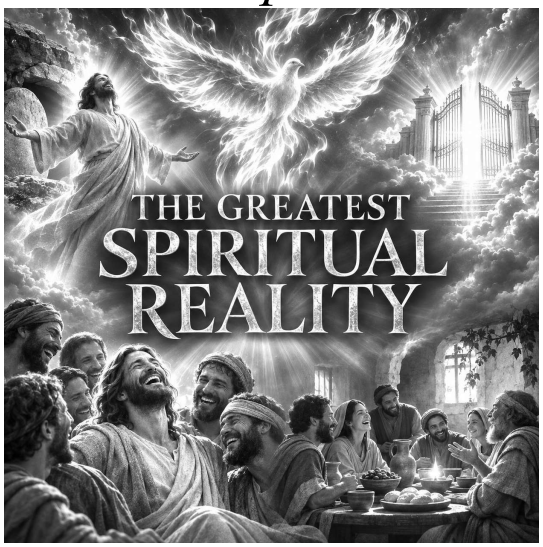
The Greatest Spiritual Reality



The Greatest Spiritual Reality — Series Introduction
Today I'm beginning a new eight-part series called *The Greatest Spiritual Reality*. This series will be the culmination of my two teaching series, *The Withered Fig Tree* and *The Holy Spirit*. But more importantly, it will be an application of what we've learned throughout these studies.

In my previous two series, *Spiritual Realities* and *The Hard Problem of Hell*, we explored many different spiritual realities. Some were mysterious, difficult to understand, and nearly impossible to prove. Others were firmly grounded in Scripture, giving us considerably more confidence in what we could conclude.

In 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, Paul describes a future time when our incomplete knowledge and understanding will give way to something far greater. He says that now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part, but then we will know fully. Whether Paul was referring to the return of Christ, our future existence with God, or something else, his point is that our present understanding is incomplete.

And that is certainly true of spiritual reality. There is so much we don't know, so

much we cannot see, and so much we struggle to understand.

But there is one spiritual reality that is not distant, unknowable, or waiting for us somewhere in the future. It is available to all Christians to utilize right now: **the indwelling Holy Spirit**.

Through the Holy Spirit, God has made it possible for us *to know* Him, to have a personal relationship with Him, and to experience His guidance, comfort, and love. We may look forward to a future when we will be with God—when the confusion, suffering, and sadness of this world will be behind us—but we are *here* now. We have lives to live, difficulties to overcome, relationships to nurture, and challenges that sometimes seem overwhelming.

And through all of this, the indwelling Holy Spirit gives us the confidence that God is for us, that God is with us, and that God loves us dearly.

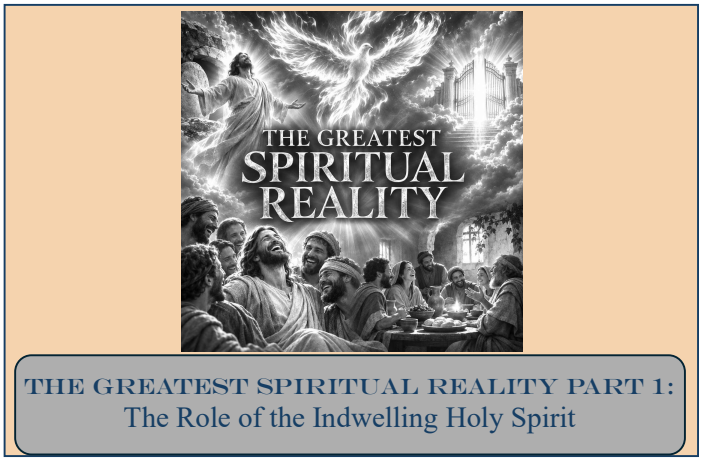
The indwelling Holy Spirit is the greatest spiritual reality available to us in this life.

Throughout my previous fifteen series, we've examined biblical teachings, historical evidence, and connections between passages that are often studied separately. We've also developed premises where Scripture is less explicit and explored possibilities and extrapolations where the Bible provides little or no direct information.

