THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNION IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT, EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, AND PRE-NICENE CHURCH FATHERS

A Comprehensive Theological and Historical Study

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I. INTRODUCTION

The practice of Communion, also known as the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, represents one of the most fundamental and enduring practices in Christian worship. What began as a final meal shared by Jesus Christ with his apostles on the eve of his crucifixion evolved into a central liturgical practice that defines Christian identity across numerous ecclesiastical traditions. Understanding the origins, theological significance, and historical development of Communion requires careful examination of the Greek New Testament sources, the lived practice of early Christian communities, and the theological reflection of the pre-Nicene Church Fathers.

This paper undertakes a systematic investigation of Communion across three primary domains: (1) the linguistic and theological concepts present in the Greek New Testament; (2) the documentary evidence for early Christian practice in the apostolic and sub-apostolic periods; and (3) the theological interpretations offered by patristic sources prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. Special attention will be given to the critical Greek texts, particularly the Nestle-Aland 28th edition (NA28) and the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament (UBS5), as well as the interpretive frameworks developed by early Church Fathers.

The significance of this investigation extends beyond historical curiosity. The doctrine and practice of Communion became one of the defining markers of Christian orthodoxy in the early centuries of the Church. The particular ways in which different Christian communities understood and practiced Communion—whether as memorial, as spiritual participation, as sacrificial act, or as mystical union—shaped ecclesiology, Christology, and soteriology in profound ways.

II. TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTS IN THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

A. The Greek Lexical Field

The Greek New Testament employs several key terms to describe the practice of Communion, each carrying distinct theological resonance:

Εὐχαριστία (eucharistia) – "thanksgiving."

This term appears in the accounts of the Last Supper and in Paul's extended treatment in 1 Corinthians 11:24 (εὐχαρίστησεν, "he gave thanks"). The verb εὐχαριστέω emphasizes gratitude and the blessing invoked upon the bread and cup. This terminology reflects the Jewish berakah (blessing) tradition, where thanksgiving and blessing were inseparable concepts.

Κοινωνία (koinonia) – "fellowship" or "participation."

This term carries rich theological depth, denoting both horizontal fellowship among believers and vertical participation in divine realities. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul writes: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [κοινωνία] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing [κοινωνία] in the body of Christ?" (NRSV). This establishes the essential understanding that Communion involves real participation—whether understood physically, spiritually, or sacramentally—in Christ's body and blood.

Κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου (klassis tou artou) – "breaking of bread."

This phrase, appearing in Acts 2:42 and 20:7, describes the communal meal practice. The emphasis on "breaking" harks back to Jewish meal customs where the head of household would break bread. This nomenclature suggests that in earliest Christian practice, Communion was embedded within a fuller communal meal (the agape feast).

Δεῖπνον (deipnon) – "supper" or "meal."

The Last Supper is described as a δεῖπνον in the Gospels and Paul's account (1 Corinthians 11:20-25). This Greek term designates the evening meal, the most significant meal in Greco-Roman society, and thus carries cultural weight regarding the solemnity and communal significance of the occasion.

Μνημόσυνον (mnenosunon) – "memorial" or "remembrance."

Though less frequently employed, this term in 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 ("Do this in remembrance of me") points to the anamnetic (memorial) dimension of Communion. The Greek concept of anamnesis transcends mere psychological recollection; it invokes the real presence of past events in the present liturgical moment.

B. Theological Concepts Embedded in Terminology

The multiplicity of terms reflects the multivalent theological understanding of Communion in the New Testament. The New Testament presents Communion as simultaneously: (1) an act of thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία) to God for redemption; (2) participation (κοινωνία) in Christ's body and blood; (3) memorial (μνημόσυνον/ἀνάμνησις) of Christ's death, which makes present the eschatological promise; and (4) a communal meal (κλάσις/δεῖπνον) that constitutes and renews the gathered church. This semantic richness will persist throughout patristic interpretation.

III. THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS OF THE LAST SUPPER

A. Synoptic Accounts: Matthew, Mark, and Luke

The three Synoptic Gospels provide parallel accounts of Jesus's final meal with his disciples. Mark represents the earliest Gospel source, with Matthew and Luke dependent upon it. Mark 14:22-25 (NA28) presents: "And as they were eating, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.'" (ESV)

The narrative structure is consistent across all Synoptics: (1) Jesus takes bread; (2) he blesses (εὐλογέω) or gives thanks (εὐχαριστέω); (3) he breaks and distributes it; (4) he makes an interpretive statement ("This is my body"); (5) he takes a cup; (6) he gives thanks; (7) he gives it to them; (8) all drink; (9) he makes a statement about covenant blood poured out for many. This formulaic structure suggests early liturgical transmission.

The precise Greek terminology in Mark and Matthew employs λαμβάνω (lambano, "take"), εὐλογέω (eulogeo, "bless"), κλάω (klao, "break"), and ἔδωκεν (edoken, "gave"). The statement "This is my body" (Τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου) remains famously ambiguous in its original Greek: does the copula "is" indicate metaphorical identification, sacramental presence, or something else entirely?

Luke 22:19-20 introduces a significant textual variant. The longer text of Luke—which appears in the NA28 as the preferred reading based on stronger manuscript support—includes Jesus's explicit instruction: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν). This anamnetic element becomes crucial for later patristic understanding of Communion as an ongoing memorial.

B. The Johannine Perspective and the Bread of Life

Notably, the Fourth Gospel does not provide a Last Supper narrative. Instead, John emphasizes Jesus's role as the "Bread of Life" (ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς) in John 6:25-59. John 6:51 presents: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (NRSV). The Aramaic tone and visceral language ("my flesh"—σάρξ) underscore the realism of the consumption language.

Subsequent verses intensify the realism: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day" (6:54). The repetition of eating and drinking language (φάγῃ, "eats"; πίῃ, "drinks") emphasizes not a mere symbolic act but a life-constituting practice. The phrase "abides in me, and I in them" (ἐν ἐμοὶ μένει κἀγὼ ἐν αὐτῷ, 6:56) articulates the mystical union resulting from this consumption.

IV. PAULINE TREATMENT OF THE EUCHARIST

A. 1 Corinthians 11:20-34: The Primary Pauline Source

Paul's extended treatment of Communion in 1 Corinthians 11 represents the oldest written source material available. Scholars generally date 1 Corinthians to ca. 53-54 CE, making it earlier than the written Gospels (ca. 65-95 CE). Significantly, Paul explicitly claims to have "received from the Lord" (παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου) what he is "delivering" (παραδίδωμι) to the Corinthians (11:23).

Paul's formulation (1 Corinthians 11:23-25): "For I received from the Lord that which I also passed on to you, that 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.' 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.'"

Several features distinguish Paul's account. First, the explicit introduction of the tradition formula (παρέλαβον/παραδίδωμι) indicates Paul's awareness that he is transmitting established tradition. Second, the emphasis on "remembrance" (εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν) in both formulas—unique to Paul among the Evangelists—establishes the memorial aspect as central. Third, the expression "new covenant in My blood" links Communion explicitly to Jeremiah 31:31-34 (LXX: καινὴ διαθήκη) and Exodus 24:8. Fourth, the instruction to "do this, as often as you drink it" (ὁσάκις ἐὰν πίνητε) suggests repetition and ongoing practice.

B. 1 Corinthians 10:16-22: Real Participation

Paul's discussion of idolatry and food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 10) illuminates his understanding of Communion's ontological realism. He writes: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing [κοινωνία] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" (10:16). The rhetorical questions affirm real participation. Paul then argues that just as participation (κοινωνία) in Communion creates unity with Christ and the church, so too does eating food offered to idols create participation with demons (10:19-20). The parallelism demonstrates that Paul understands Communion as genuinely constituting participation—not merely symbolic representation.

