

The Significance of Communion

Overview of Contents

Background for Sharing Communion at Rangeville Community Church

Position Statement on Communion

Looking Back to remember Jesus' Life and Death with Gratitude

Celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus through the sharing of Communion

Looking Forward

How to share Communion with a Family, Gathering or Life Group

How to share Communion as an Individual

Background for Sharing Communion at Rangeville Community Church

Communion is a one of two sacraments that we celebrate at Rangeville Community Church, the other being baptism. Typically, we celebrate communion in our church services on the first Sunday of each month and this is the most common place where communion is shared. We also acknowledge the great value for individuals and/or smaller gatherings to celebrate communion, provided this is done with sincerity and sacredness. To this end, we have encouraged and trained Life Group Leaders and Ministry Leaders to be able to lead communion. Due to COVID-19, communion cannot be shared in our services in the way that we have in the past. Therefore, for this season, we are encouraging Life Groups, Families and small gatherings to meet together and share communion on a regular basis. The information that follows is intended to answer questions that you might have regarding communion and how to lead if you choose to do so.

Rangeville Community Church has the following Position Statement on Communion:

In the Sacrament of Communion we look back and remember Jesus' life and death with gratitude. Together we celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus through the sharing of Communion in which the bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ. Communion is a means of grace whereby we receive His presence in a special way. It requires us to examine ourselves before we receive communion and to come expectantly around the Father's table. We are reminded of our unity in Christ and our need to maintain that unity with each other. Jesus commands us to do this until He comes again and we therefore look forward to His second coming as King.

Looking Back to remembers Jesus' Life and Death with Gratitude

When Israel was in Egypt, God used a series of ten plagues to show the Egyptians that He was greater than their gods and that the Egyptians needed to let God's people go free from the slavery they were in. In Exodus 12, we can read about the last of these ten plagues. God asked the Israelites to take a lamb without defect or blemish, to slaughter it and then to take some of its blood and put it on the doorframes of their houses. That blood of the lamb became a sign of God's protection over that house and all who were in it had their lives saved, while those who were not covered by the blood of the lambs suffered the death and loss of their first-born sons. It was through this last dramatic and horrific plague that the Israelites were set free from bondage and slavery in Egypt and free to start their journey to a new land, a promised land, a land filled with God's blessings for a new and better way of life.

This night became known as the Passover and we often consider this more extensively over the time of Easter. There are three key elements included in the sharing of a Passover - a lamb, the Matzah (or unleavened bread) and wine. These will be considered below.

The Lamb

Once the Israelites left Egypt, the Lord gave them the Law of the Old Testament, showing them how to live a holy life and how to receive forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of animals. In Exodus 24, we read about Moses:

⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." ⁸ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

A biblical covenant is a blend of love and law. It is an agreement that is binding and enduring, but rather than being based on consequences for breaking the law, it is based on upholding the covenant out of love for both parties. Each party loves and wants the best for the other. The people of God failed to uphold this covenant, yet already God had planned a new covenant, a better way, a permanent way that would bring forgiveness, without the need for animal sacrifice. It would involve a much greater sacrifice, a much more expensive and painful sacrifice. It would be the sacrifice of his own son, Jesus Christ.

When Jesus was commencing his earthly ministry, he came to be baptised by John the Baptist. When John saw him, he called out:
John 1:29b *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*

From this, it is evident that at the start of Jesus' ministry, he is identified as a lamb, a lamb without defect or blemish that would be used as a sacrifice to take away the sin of the world.

Then moving forward three years, towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, on the night before he is destined to die, what was he doing? He was sharing with his disciples in this very significant traditional Passover meal. But this time there was a difference. This time, Jesus departed from the traditional text and format. He knew the text, but he changed it. He changed it to transform it from a Passover Meal that was used to teach the people of the love of God that had taken them from a life of slavery and the power of the blood of a lamb without defect to save their lives. This time it was different. He used it to teach them that soon he would be that Passover Lamb that would be sacrificed. It would be his blood that would be shed and it would be his blood that would cover over the sins of the people to bring forgiveness. It would be his blood that would take people from the Old Covenant described in Exodus 24 into a New Covenant of life in Christ.

That night was the last Passover under the Old Covenant and became the first Communion of the New Covenant. So what happened on that night?

Matthew 26

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and

gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Remember the key elements of the Passover were the lamb, the matzah and the wine. We have now seen Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The Bread (Matzah)

In John 6:48, Jesus says: *I am the bread of life.*

Jesus makes it clear that he is the bread and is being given for the life of the world. Furthermore, Jesus is alluding to the fact that the bread used in the Passover is bread without yeast as yeast is an analogy of sin (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Jesus is the bread of life that is without sin. The life of Jesus was perfect, without sin.