In this series, we're going to bring those ideas together. We won't attempt to review everything we've studied. Instead, we'll draw upon the conclusions we've reached, while remaining mindful of which are firmly established and which are more tentative.

Our goal is to answer two profoundly important questions: **How can we know that we have the indwelling Holy Spirit? And how should Spirit-indwelled Christians live, both individually and together, to nurture that relationship with God and help one another through the challenges of life?**

Ultimately, this series is about putting our knowledge into practice—learning to live in communion with God and with one another, sustained by the Holy Spirit, as we make our way through this life toward the next.



I've titled part 1, "The Role of the Indwelling Holy Spirit."

Before we explore the role of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we need to establish a starting point. Was there a time in Christian history when Christians understood and practiced their faith more closely to what God intended? And if so, when was it?

We need to be very careful with this question. First, there has never been a perfect Christian society. The church has always consisted of imperfect human beings. Furthermore, when God begins a new era, there is inevitably a period of immaturity and adjustment. We see this in the Garden of Eden, at Mount Sinai, and certainly in the beginning of the New Covenant. The book of Acts and the epistles document many of the early church's struggles, disagreements, misunderstandings, and failures.

Second, our historical record is imperfect. Many writings have been lost, surviving accounts reflect the perspectives and limitations of their authors, and translations introduce additional uncertainties. Even when we believe we've identified an ideal period, we must be careful not to reconstruct a Christian

society that never actually existed.

With those qualifications, I believe the period from the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70 into the early second century gives us our best starting point. By then, Christianity had passed through much of its initial growing pains, the Old Covenant order had visibly come to an end, and the institutional and theological developments of subsequent centuries had not yet fully taken hold.

Why do I believe this period may have represented Christianity at its best? And why did Christianity eventually move away from it?

I believe the answer to both questions revolves around **the role of the indwelling Holy Spirit**. Those early Christians understood something fundamental about their relationship with God that gradually became obscured. And recovering that understanding is where we must begin.

That's what we're going to begin doing today.

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit

- The Era of the Spirit begins — Acts 2:16–18
  - "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams…"
  - "I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke…"
  - "…And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"
  - Peter says this is *happening* now.
- Miraculous gifts throughout Christian assemblies — 1 Cor. 12:7–11; 14:26
  - Prophecy, healing, tongues, interpretation, and other gifts
  - Different members contributed to the assembly
- The purpose of the miraculous outpouring — Heb. 2:3–4
  - God confirmed the authority of the new message
  - The gifts also strengthened and edified Christians
- Two dimensions of the Spirit's work
  - Miraculous gifts: extraordinary manifestations
  - Indwelling Spirit: God's enduring presence

1. The Era of the Spirit begins

In my first series, The Era of the Spirit, we explored how Pentecost marked the beginning of a fundamentally new period in God's relationship with humanity. Peter stood before the crowd in Jerusalem and announced that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled in their presence: God was pouring out his Spirit on all people. Sons and daughters would prophesy, young men would see visions, and old men would dream dreams.

This wasn't merely a promise of an invisible spiritual relationship. It included extraordinary, observable manifestations of the Spirit's power in people and through signs. As we also explored in The Seven Spirits of Revelation, the miraculous outpouring was an important characteristic of the apostolic age, and there were many signs recorded by the Jews in the Mishnah and by historians of the time like Josephus.

2. Miraculous gifts throughout Christian assemblies

Imagine living in those first decades following Pentecost, regularly gathering with perhaps a dozen or two Christians in someone's home. One Christian might prophesy, another speak in tongues, another interpret, and another possess a

gift of healing. What an extraordinary experience that must have been!

As we established in The Christian Assembly, these weren't spectator events centered on a single religious professional. They were participatory gatherings in which different Christians contributed to the entire community. Paul's descriptions in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 give us a remarkable glimpse into those gatherings.

3. The purpose of the miraculous outpouring
But why did God provide such extraordinary gifts? Hebrews 2:3–4 gives us an important clue.