V. EARLY CHRISTIAN PRACTICE IN ACTS AND THE APOSTOLIC AGE

A. Acts 2:42: The Breaking of Bread

The earliest post-resurrection account of Christian practice appears in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (NA28, ESV). The term "breaking of bread" (κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου) becomes a technical term for the Eucharistic meal. Notably, Luke connects this practice to three other constitutive elements of early Christian life: apostolic teaching (didachē); fellowship/communion (koinonia); and prayers (proseucha). This quaternary structure suggests that Communion was inseparable from catechesis, communal belonging, and liturgical prayer.

Acts 2:46 provides additional detail: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts." The phrase "at home" (κατ' οἶκον) indicates that Communion occurred in domestic settings, not exclusively in formal cultic spaces.

B. Acts 20:7-11: Sunday Worship

Later in Acts, at Troas, Paul gathers with believers "on the first day of the week" (μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων). The text states: "On the first day of the week, when we gathered to break bread [κλάσαι ἄρτον], Paul talked with them" (20:7). This passage confirms that Christians gathered on Sunday (the first day of the week), replacing or supplementing Sabbath observance. The breaking of bread remained central to Sunday assembly. The shift to Sunday worship appears connected to the Resurrection appearance narratives in the Gospels and the post-Easter crystallization of Jesus's messianic identity. Sunday becomes "the Lord's Day" (ἡ κυριακὴ ἡμέρα).

VI. PRE-NICENE PATRISTIC SOURCES AND THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

A. The Didache (ca. 90-120 CE)

The Didache ("Teaching of the Twelve Apostles"), discovered in a Constantinople monastery in 1873, represents one of the earliest post-apostolic Christian documents. Didache 9-10 prescribes prayers (εὐχαί) to be spoken "over the cup" and "over the broken bread" at community gatherings. The language is notably non-sacramental by later standards: "As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and gathered together became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom." The emphasis falls on eschatological gathering, not on metaphysical transformation of the elements. The Didache permits "every prophet to give thanks [εὐχαριστεῖν] as much as he wishes"—indicating that the Eucharistic prayer retained significant flexibility in the earliest period.

B. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35-107 CE)

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote seven epistles while being transported to Rome for martyrdom (ca. 107 CE). In his Epistle to the Ephesians (20.2), Ignatius writes: "Breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote against dying, and the food which gives life forever in Jesus Christ." The phrase "medicine of immortality" (φάρμακον ἀθανασίας) carries Platonic philosophical resonance, suggesting that the Eucharist confers deification (theosis)—a theme central to Eastern Christian theology.

Ignatius further emphasizes ecclesiastical authority: "Let no one do anything with respect to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop or by someone whom the bishop has appointed." This establishes ecclesiastical control over Communion as normative. However, Ignatius also polemicizes against docetism, arguing that the Eucharist celebrates the "flesh of Jesus Christ" (σάρκα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), opposing those who deny genuine incarnation.

C. Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 CE)

Justin Martyr provides the most detailed early account of Eucharistic practice in his Apology (ca. 155 CE). Defending Christian practice before pagan Roman authorities, Justin describes the Sunday assembly and emphasizes that "This food is called among us Εὐχαριστία [the Eucharist]; of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration." The requirement of faith and baptism for Eucharistic participation becomes normative.

Most significantly, Justin provides what may be the first explicit claim of metaphysical transformation: "For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh." The word "transmutation" (μεταβολή, metabole) indicates a change in substance—an early theological move toward what would later be articulated as transubstantiation.

D. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130-200 CE)

Irenaeus, defending apostolic tradition against Gnostic heretics, provides extensive Eucharistic theology in his Against Heresies (Adversus Haereses). Irenaeus argues that the Eucharist demonstrates the reality of bodily resurrection and the goodness of matter: "And as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity."

