



Teaching Your Child about Communion

How to help your child grow in the understanding of our practice of Communion

Introduction

Communion may go by many names, but it is one of the oldest traditions in the Christian faith. Some churches refer to this remembrance meal as the Lord's Supper. Other churches use the word "Eucharist," which comes from the Greek word *eucharistia*, meaning thanksgiving. Some Protestant churches refer to Communion and baptism as sacraments, which translates from the Latin word *sacramentum*, a sacred or holy act. Churches that see baptism and Communion as sacraments understand the acts as times when God offers the gift of unfailing grace or love to us. We must accept that love.

No matter what the name, this act of worship is important enough that you will want to discuss it openly with your child.

History of Communion

Three of the four Gospel writers tell us how bread and wine were used in a special way during the final meal Jesus had with his disciples at Passover (Matt. 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–23). After Jesus' death the disciples remembered this and used the

common bread and wine from a meal as a remembrance of Jesus. We use words from these three Gospels and from 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 when we celebrate Communion.

Although we celebrate it in different ways, Communion continues to bind us to Christ and to his tiny band of followers.

Communion actually has even deeper roots in the Jewish celebration of Passover. The Passover meal commemorates the time when Moses led the Israelites from Egypt, after each family had slain a lamb and put the blood of the lamb on their doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their homes. Jewish communities still celebrate the Passover in what they call a Seder meal. Some Christian churches prepare a Christian form of the Seder meal.

Many Communion services speak of Jesus as the slain sacrifice for our sins.

Part of the service usually asks us, in some way, to repent of our sins and live in a way that follows Jesus' example. One of the best definitions of sin is "any act that separates us from God."

As your children begin to understand the meaning of sin, you can point out this part of the Communion ritual.

Following the Scriptures, our rituals also speak of bread as the body of Jesus and the wine (or juice) as his blood. Needless to say, as children grow old enough to understand these words, we should clarify the language so that they realize that the elements are not actually blood and body, but wine (or juice) and bread. The information in the appendix titled "Discussing This Topic with Your Child" following this essay will help you with this.

Differences, but One

The early church made Communion the center of its worship. Today, some churches practice Communion each Sunday. Others set aside one Sunday a month to take part in this holy meal, and some practice it only on specific occasions. Some churches offer Communion only to their members, and others practice “open Communion,” which means that all who seek to lead a Christian life are invited to join in this special meal.

In Jesus’ day wine was used as the common drink, since water was often contaminated. In concern for recovering alcoholics and children, many churches today use grape juice instead of wine. Most churches that use wine will have a separate cup for those with addiction problems. Churches may also have gluten-free bread available for those with allergies.

Some churches ask that children not receive Communion until they have been instructed about it. Other churches believe that it is important for children to feel a part of the church family during the service and receive the elements even before they can understand any of the ritual.

Although we celebrate it in different ways, Communion continues to bind us to Christ and to his tiny band of followers. The meal also binds us to each other, even with our differences.

There will come a time to talk about this special event in our Christian faith with your children, even if they have been taking part in it for some time. In fact, it is important to talk about Communion often with your child. None of us completely understand how the Holy Spirit works in us during Communion. In the first appendix to this essay you will find suggestions for conversation and experiences that

can be done as a family as you become more familiar with this special part of our Christian community. If you begin the conversations when children are young, it will be natural to continue this as they grow older.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 26:17–30

Mark 14:12–26

Luke 22:7–23

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Delia Halverson is a Christian education consultant and author of more than twenty books and numerous curriculum and articles in Christian education and Christian spirituality. She is also a workshop leader, retreat leader, and keynote speaker. Her Web site is www.deliah Alverson.com.

For More Information

Jeanne S. Fogle, *Signs of God’s Love: Baptism and Communion* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1984).

Delia Halverson, *How Do Our Children Grow?* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

Delia Halverson, *Side-by-Side: Families Learning and Living the Faith Together* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

Ralph Milton, *The Family Story Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

Touch the Water, Taste the Bread: Exploring the Sacraments with Children (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001)