In Matt 26: we read:

Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it away, saying "Take and eat; this is my body."

The Wine

The third key part of the Passover was the wine.

²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27,28)

In saying this, Jesus is relating this new covenant in his blood, back to Exodus 24:8

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Now Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus is stating that his blood is fulfilling a new covenant of forgiveness and hence relationship with God that is available to us.

Jesus is acknowledging that he is the Passover Lamb that will die. It will be his blood that will be shed. Just as the blood of the Passover Lamb placed on the doorframes brought the Israelites their life and ultimately freedom from slavery to start a journey into the promised land, the blood of Jesus brought forgiveness of our sins. With the forgiveness of our sins, it brings us life, freedom from slavery to sin and a journey into the Kingdom of God. It restores us back into relationship with God. No longer do we live under the Old Covenant that Moses spoke of. Rather the shedding of the blood of Jesus ushered in the New Covenant of forgiveness of our sins and gives us life as children of God, our loving Father.

What happened on that night? As shown earlier, that night was the last Passover under the Old Covenant and became the first Communion of the New Covenant. The death and resurrection of Jesus brought the forgiveness of our sins and gave us life as the children of God, our loving Father.

What does this mean for us today?

Celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus through the sharing of Communion

When we share communion, we need to consider a number of points. We look back and remember the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We remember that the bread and wine, or juice as we use, represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ, just as Jesus described to his disciples at the Last Supper. So what do we do when we share communion?

Firstly, we need to understand that communion is be shared among believers. 1 Corinthians 11 is a key passage to help us understand communion and our position and role in it.

²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

This makes it clear that when you partake in communion, you are proclaiming the Lord's death. You are acknowledging the death of Jesus and you are acknowledging that he will return again. Clearly, only a Christian can make that proclamation and therefore communion should be shared among Christians only. Therefore, we make it available to those who know and love the Lord.

Next, we need to prepare ourselves for sharing in communion.

²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

We are called to examine ourselves. We are called to check ourselves before God and we are to confess our sins before God. We are to ask God for forgiveness of our sins and have our hearts right before God, prior to sharing in the bread and juice. We are not to enter into communion lightly or frivolously, but with preparation of our hearts. Communion is a means of grace, where we come with expectation to meet with God. We believe that communion is a time of coming to receive and participate in all that Jesus did for us as he died on the cross, and as he gave himself, his body and his blood, for us.

We believe that we experience the presence of God in a very special way. It is more than receiving a physical piece of bread and cup of juice. When we eat and drink our taste buds recognise it as bread and juice, but spiritually, we also receive and are fed. We are also participating in a celebratory meal of the new covenant relationship with God. We are giving physical expression to our faith and allegiance to God and of God's faithfulness to us. We receive more than the physical food. We join in the healing of relationships between us and God and us and each other. We come together in unity.

Communion reminds us of 1 Corinthians 10:17 that

¹⁷Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

We come together as the family around the Father's table. We are in unity, together in covenant relationship with our loving Father, our Heavenly Dad, who calls us to share around the table - that was his idea. That started through the model of the Passover, and was fulfilled

through the death and resurrection of Jesus, giving us freedom from sin and life for eternity with him.

And while it is for us as a family to share together in unity, it is also personal. In Luke's gospel, as he tells of the Last Supper, he says in Luke 22: This is my body given for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Communion is a very special time of remembering that Jesus died "for you". It is a personal time of acknowledging that Jesus died for you. "You" are part of the covenant as well. A covenant is a two-way agreement. It is an agreement in faith for what God has done as an act of grace to save you from slavery to sin and grant you eternal life. It is an act of faith on your behalf to receive his grace and ask for forgiveness of your sins and receive the healing that he offers to you in every area of your life.

Looking Forward

Finally, communion is forward looking. Communion is not just about the past of what Jesus has done. It is not just about the present of what God is doing in your life through forgiveness of sins and restoring relationship with God. It is also about the future. It is proclaiming, it is declaring that Jesus will come again.

1 Cor 11 says:

²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

You are acknowledging that you believe that Jesus will come again and you will continue to proclaim his life and power until he comes again. Until he comes again and takes you to share with him in the wedding supper of the Lamb described in Revelation 19:9.

When we share communion, it is infinitely rich in meaning and purpose. It is a commemoration, a celebration and a proclamation. Each time you share in communion, prepare yourself through prayers of confession and seeking forgiveness. Come with expectation that Christ will be revealed to you in a special way, to give you life and show you again the love of a Father who gave his own Son for you. Come knowing that communion is special to each of us individually, but when we come together in communion, it is a time of unity and corporate declaration of who Jesus is, what he has done and what he will do.

