

# We believe...

THE CREED OF THE NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH

**APRIL 2020**

**Session 1: Holy Communion**

**Session 2: On the night of His betrayal**

**Session 3: Finding forgiveness**

**Session 4: The meals of Holy Communion**

## Session 1 – The Creed: Holy Communion

Welcome! This month, in connection with Holy Week, we will be taking a deeper look at the seventh article of our Creed, which deals with the sacrament of Holy Communion. It reads:

**I believe that Holy Communion was instituted by the Lord Himself in memory of the once brought, fully valid sacrifice, and bitter suffering and death of Christ. The worthy partaking of Holy Communion establishes our fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord. It is celebrated with unleavened bread and wine; both must be consecrated and dispensed by a minister authorized by an Apostle.**

In this statement of faith, we are immediately drawn to Jesus Christ. He instituted this sacrament so that His disciples could have fellowship with Him, not only in the moments before His death, but also for all believers throughout time that desire to be in communion with Him.

It is only because of Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross that this sacrament has meaning. He established Holy Communion during Passover with His Apostles. Like the Passover feast, in which a lamb was sacrificed in order to commemorate the Israelites' liberation from Egyptian slavery, Holy Communion commemorates our liberation from sin. The Jewish people offered continual sacrifices to God; however, Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross was given once and lasts for all time. In our celebration of Holy Communion, we are not only reminded that His body and blood atones for our sin, but we want to experience His sacrifice and victory over death every time we approach the altar. 1 John 3 reminds us of what Christ came to do – *For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil* (1 John 3:8). With His victory over evil, our communion with Christ gives us strength to also fight against the works of the evil one.

Out of love for our Savior and all that He has done for us, we want to partake of Holy Communion worthily. While we can never be considered worthy of the perfect sacrifice of Christ as sinful human beings, we believe that we should be in a "clean" state before we have such close fellowship with Jesus Christ. This means that we prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacrament. Let's look at Paul's words to the Corinthians as guidance: *Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup* (1 Corinthians 11:27-28). Throughout the week leading to the moment of communion, we reflect on our actions and words, and repent for our sins. With a repentant heart and the grace of God, we are assured that our sins have been forgiven, which we will discuss in a later session this month. Through our faith in Christ and His sacrifice for our sins, we believe that this state of forgiveness prepares us to be in fellowship with Him. And though we are still sinful human beings challenged by temptation and prone to sin after we are forgiven, Holy Communion gives us the strength and desire to continue to do better and align ourselves to God's will.

The unleavened bread and wine present in the communion wafer are a visible element of the real presence of Christ, as the words of the consecration join His body and blood to these natural elements. Bread and wine represent the sustenance that humans need to live, and for God's promised people, wine also is a symbol of joy and future salvation. By consecrating the communion wafer, bread and wine are set apart as something much more sacred than just providing for our physical life. Our celebration of Holy Communion, dispensed by a minister who ultimately has his authority through Jesus Christ, becomes a declaration that Christ has provided for our spiritual sustenance. And our proclamation of His death and future return expresses our desire and belief that we will experience eternal life with Him.

Holy Communion is a time of intimate fellowship with Christ, where, in His presence, we recognize His desire for all believers, as He once prayed, *And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me* (John 17:22-23).

## Session 2 – On the night of His betrayal

In this session, we'll continue examining the seventh Article of Faith, concentrating our discussion on an important point about the night when Holy Communion was instituted.

In our seventh article, we profess that Holy Communion was instituted by the Lord Himself, so that we would remember His sacrifice. Remembrance of His sacrifice alone silences our soul so that we are no longer distracted by the noise of life. Being distracted from the true meaning of Holy Communion is why we find Paul writing to the early Christian believers in Corinth – to teach and correct so they could participate in the Lord's Supper worthily. It is in 1 Corinthians that we can read this very important aspect about the night the Lord Jesus instituted Holy Communion.

The Corinthians were using their gatherings around the Lord's Table as an opportunity to make social distinctions between the wealthy and the poor. Their lack of understanding stole the attention away from the sacrificial death of Christ. Paul writes the following to reset the focus of the believers: *For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread...* (1 Corinthians 11:23). The Apostle provides two very important points. First, the celebration of Holy Communion was given to the church directly by the Lord Jesus, which corresponds to what we profess in our seventh article. Why is Holy Communion so important and vital for disciples of Jesus? Because He instituted it! He is Lord! The historical Jesus, who is God, created this spiritual meal for His people. We need to hold sacred and value more and more all that the Lord Jesus has given us. Second, the Apostle writes a very important statement about the night when this meal was celebrated for the first time. It was the night, and in this night, Jesus was betrayed; it's a jarring point that adds a deeper gravity to the sacrament.