Discussing This Topic with Your Child

Experiences for All Ages

- Make bread in your home. As you knead the bread and watch it rise, read Luke 13:20–21 and talk about how our love grows when we love others, just as the leaven or yeast grows in a warm place.
- Ask your pastor if you can make bread to be used in Communion.
- Arrange for your family to help prepare the Communion elements, or at least to look at the supplies used in the preparation.
- Talk about how important bread is to life and how important Jesus is to us. Remember how Jesus ate bread with his disciples at their last supper together.
- Look at pictures of wheat or visit a wheat field. Wheat has been cultivated for more than 10,000 years, originating in southwest Asia. It is the second most grown cereal crop, just behind corn and ahead of rice. Search on the Internet for wheat photos or go to <http://www.fotosearch.com/photos-images/wheat.html>. Check out this video Web site on wheat: <http://www.kansaswheat.org/videogallery.php?id=16>.
- Purchase grapes (or go to a vineyard and pick them) and make juice. You can use a juicer or blender, or simply press the grapes with a wooden spoon. The juicer or blender produces more juice. Talk about how grape juice looks like blood and how it helps us remember that Jesus suffered on the cross for us. You can also find pictures of vineyards on the Web site <http://www.fotosearch.com/photos-images/grape-vineyard.html>.
- Read John 8:1–11 and make a forgiveness stone. Print “First” on one side of the stone. Use the stone to help you remember that we are asked to first confess our sins to God when we take Communion.
- Make a bread cloth or place mats with Communion symbols (bread, wheat, grapes, chalice) to be used at your own table. Talk about the symbols during your meals.
- Prepare and use some of the ingredients that are used in a Christian Seder meal. Read or tell the story from Exodus 12 of how the Hebrews fled in the night. (The Web site <http://www.cresourcei.org/seder.html> suggests a Seder meal for a large group. You can use some of the suggestions you will find there.)
- Make unleavened bread similar to what was used for the Passover meal:
 - 1 cup whole wheat (graham) flour
 - 3 tablespoons oil
 - pinch of salt
 - enough water to make the dough pliable but not sticky
 - Combine the ingredients and knead about 10 or 15 times, adding a little flour as needed.
 - Divide the dough into four parts, rolling out each piece on a sheet of waxed paper until it is about one-eighth of an inch thick.
 - Using a fork, prick the bread.
 - Invert the bread into the palm of your hand and remove the waxed paper.
 - Place the bread pieces on cookie sheets.
 - Bake at 400 degrees until crisp but not brown (approximately 8 to 10 minutes).
- Make haroseth, which represents the mortar used by Jews in building palaces and pyramids of Egypt during their slavery: Pare several apples and leave some of the peel on. Finely dice the apples. Measure the diced apples and add about a third as much coarsely ground walnuts or pecans and an equal amount of raisins. Season with cinnamon, honey, and a little grapejuice.

With Young Children

- Remember special meals you have with members of your family and tell them that Communion is like a special meal we have with our church family.
- Explain that Communion is a time when we specially remember Jesus. To do this we share a meal together like the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. You need not refer to the death of Jesus at this point. The child has many years to grow in understanding that part of the Communion service.
- Tell the story of Jesus’ disciples preparing the place for the Last Supper and how they had a meal together. Talk

about how happy they must have been to be able to eat together.

- Say that Communion is a way of telling Jesus that we love him and we want to do as he told us to do.
- If your child will participate (or is participating) in Communion, explain the procedure that your church follows so that he or she does not feel awkward in it.

With Elementary Children and Youth

- Discuss Communion *before* and *after* you celebrate it at church.
- Read the stories from Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; and Luke 22:7–20, and ask: Where do we go for special meals with our family? How do you suppose the disciples felt when Jesus asked them to prepare the place for dinner? What might a disciple tell you if you asked him about this meal? What concerns might they have had, because they knew that Jerusalem was a place where he faced danger and that the authorities were trying to “trick” Jesus in order to arrest him?
- Elementary children can read the story “The Last Supper” from the book *The Family Story Bible* by Ralph Milton.
- Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 and locate the words in the Scripture that are common to your Communion ritual.
- Tell them to think of things they may have done that keep them from feeling close to God, and suggest that they ask God to forgive them for those sins as they take Communion. Assure them that God does indeed forgive us.
- Suggest that this is not only a time when we remember that Jesus came to earth to show us God’s love and to die for us, but eating the bread and drinking the cup as Jesus told us to helps us feel that we can be better persons because we know that God is a part of each of us.
- Explain that the bread and wine or grape juice are not actually the body and blood of Jesus, but a way for us to remember how Jesus’ body was broken and his blood was shed for us.
- In 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 we read Paul’s direction for our attitude in celebrating Communion. In the early church the Communion celebration was a part of a common meal, and some people were being gluttons, eating and drinking too much. They were paying little attention to persons who were poor, and Paul urges that they consider this celebration’s true importance before coming to the table.
- Recall that people all over the world celebrate Communion in different ways. The first Sunday in October is World Communion Sunday, when we celebrate as the worldwide family of Christ.
- To help your children realize that a meal includes more than simply eating, try this: For part of a meal send everyone with their food into different parts of the house with instructions not to speak to each other while eating. Come back together to finish your meal and talk about the difference between eating alone and with others. Help them realize that a meal includes not only the food but also the experience of sharing.

Reflection Questions for Parents

Take some time quietly by yourself to reflect on these questions.

- What special events in your life do you recall with traditions? How is Communion like family traditions? How is it different?
- When did you first take part in Communion? What are your memories of that time?
- When did you have a special experience with Communion?
- What meaning did Communion hold for you when you were young?
- What meaning does the service of Communion hold for you today?

Discussion Questions for a Group of Parents

- Has anyone in the group already explained Communion to their child? Share that experience with the group, if you are willing, and what you learned from it. How would you do it differently? What worked? What didn't work?
- How do other practices of Communion differ from that in your church?
- What other practices of Communion have you participated in?
- Have you ever taken part in a Seder meal?
- What experiences listed in this essay do you think you will use with your child?
- Are there experiences in this essay that you would like to share with another family? Make plans to do so.