How to Share Communion with a Family, Gathering or Life Group

1. Prepare yourself as a leader. Spend time in prayer asking the Lord to prepare you to lead communion. Ask Him how he wants you to lead communion. Ensure that there is no known sin in your own life.

2. Prepare how you will introduce communion if leading others in this time.

Ensure that you lead others in a time of confession and asking for forgiveness of their sins. Because 1 Cor 11 says:

²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.

²⁹For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Consider if you will use other aids or ways to prepare people for communion. Options include a message, a devotion, music or song, a clip or an action that people can participate in.

3. We choose to set apart the elements from common use for this special purpose. There are many different liturgies available for leading communion, ranging from extensive to quite short. Typically at Rangeville, we lead from the Scriptures in Matthew 26 or 1 Corinthians 11.

Communion based on 1 Corinthians 11

Today we set apart this bread and grape juice from common use.

Just as “the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said **“This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”**

After supper he took the cup saying **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood: do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”**

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Father God, we thank you for this bread and grape juice as the body of the Lord Jesus Christ which was given for us, and the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for us.

I invite you to participate in the Lord’s Supper. The invitation is open to anyone who loves the Lord and we welcome you to join with us.

All is prepared, so come and eat and drink of the Lord’s supper.

4. Distribution of bread and juice.

This can follow two different formats although in the current COVID-19 times, only option a is COVID-19 safe for groups other than a household.

- a. Use pieces of bread cut into small pieces and separate cups. In relation to the bread, also provide a gluten free alternative that does not make contact with the bread. These must be prepared hygienically to minimise the risk of any infection.

To be COVID-19 safe, have the pieces of bread provided on separate plates, possibly with the cups on each plate as well so there is no sharing from a common plate which can cause cross contamination.

- b. Intinction – use a whole loaf that is broken and those receiving communion come and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the cup. Again, also provide a gluten free alternative that does not make contact with the bread.

Advantages of this are that some people find it very meaningful to break the bread and dip it in the juice.

If using intinction:

- ensure that if it is a larger group of people receiving communion, that you have additional cups of juice (otherwise the juice can become quite “contaminated” with lots of bread crumbs etc. This is about hygiene).

- Also be aware of the possible need to have a second cup (gluten free) that bread has not been dipped in so that people with gluten intolerance can use that cup.

5. What to say:

The elements of bread and juice can be provided on a table, spaced apart appropriately and people can come and collect these when they are ready.

Alternatively, the elements can be handed out to individuals:

As a distributor say:

- The body of our Lord Jesus Christ given for you (name)
- The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ shed for you (name)

It is very meaningful to be able to make it personal and speaking the person's name adds significantly to the meaning of receiving the elements. You may choose to speak different words, but with similar meaning, but seek to make it meaningful and personal

As a recipient, appropriate responses are: amen or thank you.

6. The Eating and Drinking of the Elements

It is good to advise when you would like people to ingest the elements. Options are:

- Eating it when personally ready. This allows time for personal reflection and for participants to take it once they have spent time preparing themselves. Secondly, this may be more practical, especially if holding younger children or if an older person has tremors.
- Eating it as a group. This may create a sense of community and unity.
 - It may be appropriate to allow people the option of 1 & 2 above.

7. Be sensitive to others.

Most people bring some background to their experience of sharing communion. That may arise from what they were taught or experienced at school, at other church or from a specific denominational or theological perspective. In a setting of a smaller group, it may be possible to share these different views and learn from one another.

This leads to the consideration of what to do with what is left over?

We encourage that the left overs are taken and used in a way that still gives life (e.g. someone may consume it, someone may take it home and give it to their birds, chooks, pets), rather than discarding it as rubbish.

In conclusion, it is important to be aware of the incredible privilege it is to lead others in communion. It is a privilege and joy. It can be an emotional time. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you and minister to you as you minister to others through leading communion. We trust that you will be richly blessed as you lead communion, along with those who you lead in this sacrament.

How to Share Communion as an Individual

Some Christians choose to take communion regularly, even daily.

As above, it is important to prepare by spending time in prayer asking the Lord to show you if there are particular areas of your life that He wants to focus on. It may be confession and forgiveness, it may be healing, encouragement or affirmation.

Focus on Scriptures that reveal Jesus Christ as your Saviour. Consider using 1 Corinthians 11 or Matthew 26 to guide you in the significance of the bread and juice.

Try to use this time to listen to what God is showing you or saying to you. Personal Communion can be extremely powerful times between yourself and God.

On a practical note, you can buy poppers of juice (for example, grape, cranberry or black currant) which can be opened and resealed so it can be used over several days.