Jesus didn't institute Holy Communion on just any night. We receive from Paul's writing the context of when this event occurred. Today, we benefit from having the entire New Testament available to us. However, at the time when Paul wrote this letter, the Gospels were yet to be written. Because of this, the believers in Corinth relied on the words of God's messengers to provide them with clarity and truth about the events of Jesus' life. Today, we can read the Gospels and learn about the night and the betrayal that Paul makes mention of. Jesus gathered together with the twelve disciples, including Judas, to share the Passover meal. Before they all settled into that place, the Gospel writers tell us that *Satan entered Judas* (Luke 22:3), and he sought out the chief priests to devise a way to betray His teacher and friend. In John's Gospel, Judas was portrayed as a thief (John 12:6). And, when the chief priest offered him 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave at that time, Judas, distracted by his love for money, made the plan to betray Jesus.

The fact that Jesus was going to be betrayed by one of His disciples wasn't unknown to Jesus. In John's Gospel, while eating together, Jesus identifies Judas as His betrayer – *When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me." Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke... "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it." And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon* (John 13:21-26). John then tells us that, *receiving the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night* (v. 30). Startling, isn't it? There was a darkness surrounding Jesus at this critical time of His life. Someone so close to the Lord Jesus, who journeyed with Him from place to place, witnessed the miracles, heard His teaching, was trusted to handle the money, was loved by His teacher, and sat in a place of honor at the table, was willing to betray Him and chose to do so. Many of us know the heartache that comes from being betrayed by someone close to us. It is often life-shattering and plan-altering. Yet, Jesus continues to move forward with God's plan of redemption.

The fact that Jesus was betrayed cannot be separated from the story of the Passion of Christ. It's a part of the gospel. We cannot disconnect our remembrance of Jesus Christ from the tense and unsettling reality of the moment when He instituted this meal. It should never be lost on us what our Lord Jesus experienced during these final hours of His earthly life. His betrayal led to His trial, which led to His crucifixion. In the darkness of night, He was abandoned by those closest to Him, and yet, out of love for humanity, He completed His work on the cross so that those who are lost and wandering in the despair of the darkness can find the light.

We believe that the Lord Jesus instituted Holy Communion *on the night of His betrayal*. When the truth of that statement settles in our soul, we will come to the Lord's table with deep reverence and love for Jesus Christ.

### Session 3 – Forgiveness

Welcome back! Over the last two sessions, we have discussed our beliefs about the sacrament of Holy Communion. But how do we prepare ourselves for this meal with Jesus, our Redeemer? We do this through repentance and forgiveness, which will be the topic of our discussion today.

Repentance starts with **awareness**. We must be aware of and reflect on our sinful actions and thoughts, but a deeper recognition must take place: that we are perpetually sinful beings. Realizing how far we actually are from God allows us to take steps to move closer to Him. We are often running in the wrong direction and need to turn back. Awareness leads to **remorse**. Our broken relationship with God brings us grief and sadness, especially when compared to the goodness and love that He offers. As we experience this inner turmoil and pain, we **confess** our sins to God. Apostle John reminds us that *if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9). This is a prayer that we can practice daily, continually exposing our souls to God in confession and finally asking for His forgiveness and His strength to help us in our **resolve** to change. Having received forgiveness ourselves prompts us to go down the path of forgiveness and **reconciliation** with our brother, sister, or neighbor, and as we pray together in the Lord's Prayer, *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*. Cultivating a repentant heart towards God and seeking His forgiveness are not things that only happen on Sunday; rather, we should wrestle daily, in thought, in prayer, and in reconciling conversations with those we love.

Recognizing that God forgives our sins when we approach Him in repentance, remorse, and confession – let's explore the purpose and importance of the absolution that we hear every Sunday. In the divine service, before the sacrament of Holy Communion, we hear these words, known as the absolution: *I proclaim unto you the glad tidings: in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, your sins are forgiven. The peace of the Risen One abide with you. Amen.*

These words are the *assurance* of God's forgiveness – they remind us of His willingness to give us a fresh start by the merit of Christ's sacrifice, and the promise that the Lord loves us and accepts us, no matter how many times we fail. Jesus is the One who forgives our sins, not the minister. But the opportunity to hear those words spoken to us is something that we cannot take for granted, for these are comforting words to a repentant sinner.

Let me use two familiar characters to illustrate: Peter and Judas. As we are fresh from experiencing Good Friday and Easter, let us again delve into their stories. Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of the soldiers, which led to His arrest and crucifixion. While Jesus was being tried and beaten, Peter denied knowing Him three times.

