Holy Communion – Week One
The Central Act of Christian Worship

Discussion Question

Tell us about the best meal you've ever eaten.
What made it the best?

"How is this meal different?"

From its earliest beginnings the Church's central act of worship involved gathering weekly, or even daily, to break bread together (Acts 2:42-47). At one level these fellowship meals were simply a continuation of the habit Jesus had practiced with his disciples throughout his ministry, yet Jesus himself had imbued the practice with obligation and meaning, as we will see. Very soon the Christian fellowship meal began to contain a formal theological content which went well beyond the simple meaning of Christian fellowship. By the time Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians he could already outline the formal practice of the Christian religious meal (1 Corinthians 11: 23-25), express some of the theology contained in the practice (1 Corinthians 11: 26-27) and give directions as to how it should be practised in an orderly and worthy fashion (1 Corinthians 11: 17-34).

Origins

So where did the meal come from?

1. **Jewish fellowship meals**

One point of origin was the formal communal meals of Jewish clubs and societies. In fact such club meals were common throughout the Greco-Roman world. It's rare to find equivalent meal meetings today that combine eating, fellowship and the promotion of group values in a cohesive liturgical structure. Rotary, Freemasons and Toastmasters all have structured (liturgical, even) meetings but shared meals are usually a separate matter. Wedding receptions include a meal and rituals (e.g. speeches, cutting the cake, etc.) but these are hardly standardized or formal, nor do they promote a particular cause or belief. The best example I can think of that approximates the formal fellowship meals of Jesus' day is the Burns Supper. Here there is a set liturgy of speeches, poetry and rituals, which includes the eating of a specific ritual menu of haggis, neeps and tatties, and which promotes a shared value – to celebrate the poetry of Robert Burns.

The fellowship of disciples gathered at table with their rabbi to receive instruction and teaching and to discuss the strategy of the movement would have been a common phenomenon in the Jewish world of the first Century. This seems to be the form that many of Jesus' meals in the Gospels took – not only the Last Supper itself.

2. The Jewish Passover Meal

Much ink has been spilled over the question of the precise relationship between Passover, Jesus' Last Supper, and the later development of Holy Communion. Was the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples a Passover meal? Was the Passover meal the prototype of the Christian Lord's Supper? The answer to both questions is probably, "No".

Inconsistencies such as the menu, the absence of certain formal aspects of the Passover meal and the timing of the events around the Last Supper make it unlikely that it was the Passover meal itself. Moreover, significant differences between the Passover meal and Holy Communion, such as timing, frequency and ritual components make it clear that Holy Communion was not understood simply as a replacement to Passover. Indeed, the early Christian communities continued to celebrate the Jewish Passover as a separate rite even after the Lord's Supper had developed its own liturgy and meaning.

Nevertheless, despite a lack of formal congruence between the two rituals it is impossible to ignore the very close association in the meaning of the two meals. As JM Barkley put it, the Passover was a season, rather than a meal, so the Passover would be in the mind of Jesus and His followers." The fact that the synoptic gospels attempt to link the two rites and that Paul (in 1 Corinthians 5:7) actually refers to Jesus as the paschal lamb are indicative that there was a very early association of the meaning of Jesus' death with that of the Passover, and of the Lord's Supper with the Passover meal. There may not be any formal similarities between the two rites but they are both meals at which a divine covenant and an event of God's salvation are recalled. At the same time both meals look forward to a coming deliverance by God. This connection between the two meals was certainly grasped by the first Christians.

3. Jesus Himself

One could simply note that Jesus instituted the sacrament at the Last Supper, applying symbolic meaning to it and commanding his disciples to continue observing the meal as a rite in remembrance of him.

It would be more complete and more accurate to say that (1)Jesus' practice of sharing communal meals throughout his ministry; (2) his use of banquet imagery in his teaching, (3) his actual institution of the rite at the Last Supper and, (4) the way that his New Testament followers continued to celebrate the sacrament after the Resurrection each helped to shape how the Church ended up worshipping.

3.1 Jesus' ministry of shared meals

Shared meals played a central role in Jesus' ministry. In our final week we'll think more deeply about the significance of this fact. For now I

simply want to point out that Jesus' own practice set a pattern which the Church later followed. In other words, Jesus' instruction at the Last Supper for his disciples to share meals in his memory was not an innovation but rather an instruction to continue a habit already formed. Nine of Jesus' shared meals are recorded in Luke's gospel alone.

