

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, along with the reading and proclamation of the Word, has stood at the center of Christian worship since the beginning of the church's life. Our Lord gave us the gift of communion when, in his Last Supper with his disciples, he invited them to eat bread and drink wine with a new meaning and significance. While the supper is recorded in the Gospels, it is St. Paul, writing to the Christians at Corinth, who gives us the words instituting the Lord's Supper: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, 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 this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NRSV)

THE EARLY CHURCH

In the earliest church the Lord's Supper (or the Eucharist) was celebrated as a part of each Lord's Day service. It was a joyful celebration of God's redemptive love through the Passion of Christ our Savior. Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (second century AD) describes the Lord's Day service: "On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities of the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president [the one presiding] in a discourse urges and invites [all] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and

offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation asserts, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons."

As the church entered its second millennium, the proclamation of the Word in the sermon fell by the wayside, and the participation of the people in the liturgy became more and more restricted. By the late middle ages, the low Mass (or private Mass) had become the normal way to celebrate Mass. The Mass was "said" by a priest and a server, and the people, if present, simply watched the action. The service was conducted in Latin, so even if they could hear what the priest was saying, they could not understand it. With growing scruples about the possibility of the people accidentally spilling the "blood of Christ," the cup was increasingly denied them. The people's own superstitious fear of the elements of the Mass kept more and more of them from communing at all, so that in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that the faithful must commune at least once a year, even if it were a frightful thing for them to do, but in bread only. The meal which was at the beginning of the church's life a celebration of thanksgiving for God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ had come to be seen as a sacrifice through which those who participated hoped to gain God's forgiveness and grace.

REFORMATION

At the time of the 16th century Reformation of the church, both principal reformers—

Martin Luther and John Calvin—sought to restore to the church's worship the reading and proclamation of the Word and the full participation of the people in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Luther was more successful in his efforts than Calvin. As far as the celebration of the Eucharist was concerned, while the people of Calvin's Geneva eagerly embraced preaching each weekday and in the Lord's Day service, the idea of a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper by people who were accustomed to observing it as rarely as once a year was too much to accept. The leaders of the church in Geneva agreed to four celebrations annually: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Harvest-tide. So began in most Presbyterian and Reformed Churches the practice of the quarterly celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the latter part of the twentieth century, many Reformed and Presbyterian churches began to move to a more frequent celebration—some with a monthly observance, a few with an alternate early morning weekly Eucharistic service. The liturgical renewal in the church led us to rediscover both the practice of the early church and our own Reformed emphasis upon the two-fold foundation of Christian worship—Word and Sacrament.

THE MEANING

In this sacrament we remember and give thanks for Christ's suffering and death upon the cross for the redemption of the world. The *Second Helvetic Confession* states: "By this sacred rite the Lord wishes to keep in fresh remembrance that greatest benefit which he showed to mortal men, namely, that by having given his body and shed his blood he has pardoned all our sins, and redeemed us from eternal death and the power of the devil." But this

is more than a mere memorial. The confession also assures us that in the Supper the Lord “now feeds us with his flesh, and gives us his blood to drink, which, being received spiritually by true faith, nourish us to eternal life.” The bread and wine, however, do not change in substance. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* explains it this way: “There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.” While the bread and the wine of communion do not become anything other than bread and wine, by the work of the Holy Spirit as they are received in faith, they become for us a spiritual feeding upon the very life of Christ. We are drawn into a communion with the living Christ that reaches beyond the power of words alone to describe. Ultimately this is mystery—simple bread and wine, and yet more, much more. This is the food and drink that “nourish us to eternal life.” As the water of baptism marks the beginning of the journey of Christian life and discipleship, the bread and wine of Holy Communion are the food and drink that sustain us on the journey. Without it our souls are impoverished and our life diminished.

The Lord’s Supper is also an expression of our faith in the fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth. St. Paul reminds us: “As long as you eat this bread and drink this cup you show forth the Lord’s death until he comes again.” What God has begun in Jesus Christ, God will bring to completion. Our *Directory for Worship* tells us: “Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s presence, the Church eagerly expects and prays for the day when Christ shall come in glory and God be all in

all. Nourished by this hope, the Church rises from the Table and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission to the world, to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace until Christ’s Kingdom shall come at last.”

Holy Communion is not only a communion with Christ, but also a communion with one another. We share the bread and the cup *together*. The sacrament is never an individual act, but always an act of the whole community. Even when celebrated with the homebound or hospitalized, an elder is present as the representative of the whole people of God. Through this communion our life together is strengthened and our shared hope in Christ renewed.

All who are baptized are invited to participate in the Sacrament. From the earliest days of the church’s life, only the baptized have been permitted to partake of the Eucharistic meal, for baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into the body of Christ. But *all* the baptized were and are included: young and old, infants and infirm. We come not as people who have it all together, but as people who know they do not. We come not as people who are sufficient unto themselves, but as people who acknowledge their need for God’s grace and love in Jesus Christ. “Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God’s love and grace in Christ Jesus.” (*The Directory for Worship*)

The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper

