

Communion

Lesson 6

I. Historical Development

- a. There are **various** names which Christian denominations apply to Communion or the Lord's Supper. In addition to those two, it is also known as "the Mass, "Holy Communion," and, in Eastern churches, the "Divine Liturgy."
- b. The word which applies specifically to Communion, and is often used is the word "Eucharist". This comes from the Greek *eucharistia*, meaning "**thanksgiving**."
- c. During the first century, **two** services were held on the first day of the week. That day was adopted as a day of worship because it was the day on which Christ rose from the dead. *Acts 20:7 And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight. KJV*
- d. The morning service most likely **included** the reading of Scripture, exhortation by the leading elder, prayers, and singing, *Col 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. KJV*
- e. During the evening service, (the second service of the day), the **love feast** preceded Communion. *1 Cor 11:20-22 When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! NIV*
- f. Historical records reveal that by the end of the first century the love feast was generally **dropped** and the Communion was celebrated during the morning service of worship.
- g. In the middle part of the second century, according to Justin Martyr and the **Didache**, Sunday worship services included the writings of the prophets, and exhortation given by the president, Congregational prayer, followed by the Lord's supper.
- h. The elements of bread and water and wine were dedicated by Thanksgiving and prayers to which the people responded by an Amen. The deacons then distributed the elements **to the homes** of those unable to be present at the meeting.
- i. The activities of the worship day ended by taking up a **collection** for aid to widows and orphans, the sick, prisoners, and strangers. The meeting was then dismissed and all the people made their way to their homes
- j. Between 100 A.D. and 313 A.D. the church faced an external problem of persecution from the Roman state. Consequently, worship services were held in secrecy and were widely **misunderstood** by the non-Christian community.
- k. When outsiders heard about "eating and drinking" of the elements representing Christ's body and blood, this easily lead to the rumor that Christians killed and ate infants in sacrifice to their God. It was commonly believed that Christians were guilty of incest, **cannibalism**, and unnatural practices.
- l. Over the centuries, as Christianity spread, Communion has been an almost universally practiced ritual throughout the Church, this **sacrament** or ordinance has taken various forms among different denominations.

II. Denominational Distinctions

- a. The controversy regarding the nature of Christ's presence in the Communion gradually caused strenuous debate within the Western church early in the **ninth** century.
- b. Some were concerned that any acceptance of the idea of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice by the **priest** would be viewed as a gain for the power of the Papacy.
- c. This was due to the fact that the Pope headed the hierarchy of clergymen, who **alone** had the authority to perform this miracle of the Mass during which they sanctified the elements, transforming them into the real body and blood of Christ
- d. About **831AD** a priest by the name of Radbertus, living near the city of Amiens, began to teach that by a divine miracle, the substance of bread and the wine were actually changed into the body and blood of Christ.
- e. Although he did not call this change **transubstantiation**, his teaching amounted to the same thing. He formally published these ideas in 831 in a book entitled: "*The Body and Blood of the Lord.*"
- f. Although the Roman church embraced this understanding, they did not officially accept the doctrine of transubstantiation until **1215**. Even so, they did not fully define the term until the Council of Trent in 1545.
- g. The seeds of schism were gradually springing up in various pockets of the church over the controversy of the Eucharist. The question centered on the precise nature of the **presence** of Jesus in the Eucharist.
- h. Debate focused on the extent to which the body and blood of Christ were actually present in, as opposed to **symbolically** represented by the consecrated elements.

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- i. By the 13th century, the doctrine of "transubstantiation" became the dominant **Roman Catholic** teaching. The consecration of the elements, according to this doctrine, effects a change in the "substance" of the bread and wine, while the "accidents" (the outward appearance of the elements) remains the same.
- j. This doctrine was developed in detail in the writings of the great medieval theologian, St. Thomas **Aquinas**. Since the Council of Trent (1562), the Mass has been viewed as a Eucharistic sacrifice.
- k. Mass is celebrated every Sunday and on major feast days. Generally, only **baptized** Catholics receive the Sacrament, and every Catholic is expected to receive it at least once each year.
- l. **Eastern Orthodox Churches** refer to the seven sacraments as **mysteries**, and the Eucharist is referred to as the Divine Liturgy. A greater emphasis is placed on the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the elements than among Roman Catholics.
- m. In the Eastern tradition the communicant (the individual receiving Communion) receives a piece of **consecrated**, leavened bread in a spoonful of consecrated wine.
- n. **After** the prayer of consecration, the elements are believed to have become the body and blood of Christ, but how this happens is considered a mystery. Communicants are expected to receive the Sacrament at least four times each year.
- o. Among Protestant groups, the Anglicans (usually called Episcopalians in North America) and Lutherans most closely **resemble** Catholics in Eucharistic theology and practice.
- p. **Episcopalians** refer to the Eucharist as *thanksgiving*. Bread and wine are used, and Christ's presence is affirmed but not **explained**. Communion is received every Sunday, usually by both children and adults.
- q. Since the sixteenth century, **Lutheran** churches have affirmed the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, a doctrine known as **consubstantiation**.
- r. In other words, after the consecration, *both* the bread and wine *and* the Body and Blood of Christ **coexist**. Among Lutherans, emphasis is placed on Holy Communion providing a remission of sins.
- s. Among Lutherans, the ritual is celebrated on the first Sunday of the month, and **children** generally do not receive Communion.
- t. **Presbyterian, Congregational, and Reformed Churches** follow the teachings of John Calvin, who taught a "real but **spiritual** presence" of the living Christ in the Eucharist.
- u. That presence, however, was to be located more in the **sacramental** action than in the elements, which according to Calvin are not transformed.
- v. Through the ritual action, the power or virtue of the Body and Blood of Christ is transferred to believers, a doctrine that became known as **virtualism**.
- w. The Reformer Huldrych **Zwingli** went even further away from the Roman tradition than Calvin, and insisted that the Lord's Supper was primarily a memorial rite.
- x. For these Calvin-influenced churches, Christ's body remains in heaven during the Lord's Supper, but his **Spirit** is in the meal, and the faithful communicant receives Christ spiritually. Most celebrate Communion monthly.
- y. **Methodist and Baptist Churches** commonly refer to the Eucharist as the Lord's Supper and consider it a **memorial** that commemorates Jesus' death and sacrifice.
- z. Recently some Methodists and Baptists have moved toward a more **sacramental** interpretation of the Eucharist. The elements of bread and grape juice are used.
- aa. **Restorationist churches** (incl. Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ), like Baptists, view the meal **primarily** as a memorial of Christ's death. The Lord's Supper is celebrated weekly with bread and grape juice.
- bb. Latter-day Saints (**Mormons**) refer to the meal primarily as "the Sacrament" and celebrate the meal every Sunday. Bread and water are distributed to church members in their pews.
- cc. Among the denominations who do not celebrate the Eucharist are the Society of Friends (**Quakers**) and the **Salvation Army**.

III. Application

- a. Christian denominations vary widely in their understanding of Communion. From the continuum below, where would you place your personal belief regarding the presence of Christ in Communion?

