

Breaking Bread Together

As a church, we seek to prioritise the Bible's teachings above long-standing beliefs and practices that do not align with its teachings.

One of the areas that we have carefully considered is the practice of Communion, and it is clear that many current practices are rooted in traditions that developed long after the apostolic period, and which have led the church away from the biblical understanding and pattern of breaking bread together.

The Biblical Terminology

There are a number of biblical names for the same thing.

Acts 2:42 – 46	Breaking bread
1 Corinthians 11:20	The Lord's Supper
1 Corinthians 10:16	<i>Koinonia</i> (the communion / fellowship / participation)
1 Corinthians 10:16	<i>Euchariste</i> (the thanksgiving or blessing)
Jude 12	The love feast

Biblical Texts

Matthew 26:26 – 29, Mark 14:22 – 25, Luke 22:14 – 20, Luke 24:13 – 49, John 21:9 – 15, Acts 1:1 – 5, Acts 2:42 – 46, Acts 20:7, Acts 20:11, 1 Corinthians 5:7 & 8, 1 Corinthians 10:14 – 22, 1 Corinthians 11:20 – 34, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Hebrews 13:9 – 14, 2 Peter 2:13, Jude 12

We understand the breaking of bread by considering the occasion when it was instituted – the Lord's Last Supper

There is an ongoing debate about whether the Last Supper was a Passover Seder or a chaburah – a pre-festival meal shared among close friends to prepare for the upcoming festival.

Whichever it was, we can affirm that it was a real meal, and that it forms the basis of Communion.

We believe that during the first decade of Christian history, the early church, largely composed of Jewish believers, observed a Christian adaptation of the Jewish Passover annually.

And over time, the initial differences between the two celebrations grew more pronounced, particularly as the Gentile (non-Jewish) believers grew in number, and joined the church.

The Passover

Origin: Passover is an annual Jewish festival that commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, where God spared the Israelites from the final plague by 'passing over' their homes, which had been marked with lamb's blood.

Practices: It involves a Seder meal with symbolic foods like the roasted lamb, unleavened bread (bread made without the use of yeast as a raising agent), bitter herbs, and four cups of wine; together with retelling the story of the Exodus, and singing traditional songs.

Significance: It celebrates God's deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery.

The Lord's Supper (or Communion)

Origin: The Lord's Supper, also known as Communion, was instituted by Jesus during the Last Supper with his disciples.

Practices: Christians partake in bread and wine, symbolising Jesus' body and blood, to remember his sacrifice on the cross for us.

Significance: It commemorates Jesus' death and resurrection, emphasising the new covenant between God and humanity brought about through Jesus' sacrifice.

While the annual Christian celebration and Jewish Passover share a common origin, they were actually quite different, and continued to evolve along separate paths.

The Christians focussed on the resurrection of Jesus, while the Jewish observance continues to commemorate the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

The divergence between Passover and the Christian celebration also led to distinct calendar practices.

Passover, governed by the lunar calendar used by the Jewish community, can fall on any day of the week.

Christians, however, deemed it more fitting to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday – the day that he rose from the dead.

And this annual celebration is what we now know as Easter.

Therefore it is Easter, not daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly Communion, that is the true Christian successor to Passover.

However, the New Testament makes it clear that the early church broke bread together far more often than just once a year.

In fact, sharing meals was a regular part of their lives, as they gathered in each other's homes throughout the week – not just on Sundays. (Acts 2:46).

In doing so, they were continuing the example set by the Last Supper, which was a close fellowship meal, meeting in a private house.

The teaching contained in 1 Corinthians 11:20 – 34 shows that the practice of the early church in breaking bread together continued to consist of a group of believers gathering in fellowship to share a full, not symbolic, meal.

It was against this background that Paul had to write some corrective words to the Corinthians about what was going on when they broke bread together.

- Some people were greedy and ate all the food, leaving others to go hungry.
This is obviously much more than just eating a small piece of bread.
- Some of them got drunk at these meals.
You cannot do that on a mere sip of wine.

- The teaching about discerning the body has to do with the remembering the unity of the believers that was implicit in the fellowship meal.
- The gathered family of God was one body because of the fellowship between them – wherever and in whatever numbers they gathered – that was symbolised by the sharing of one loaf and one cup in the meal.

Every breaking of bread meal assumes that Jesus is invisibly present at the table, just as Elijah is given an empty chair at the Jewish Passover.

The fact that Jesus is invisibly present also points to the future, when we will share in the marriage supper of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem.

When we break bread together – sharing one loaf and one cup – we are receiving blessing, grace, and the coming of the kingdom, as we manifest the unity of the body of Christ.

The Fellowship Meal is a *koinonia*, a communion, and a fellowship.

The Meaning of the Breaking of Bread

From the teaching given by Jesus and Paul, we can understand the meaning of the event as follows.

‘Do this in remembrance of me.’

Remembrance was what Israel did at the Passover under the Old Covenant.

They looked back to the Exodus and relived the glorious act of God for their salvation, the founding history of their nation.

However, in the breaking of bread under the New Covenant, we look back to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, as his body was broken for our salvation.

We remember his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension – our saviour and redeemer – who delivered us from slavery to sin, and made us into his kingdom people.

We also look back over our lives and recall all the works he has done through the Holy Spirit, our conversion, the changes he has brought, the new life he has given, and the ways we have met with God.

‘This is the New Covenant in my blood.’