Irenaeus emphasizes that matter itself is transformed and elevated through the invocation (ἐπίκλησις, epiklesis) of God. Irenaeus also articulates the connection between Eucharist and church unity: "Since therefore the Church offers this oblation in all places throughout the world, and not in one place only or at one time, we ought to understand that there is one Bread and one Cup throughout the Church." This sacramental theology of ecclesiastical unity remains central to liturgical thought.

VII. THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

A. Development of Real Presence Theology

A significant development occurred between New Testament and patristic periods. While the Synoptic Gospels and Paul emphasize anamnesis (memorial, remembrance), the early Fathers progressively emphasize the ontological reality of Christ's presence in the bread and wine. This is not to say the Fathers abandoned anamnesis; rather, they theologized anamnesis in a way that transcended purely psychological or representational categories. The Jewish understanding of zikkaron (remembrance) involved making present the redemptive acts of God—not merely recalling them mentally. Similarly, the Christian anamnesis of Christ's death and resurrection made these salvific events operative in the present through the Eucharist.

B. The Role of the Logos and Pneuma

Early Eucharistic theology emphasized the creative efficacy of the Logos. Irenaeus argues that the word of God (the Logos) invoked in the Eucharistic prayer effects the transformation of the elements. The epiclesis—the prayer calling upon the Spirit to sanctify the elements—became increasingly prominent in patristic liturgies. This pneumatic understanding emphasizes that transformation occurs not through mechanical causation but through the Church's invocation and the Spirit's response. The Eucharist becomes an act of the entire community—not merely the priest's action—mediated by the Spirit.

C. Communion and Ecclesiastical Identity

The Eucharist became inseparable from ecclesiology. Paul's dictum that the church is the "body of Christ" (σῶμα Χριστοῦ, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27) took sacramental form in Communion. To partake of the Eucharistic body was to become incorporated into the ecclesial body. Irenaeus's statement that "the Church offers this oblation" reveals the corporate nature of Eucharistic action. The bishop's presidency over the Eucharist, emphasized by Ignatius and Cyprian, established episcopal authority as essential to the Church's sacramental life. This link between Eucharist and hierarchy shaped ecclesiastical authority structures fundamentally.

VIII. MODERN DENOMINATIONAL PRACTICES OF COMMUNION

The practice of Communion has been preserved across Christian denominations, though with significant variations in theology, liturgy, and requirements for participation. The following represents the major Christian traditions and their Eucharistic approaches:

Roman Catholic Church

Understands the Eucharist through transubstantiation (Council of Trent, 1545-1563): bread and wine are substantially transformed into Christ's body and blood while retaining sensory properties. The Mass remains the central act of Catholic worship. Requirements: Catholics in a state of grace may receive; non-Catholics generally excluded.

Eastern Orthodox Church

Celebrates the Divine Liturgy as the central sacrament, emphasizing the epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit). Affirms "real presence" through mystical/pneumatic transformation rather than metaphysical substance change. Eucharist understood as participation (κοινωνία) in divine life—deification (theosis). Requirements: Only baptized, chrismated Orthodox believers in good standing may receive; strictest discipline regarding Eucharistic participation.

Lutheran Church

Maintains belief in real presence of Christ in the Eucharist through consubstantiation (Martin Luther's doctrine): Christ's body and blood coexist with bread and wine. Regular celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar. Requirements vary by congregation and synod, ranging from closed to open communion.

Reformed Church (Calvinist)

Emphasizes spiritual presence: Christ truly present in the Eucharist spiritually through faith—elements remain bread and wine, but believing participants receive spiritual substance through the Holy Spirit's action. Table of the Lord emphasizes participation in Christ and the Church. Requirements: Typically require congregation membership or transfer from another Reformed church.