Peter denied Jesus, yet experienced the joy and life of Easter. Judas betrayed Jesus, but chose death in a field, alone (Matthew 27:3-10). Both were remorseful: we read in the gospels that after his denial, Peter wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75 / Luke 22:54-62), and Judas was filled with remorse. However, Judas did not get to see the wounds of the resurrected Jesus, or hear Him say, "Peace be unto you" in the presence of the disciples, or eat breakfast with Him on the shore, or experience the joy and wonder of Pentecost. Judas is known as the villain of the story, while Peter became the rock on which the church was built. What is the difference between Judas and Peter? Peter repented and turned back to the circle of the disciples. Judas regretted his actions and fled.

In isolation, Judas could not experience the grace of God. Ashamed, he withdrew from the community in which he could hear and experience words of forgiveness.

He could not create for himself God's word of grace, and neither can we. We need to hear it said over us, like a balm on our brokenness. As Paul says, faith comes through hearing (Romans 10:17), and in order for us to believe that we are forgiven, we need someone to say it to us. And this is what Jesus gave His apostles the authority to do – to proclaim forgiveness, to preach forgiveness in His name.

It's through hearing that we are assured of forgiveness, love, and the peace of Christ. By accepting those words, we can prepare ourselves to have communion with Jesus Christ, our Savior.

## Session 4 – Meals of Holy Communion

Welcome to our last small group session for the month of April. We're going to finish our discussion on the various aspects of the seventh article and Holy Communion by exploring the meals we are celebrating when we come to the Lord's table.

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).* This was quite a provocative statement! What could Jesus mean by it? Jesus was evoking two references from the Hebrew Scriptures, which His Jewish listeners would have recognized. The first was the miracle of manna, the bread sent from heaven, which God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16). The second is found in Deuteronomy, embedded in the giving of the Mosaic Law, where Moses reminds the people of God's provision for them in the wilderness, which was a lesson for them – ...*that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:3).*

Jesus takes this imagery one step further when He continues to explain this statement to His disciples, as we read in John: *I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead... I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world... unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you...* (John 6:48-49, 51, 53).

What does Jesus mean by this? What is happening when we eat the wafer during Holy Communion?

We believe that during the consecration, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ is invisibly joined together with the bread and wine. When we eat the wafer, we are sharing in the life of Christ, just as He explained to His disciples, *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him (John 6:56).* Through the sacrament of Holy Communion, which Jesus established with His disciples (Matthew 26:26-28), He shares His life with us, giving strength and power to the new life we received at our baptism and sealing, transforming us more and more into the nature of Christ.

As we celebrate Holy Communion we look to the past in remembrance, we look outward in profession, we look around us in fellowship, and we look toward the future, always giving thanks for God's provision. Let's explore these different perspectives a little further.

Holy Communion is a **meal of remembrance**, as it commemorates the death of Jesus Christ, who through His sacrifice freed us from sin (John 8:34-36) and redeemed our relationship with God. Even as He instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus encouraged His followers to *do this in remembrance of Me (Luke 22:19).* This remembrance extends beyond Jesus' suffering and death, to His resurrection and ascension, and gives us certainty of His presence in our lives and the coming of His future kingdom.

Holy Communion is a **meal of profession**, which is made clear from the words that we hear: *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).* We profess belief in the death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ; these are foundational statements to our Christian faith. And we also profess belief in the activity and authority of the apostle ministry, which was established by Jesus Christ, and with whom He instituted Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is a **meal of fellowship** in three unique ways:

1. First, Christ shares communion with His Apostles, repeating the original circumstances of the establishment of the Lord's Supper.
2. Second, Christ has fellowship with believers who partake worthily for their salvation.
3. And finally, the believers gathered in the divine service also have fellowship with one another.

This is a great wonder! Jesus Christ brings unity among us by gathering all of us to Himself. Only if we are one in Christ can we achieve true oneness amongst one another.

Holy Communion is an **eschatological meal**, a meal pointing to the future and foreshadowing the marriage feast in heaven. In Jesus Christ, this future kingdom has drawn near to us. In accordance with His statement: *I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes* (Luke 22:18), we, as the congregation joined in Holy Communion, await His return and the fulfillment of this promise. Until He comes, we experience the most intimate fellowship with Jesus when we are joined together in Holy Communion.

Finally, Holy Communion is a celebration of thanksgiving! We give thanks for the forgiveness of our sins, made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We give thanks before we commune with Christ, just as He established in the first Lord's Supper, *...Jesus took bread, [gave thanks for] and broke it... then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them...* (Matthew 26:27). We are especially thankful that our Father in heaven has given us this celebration, and the faith to believe and follow Jesus Christ, because as He explained to His disciples – *He who eats this bread will live forever* (John 6:58).