These words signify the establishment of a new agreement between God and humanity, replacing the Old Covenant, which was based on the Law of Moses.

The New Covenant is based on faith in the shed blood of Christ to take away sin, not on repeated sacrifices or any other kind of work.

Jesus’s blood, shed on the cross, is the sacrifice that atones for sin and brings forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

This new covenant is a relationship based on grace and love, not on human effort.

The drinking of the wine from the one cup also speaks of us all receiving the Holy Spirit as we are made alive in the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13)

What actually happens?

Despite the importance of communion as an ordinance, there are very few specific instructions in the Bible regarding it, such as how often it should be observed and methods of conducting a communion service.

While today's church Communion services are highly structured, early Christian fellowship meals were probably far more flexible, reflecting the diverse cultures they were held in.

Since the Bible does not specify how the elements should be distributed, we believe that the spirit of the meal is more important than any particular ritual, since the elements are merely symbols of spiritual realities, not the realities themselves.

As Christians, our focus should be on remembering Jesus Christ's sacrifice, not on the ritual itself.

When we gather for a Fellowship Meal in a home or restaurant, we break bread together at the start of the meal, after one or more communal prayers of thanksgiving.

We then distribute the bread and the wine, using a method called 'intinction', which consists of the bread and wine being passed around, with each person partially dipping a piece of bread into the wine before eating it.

As they receive the bread and wine, we encourage each person to offer their own personal thanksgiving; whether silently or audibly.

If we bear in mind that the point of Breaking Bread together is to share fellowship with the Lord Jesus, and with each other, then it will have accomplished its purpose.

Questions about the Elements

Unleavened v leavened bread

During Passover, Jews eat unleavened bread to commemorate the Israelites' hasty exodus from Egypt.

The story goes that they left so quickly that their bread didn't have time to rise.

The Passover then leads into the feast of unleavened bread, which is held over the next seven days. At other times, of course, the Jews eat normal, leavened, bread.

However, Jesus replaced the Passover with a new celebration, in which the bread represents his body broken on the cross for us.

And since his followers are not celebrating the Passover during communion, the use of unleavened bread did not carry forward into either the festival of Easter, nor the regular breaking of bread meals.

Hence, leavened bread – bread with yeast – was used at all fellowship meals and at Easter.

However, midway through the first century, the Western church started to adopt the use of unleavened bread for communion, on the basis that yeast is often seen as a picture of sin. ¹

This gradually became more common, eventually becoming a widespread, though far from universal, practice.

For example, whilst the Roman Catholic church now uses unleavened bread, many Evangelical, and some Anglican churches, maintain the use of leavened bread.

The Eastern church also continues to use leavened bread for communion, with the rising of the dough symbolising the resurrection of Christ, as well as emphasising the difference between Christian Communion and Jewish Passover. ²

While both leavened and unleavened bread are used for Communion by different groups, we believe that the use of ordinary, leavened, bread best symbolises our beliefs, as well as reflecting the practice of the church from the earliest days. ³

Alcoholic or non-alcoholic wine

The Bible does not directly stipulate the use of alcoholic wine or unfermented grape juice.

However, the fact that some people were getting drunk during fellowship meals clearly shows that the early Christians were using alcoholic wine.

It is also noteworthy that Paul's answer to the situation of people misusing the wine is not that they change to using non-alcoholic grape juice, but rather that they exercise self-control in their consumption of alcohol.

Closing thoughts

As the believing church comes together ⁴ as God's children, to break bread together, it is vital that we remember the essence of what we are doing.

We are commemorating and celebrating Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and ascension for us.

We are remembering his promise that he will come again, and we will be partakers in the glorious Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

In the simple act of sharing one bread and one wine, we are asserting the profound unity of the church as the Body of Christ.

Anything less than this makes a mockery of Communion, and opens us up to the condemnation that Paul made in 1 Corinthians 11:20 :-

'So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat.'

Let us break bread together in such a way that it reflects the very essence of our identity as the Body of Christ.

Footnotes

1. Whilst yeast can represent the characteristic spreading of sin, it can also have other significance, depending on context.

For example, in Matthew 13:33, Jesus uses yeast as an apt symbol for the growth of the kingdom of God.

He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.' (NIV UK)

Yeast here is obviously being seen in the positive light of growth and transformation.

2. The issue of unleavened versus leavened bread was one of the contributing factors to the Great Schism in 1054.
The Orthodox Church condemned the West for the introduction of unleavened bread during Communion. The split between the two resulted in the Eastern and Western churches excommunicating each other.
3. Does **1 Corinthians 5** tell us that we should use unleavened bread during Communion?

When we read this chapter, it becomes clear that Paul has no interest in physical yeast, any more than Jesus did in Matthew 16:5 – 12.

Instead, he is concerned with a case of sexual immorality that is being allowed to continue within the church.

He points out that, just as yeast spreads throughout the bread dough, so sexual immorality will spread throughout the church, if it is not dealt with.

And so he tells the church to remove the man committing this immorality from the fellowship, so that their fellowship meal might be pure, without the taint of open sin.

It is sin that he is concerned with, not yeast.

4. With regard to children taking communion, the Bible is silent.

However, we remember that Jesus blessed children of a very young age, and rebuked his disciples who were trying to keep them from him.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to open the communion to children who desire to participate, and are capable of understanding the significance and importance of what is happening, even if they have not yet been baptised (especially if this is due to parental resistance).

We expect that this point will be reached when the child is about 7 or 8 years old, although this will vary with the individual.