Anglican Church

Occupies middle ground between Catholic and Reformed understandings. The Book of Common Prayer affirms the sacramental nature of Communion without specifying the precise mode of presence. Deliberately ambiguous theology permitting both "high church" (Anglo-Catholic) and "low church" (evangelical) interpretations. Generally open to baptized Christians.

Methodist Church

Practices Communion as a key "means of grace" emphasizing personal reception of grace through faith. Practices open Communion, inviting all believers to the table. Requirements: Open to all who "truly and earnestly repent" and believe in Christ, regardless of church membership or denomination.

Baptist Churches

Traditionally emphasize symbolic rather than sacramental understandings of Communion. Celebrate the "Lord's Supper" as a memorial of Christ's death and anticipation of eschatological feast. No ordained clergy strictly necessary for presiding. Requirements vary: some practice restricted communion (members only), others practice open communion; some require believer's baptism (credobaptism).

Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

Generally understand Communion as symbolic memorial emphasizing the Spirit's empowering presence. Healing and spiritual renewal may be sought through Communion. Typically practiced monthly or quarterly with less liturgical formality. Requirements: Generally open to all who believe in Christ.

Christian Science

Maintains "The Sacrament" as practice but dematerializes it entirely. Rather than physical bread and wine, practitioners engage in spiritual reaffirmation of truth and redemption. No physical elements consumed. Requirements: Membership in Christian Science church.

Seventh-day Adventist Church

Practices foot-washing as preliminary to Communion. Lord's Supper understood symbolically, commemorating Christ's death and representing believer's commitment to follow Christ. Typically quarterly; Adventists observe Passover tradition's meaning through Communion's eschatological dimension. Requirements: Baptized members in good standing.

Mennonite and Brethren Churches

Anabaptist traditions understand Communion symbolically, emphasizing covenant renewal and communal identity. Historically practiced restricted communion limited to members sharing the community's faith and practices. Requirements: Baptized members of the congregation.

The Salvation Army

Does not practice Communion, having abandoned sacramentalism entirely. Emphasizes personal conversion and holy living, believing that communion with God occurs through disciplined spiritual practice rather than sacramental means.

IX. CONCLUSION

The practice of Communion emerges from the life-giving meal Jesus shared with his apostles on the eve of his crucifixion and evolves throughout the New Testament and patristic periods into the central sacrament of Christian worship. The Greek New Testament provides rich linguistic resources—εὐχαριστία, κοινωνία, κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου—that embed multiple theological dimensions: thanksgiving, participation, memorial, and communal identity.

From Paul's early crystallization of the tradition (ca. 53-54 CE) through the Synoptic Gospel accounts to the Johannine theology of the Bread of Life, New Testament sources consistently affirm that Communion involves real—not merely symbolic—participation in Christ's body and blood. The nature of that reality remains subject to diverse interpretations (spiritual, sacramental, mystical), yet the commitment to real participation proves constant.

The Pre-Nicene Church Fathers—from the Didache through Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, and others—systematically develop Eucharistic theology in response to challenges and internal questions. The consistent trajectory moves toward understanding Communion as simultaneously: (1) real participation in Christ through transformation effected by the divine Word and Spirit invocation; (2) an anamnetic act making present the redemptive sacrifice of Christ; (3) an eschatological anticipation of the kingdom feast; (4) the constitutive act of the Church's gathered identity; and (5) a medicine of immortality conferring deification (theosis) through Spirit-transformation.

Modern denominational diversity reflects these patristic trajectories. The Catholic emphasis on transubstantiation extends Western Scholastic systematics, while Orthodox Christianity preserves Eastern patristic emphasis on pneumatic transformation and theotic deification. Protestant traditions inherit these diverse legacies, calibrating Eucharistic theology and practice across spectrums from symbolic memorialization to liturgical realism.

Understanding how Communion developed from Jesus's final meal through apostolic practice, patristic theology, and medieval systematization to modern denominational expressions illuminates both the unity underlying Christian witness and the genuine theological developments that shaped divergent practices. The invitation remains: "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."