- Dinner with Levi (Matthew?) the tax-collector (5:27-32)
- Dinner with Simon the Pharisee (7:36-50)
- Feeding the 5000 (9:10-17)
- With Mary and Martha (10:38-42)
- Dinner with the Pharisees (11:37-52)
- Sabbath meal with Pharisees (14:1-24)
- Dinner with Zaccheaus (19:1-10)
- The Last Supper (22:14-38)
- Dinner at Emmaus (24:28-32)
- With the Disciples (24:36-43)

Two aspects of these meals are noteworthy, their intimacy and the inclusion of unlikely guests. Some of Jesus' most intimate conversations take place at these meals, as one would expect since the dining table is that most intimate place in family life. This intimacy makes the second aspect all the more noteworthy as Jesus chose, as a rule, to share this space with outsiders – women, opponents of his group (i.e. Pharisees), tax-collectors and sinners. Indeed this radical inclusion of outsiders at joyful meals was so frequent and public that it was seen as scandalous by Jesus' enemies who accused him of eating with sinners and of being gluttonous (Matt. 9:10-17, Mark 2:15-22, Luke 5:29-39, Luke 7:34, Matt 11:19).

3.2 Banquet imagery in Jesus' parables

The theme of radical inclusion of the outsider is given further weight in Jesus' parables. In Luke 14 Jesus tells two meal-related parables of the Wedding Feast (14:7-11) and the Great Banquet (14:12-24), and in Matthew 22:1-14 there is a similar parable. From these parables we learn that we should not seek positions of honour at shared meals but give those to others. Moreover we learn that in heaven itself, preference is given to the outsider for inclusion at God's banquet.

3.3 Institution at the Last Supper

Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Last Supper by instructing his disciples to "do this in remembrance of me".

- Matthew 26:17-30
- Mark 14:12-25
- Luke 22:7-20
- John 13:1-30
- 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Again there are two things to note here. Firstly, that Jesus makes the meaning of the symbols of bread and wine explicit. The bread stands for his body and the wine for his blood. The symbols are therefore to be directly associated with his sacrificial death on the Cross. Secondly, Jesus gives the meal eschatological significance. In other words, he links it to heaven. This is a meal that helps us prepare for what life will be like with God in glory.

3.4 Holy Communion in the New Testament Church

How did those who were actually with Jesus at the Last Supper carry out his command? From the Book of Acts and Paul's letters (notably 1 Corinthians), we learn that the disciples continued to share meals as Jesus told them to in his memory on a weekly or even daily basis (Acts 2:42-47).

It is highly significant that Jesus' followers soon associated the meal of special significance with their shared meal on "the Lord's Day" or "the first day of the week", i.e. Sunday. Although they shared meals daily, continued to attend the synagogue on the sabbath (Saturday) and continued to celebrate Passover once a year, their new sacramental meal was reserved for a weekly gathering on Sundays. Even though Jesus had instituted the meal on a Thursday and the symbolism of bread and wine were associated with events on Good Friday, it was Sunday – the Day of Resurrection – that became ***the*** day for worship centred around a shared meal. So from it's very beginning Holy Communion was the feast of the Resurrection and what was "Remembered" was not only Christ's sacrifice on the Cross itself, but the consequence of that sacrifice, namely the promise of Resurrection.

Discussion Question

Have you ever taken communion in a different church tradition? What was different about it?

The Shape of the Liturgy

The earliest Christians were exclusively Jewish and the first Gentile Christians were converted to both Judaism and Jesus' Way. As such they continued to participate in Temple and Synagogue worship on the Sabbath (Saturday) and then met again on Sunday to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Once Christianity moved beyond Judaism, parts of worship derived from the Synagogue such as reading and studying Scripture were added to the Sunday worship. So their worship included a Liturgy of the Word followed by a Liturgy of the Table.

More than that we cannot say because as Christianity spread, its worship took on varied regional shapes. Following the discovery and analysis of many ancient texts, Gregory Dix (in 1945) proposed a

fourfold pattern of the liturgy of the table which is representative of the shape of many of the earliest known liturgies and provides us with a fairly simple outline of the parts of the Eucharist that were common to most of the first written liturgies that appeared in the late third or fourth centuries.

Dix's schema is based on the four actions of Jesus at the institution of the Lord's Supper, namely that he (1) *took* the bread; (2) *gave thanks*; (3) *broke* the bread; and, (4) *gave* it to those gathered.

