blood shed to usher in the new covenant.

[31:21] May God bless us as we regularly take communion together and may it be worthy of his son as we worship him unitedly. Let's pray together. Our Father we thank you for this wonderful object lesson that the Lord Jesus has given us bread and wine helping us to remember his body given for us and his blood shed for us.

We thank you that that gives us the chance to bring our worship to you for him and it recenters our thinking on his cross on what really matters in our faith the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

Help us to do it worthily that we may be united as a church that we may be prepared when we come to communion and that we may glorify Jesus in all that we do.

We thank you for your presence with us this morning. We thank you for the privilege of worshipping together. We thank you for what we learned about Foodbank Plus and we pray for your continued

blessing on that. Pray for the children and for what they have learned too that they in early life may come to put their faith in Jesus.
We commit ourselves to you now and ask for your blessing on us. In Jesus' name. Amen.