Dix's "Four-action" Shape	**Book of Common Order (1994)**
1. The offertory	Invitation to the Table Offertory and Great Entry Narrative of the Institution Taking of the Bread and Wine
2. The prayer of thanksgiving	Thanksgiving Introductory dialogue – Sursum Corda First part of the Thanksgiving and Preface Sanctus and Benedictus Anamnesis Epiclesis Intercessions Lord's Prayer
3. The breaking of the bread	Fraction
4. The distribution of the elements	Communion The Peace Post Communion Prayers Dismissal

This was the basic rite which became standardised in the Roman Catholic church and does not vary widely in structure from the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox church. This was also the basic shape of the liturgy which the Reformers inherited. In the coming weeks we will discuss some of the debates surrounding the meaning and theology of the sacrament but it is worth pointing out that, despite these debates, much of the structure and shape of the liturgy has stayed the same to this day. It is therefore possible for Christians across the world to enter a Eucharistic service in almost any church and recognise the basic shape of the sacrament, even if individual parts may vary.

Parts of the Communion Liturgy

From next week we'll think through some of the strands of meaning that are conveyed through our celebration of the Lord's Supper. For now we'll take a brief overview of all the different prayers and actions that have become part of the Communion liturgy over the past 2000 years.

1. **The Invitation to the Table**

The Invitation to the Table is probably the most recent addition to the liturgy. It was introduced into the *Scottish Prayer Book* of 1637 via the *English Book of Common Prayer*. Originally it took the form of an invitation based on the confession of the communicant, and therefore served as one of the checks for the worthy reception of the sacrament.

In the light of the church's greater ecumenical awareness, the Invitation has become an expression of the catholicity of the Church and of the Reformed doctrine that the Table does not belong to a single branch of the church but that it is the "Table of the Lord".

2. **"Lifting of the Tokens"**

For the Eucharist to be truly meaningful as a celebration of communion with Christ and with each other, it is necessary that that communion actually exists, i.e. that the Eucharist is not merely a façade hiding underlying disunity. But how should such compliance be controlled?

Each church has its own method of policing the "fencing" of the Table. This can range from publicly excommunicating certain individuals or groups for known offences to relying on people to examine their own consciences before coming to the Table. In presbyterian churches the "fencing of the Table" traditionally took the form of issuing Communion tokens or cards to members. This practice involved a preparation process in which the elders of the Kirk Session would visit the homes of members to enquire about the spiritual welfare of the family and only after thorough and successful interrogation would the members of that family be given their Communion tokens which would then serve as their "entrance tickets" to the sacrament. During the sacrament itself, after the Invitation to the Table was issued, there would be a ceremonial "Lifting of the Tokens" at which time the elders collected the tokens from all those who intended to communicate.

In recent times such strict policing of the Table has largely fallen out of vogue in favour of emphasising the celebratory aspects of the meal and the openness of Christ's invitation. Jurgen Moltmann, for example, has declared that,

> The Lord's supper is not the place to practice church discipline; it is first of all the place where the liberating presence of the crucified Lord is celebrated…. Confession and absolution often precede the Lord's supper, so that the open, prevenient invitation of Christ is linked with legalistic injunctions and moral conditions for 'admission'. Christ's original feast of joy is then unfortunately transformed into a meal of repentance where people beat their breasts and gnash their teeth.

3. The Offertory and the Great Entrance

The Offertory is traditionally that part of the liturgy where the offerings of money and the elements of bread and wine are brought to the Table and prepared for consecration and use in the Communion. Originally these gifts were offerings of food that always included bread and wine that people would have brought from home to be shared at the meal. Later this action was symbolised by the placing of the people's offerings alongside the elements on the Table or by the processing of the elements from among the people to the Table.

In the coming weeks we'll look more closely at what this offering actually means when we look at the sacrificial symbolism of the Eucharist.

4. The Greeting of Peace

The Greeting of Peace or Kiss of Peace is a gesture of mutual salutation between the participants in the Holy Communion service. Among the Jews of Jesus' time the kiss was a common courteous formality which preceded any ceremonial meal. In the light of Jesus' command to "first go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matt 5: 24), the Kiss of Peace became associated with the Offertory. Later Roman rites moved it to just before the Communion, following the practice in the African church, although the reasons for doing so are not entirely clear. Eastern Orthodox rites as well as most Protestant and Anglican rites have the Kiss of Peace in its original position before the Offertory. Interestingly, the current Church of Scotland book of Common Order (1994) has the Peace ***after*** the Communion in all of its orders. Presumably this position is to emphasise the idea that the sacrament strengthens our actual communion and thereby brings us peace.

5. The Narrative of the Institution (The Warrant)

The account of the institution of the Supper by Jesus is found in almost all ancient liturgies and forms the nucleus of the liturgy in the centre of the Eucharistic Prayer alongside or as part of the Anamnesis (see below). Usually the narratives of Paul (1 Corinthians 11:23-26) and Matthew (24:26-29) were used.

Many Reformed liturgies – all the way back to Calvin and Knox – include the Words of Institution as part of the introduction to the whole rite. The Words of Institution have the meaning here of giving Biblical authority (or warrant) for the performance of the rite in its entirety.

6. Setting Apart of the Elements

The placing of hands on people is a universal sign of blessing, setting apart, consecrating or commissioning. The similar gesture in relation to things is an extension of this idea of blessing. Placing hands on the

elements could be seen as a blessing of the offerors. In the Eucharistic rites from the third century onwards, the sign was simply seen as a blessing of the elements themselves in preparation for the consecration.

What actually happens to the bread and wine at this point, if anything at all, became a matter of debate at the Reformation. We'll delve into this in a later study. For now we simply note that at this point the elements are identified as having special significance for us at this meal.

7. Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Anaphora or Eucharistic Prayer)

We come now to the second of the four actions of the liturgy. Although various parts of this Eucharistic prayer can be distinguished, as a whole the intention of the prayer is to give thanks to God in the context of our communion with Christ, who has offered himself.

7.1 Introductory prayers of Thanksgiving

The prayer traditionally begins with an introductory dialogue known as the *Sursum Corda* in which we are invited to "Lift up our hearts" and "Give thanks to the Lord our God." This ancient prayer (from the 2nd Century at least) invites the assembly's permission to proceed with the blessing and reminds us that we are being "lifted up", i.e. that we are now entering a spiritual realm beyond this place and that at this Table God has "made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6-7).

After the opening dialogue follow general prayers of thanksgiving for God's mighty works in the past, in creation and redemption. These prayers can be varied and often include a set of Proper Prefaces (prayers that are specific to a particular season or situation).

The thanksgiving has its climax in the *Sanctus*, which was traditionally sung as an anthem by the whole congregation at the conclusion of the prayers of thanksgiving. Derived from Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8 and traditionally followed by the *Benedictus qui venit* (Mk 11: 9-10, Mt 21: 9), the *Sanctus* provides an opportunity for the people to participate vocally in the act of thanksgiving. The *Sanctus* is also a reminder that the thanksgiving we offer on earth is in harmony with the eternal song of thanksgiving offered before the throne of God. "Heaven and earth are full of God's glory!"

7.2 Anamnesis and Offering

A rather technical word is used here for the point at which we declare that this meal is being eaten "in remembrance" of Jesus. Memorial, commemoration, remembrance – all these suggest that the person or deed commemorated is past and absent, whereas anamnesis signifies

exactly the opposite: it is an objective act, in and by which the person or event commemorated is actually made present, is brought into the realm of the here and now. Moreover, it is not merely about ***us*** remembering Jesus' sacrifice and Resurrection, it is also about these events being remembered ***to God***. In other words, we are re-calling before God the sacrifice made by Jesus along with all it accomplished, thereby claiming its effects for ourselves here and now.

The anamnesis traditionally took the form of two statements, one of commemoration ("Therefore remembering…") and one of offering ("We offer…"). The idea was that as we recall Christ's eternal sacrifice, the elements and/or the worshippers are here and now being taken up into that offering thereby sharing in both his suffering and his Resurrection. As we will see, this idea became controversial during the Reformation and Reformed liturgies prefer to emphasise the idea that we offer ourselves to God in a ***response*** of thanksgiving rather than ***as part of*** Christs sacrifice.

7.3 Epiclesis

The Greek word *epiclesis* means "calling down upon" or "invocation". In the liturgy it refers to that part of the Eucharistic Prayer which we call on the Holy Spirit to put into effect what we have remembered before God in the Anamnesis. "Send down your Spirit to bless us and these elements…".

When we later consider how and where Jesus is present in the sacrament we will return to this prayer. For now I will just mention that the presence, position and contents of the Epiclesis in the liturgy are largely dependent on the theological understanding of consecration. The classical Western doctrine that the consecration is effected by the repetition of the Words of Institution is probably responsible for the apparent absence of the Epiclesis in the Roman rite (and many Anglican liturgies), while the Eastern understanding of the Epiclesis as necessary for consecration has meant that the Eastern Epiclesis has traditionally been more elaborate.

For Calvin, it is the Holy Spirit who effects the presence of Christ in the sacrament and also communicates the body of Christ to believers. It is through the Holy Spirit that believers are united to the ascended Christ. The Epiclesis therefore has a prominent place in most Presbyterian liturgies.

7.4 Intercession

The prayers of intercession that come at the end of the Eucharistic prayer developed from the reading of the diptychs in the early Church. The diptychs began as a list of the names of people who had brought gifts of bread for the Eucharist, which was read aloud by a deacon

before the Communion. As it became popular to make offerings of thanksgiving on behalf of others, the diptychs were extended to include the names of these others and later also the names of the dead and especially the names of martyrs and saints. Eventually these prayers came to include all sorts of intercessory prayers for the living and the dead.

The liturgical point of having the intercessions as part of the Eucharistic prayer is that it is only as members of Christ (united with Him in the Communion) and in the light of his offering (commemorated in the Eucharist) that we are able to offer our intercessions. In fact the things that we ask for ourselves and for others are part of the fruit of our union with God, which we receive through the Communion.

7.5 The Lord's Prayer

The earliest evidence of the use of the Lord's Prayer at the end of the Eucharistic prayer is in Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 348) and it gradually became an accepted part of the rite throughout the Church. The liturgical value of having the Lord's Prayer at this point in the liturgy speaks for itself. Many early commentators stressed its suitability as a preparation for the Communion. The Lord's Prayer is also a good way to conclude and draw together the prayers of intercession, which precede it in the liturgy. More than that, the Lord's Prayer at this point in the service can be seen as a climax to the whole of the Eucharistic prayer that precedes it, even though it is not essentially a prayer of thanksgiving itself.

8. The Fraction (Breaking the Bread)

The Fraction is the third action in the "four-action" shape of the liturgy and refers to the formal breaking of the bread by the minister prior to its distribution in the Communion. Originally this action was a purely utilitarian means of preparing the bread for distribution, both in the Jewish grace before supper and in the early Church's Lord's Supper. The gesture soon attracted symbolic meaning however, the earliest of which was the unity of the Church. In 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul uses the symbolism of the breaking of a single loaf as an argument for the unity of the Church. When the people's offerings began to be used for the Communion, more than one loaf was shared and the Fraction could no longer be clearly seen as a symbol of unity.

By the third century the Fraction had begun to be seen as a symbol of Christ's death. Hippolytus' liturgy (215AD) already changes Jesus' words accompanying the Fraction from Paul's "This is my Body which ***is*** for you" to "This is my Body which ***is broken*** for you". Despite the fact that this symbolism of the breaking of Christ's body is clearly contradicted by John 19:36, it became the popular traditional understanding of the gesture's meaning.

Since the seventh century it has been customary to sing the anthem, *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), either between Fraction and Communion or during the Fraction. This anthem, based on John 1:29, has traditionally been viewed as a prayer "addressed specifically to Christ present in the Eucharist as a sacrificial offering".

9. The Communion

The final and climactic action in the "four-action" shape of the liturgy, the Communion, involves the actual distribution of the elements to the communicants. This action has been practised in various ways throughout the history of the Church. In the early Church the people came forward to receive the sacrament standing at the balustrade in front of the sanctuary. Between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries it became customary in the Roman Church to receive the sacrament kneeling. The Reformed Scottish practice was for the communicants to come forward and sit around the Table to receive Communion. Under the influence of the English Nonconformists Scottish Presbyterians began to receive the sacraments sitting in their pews, although this was probably equally due to the impracticality of seating large congregations around a single Table.

Sadly, the consequent posture of worshippers receiving the elements in the pews can seem passive, private and even solemn, which is the very opposite of what was intended – namely, a community seated together at table, serving one another and eating as a family.

In all rites, East and West, the minister traditionally communicates first, both as an example to other worshippers and as the first recipient from Christ, the host. In the Reformed tradition, the minister, servers (originally Elders) and congregation then each receive and serve one another in turn. During the 20th Century, under the influence of Victorian sensibilities of politeness, ministers in some English-speaking traditions started receiving the elements after the congregation had eaten. This shift received impetus from the anti-clericalism of the charismatic renewal in the 1960's where it was seen as a sign of humility for the minister to wait until last. Today, although all the orders in Common Order have the minister partaking first, many ministers in the Church of Scotland wait and are served last. While the humility of this action is commendable, it can have the unintended consequence of creating the impression that the minister, and not Christ, is the host at the meal, or worse that Christ is not even present at the meal.

10. Thanksgiving and Dismissal

The historical Eucharistic prayers almost all end with a doxology of praise and thanksgiving.