<Read Hebrews 2:3–4>

Notice that the author connects signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Spirit with God's testimony confirming the message of salvation. This was a new era, the New Covenant, and these gifts provided powerful evidence of its divine authority.

Paul also makes clear that miraculous gifts were intended to strengthen and edify Christians. I believe that was an important immediate benefit, while their larger historical purpose was to establish and confirm the authority of the Era of the Spirit.

4. Two dimensions of the Spirit's work
And this brings us back to a distinction I've emphasized throughout earlier series: the miraculous gifts of the Spirit and the indwelling Holy Spirit are not the same thing.

The miraculous gifts were extraordinary manifestations of God's power. The indwelling Spirit was God's continuing presence within the Christian. Both were important, but they did not have the same purpose or duration.

That distinction becomes critically important as we move into the next slide.

From Miraculous Gifts to Indwelling

- The Apostles and miraculous gifts — Acts 8:14–19; 19:6
  - Miraculous gifts imparted through apostolic hands
  - The apostolic generation could not continue indefinitely
- Who could become an Apostle? — Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8
  - Witness of the risen Jesus and direct divine commissioning
  - Paul: an extraordinary, personally commissioned Apostle
  - No documented succession of comparable Apostles (look up Mani and the Manichaeans)
- The transition after AD 70
  - Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed; Jewish opposition disrupted
  - Apostolic generation passing away; miraculous gifts diminishing
  - House assemblies increasingly dependent on the indwelling Spirit
- The enduring promise — Acts 2:38–39; Rom. 8:9
  - The indwelling Spirit remained available to every Christian

1. The Apostles and miraculous gifts
In The Era of the Spirit and How to Worship God, we investigated the relationship between the Apostles and the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8 provides a particularly important example. The Samaritans had already believed and been baptized, yet Peter and John traveled from Jerusalem, prayed for them, and laid their hands on them. Simon observed that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands. Acts 19 describes something similar when Paul laid his hands on believers in Ephesus, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

These accounts suggest that the Apostles had a distinctive role in imparting miraculous gifts. If this was the ordinary means through which the gifts spread, what would happen when the Apostles were no longer alive?

2. Who could become an Apostle?
This leads to a critically important question: Who qualified to become an Apostle?

In Acts 1, when Peter proposed replacing Judas, he described qualifications that included accompanying Jesus throughout his ministry and witnessing his resurrection. Paul later defended his own apostleship by pointing to his encounter with the risen Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul even described himself as one born at an unusual time, emphasizing the extraordinary nature of his calling.

Of course, the New Testament sometimes uses the word apostle in its broader sense of someone sent out on a mission. But here we're talking about the Apostles commissioned by Christ, bearing foundational authority in the Christian community.

Could there have been more Apostles after Paul? Certainly, God could have commissioned others. But Scripture gives us no clearly documented succession of people receiving that same combination of direct commission, foundational authority, and ability to confer miraculous gifts.

If the transmission of miraculous gifts was particularly connected to these Apostles, the eventual passing of the apostolic generation would naturally lead to the diminishing of those gifts.

3. The transition after AD 70
This brings us to the period we identified in the introduction, following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70 and extending into the early second century.

The Jewish revolt and Rome's destruction of Jerusalem devastated Jewish society. The Temple was gone, enormous numbers of people had been killed or displaced, and the religious and political structures of Judea had been profoundly disrupted. This would also have weakened some of the organized Jewish opposition that early Christians had encountered, although Jewish-Christian tensions certainly did not disappear.

At roughly the same time, the original apostolic generation was passing away. The miraculous gifts, I believe, were becoming less common as those who possessed them grew older and died.

Imagine being part of a Christian house assembly during this transition. Earlier generations might have witnessed extraordinary displays of the Spirit's power regularly. But subsequent generations could no longer assume those manifestations would be present.

I wonder whether even the Apostles fully appreciated that the widespread miraculous gifts might disappear. They understood that Jesus had promised the Spirit forever, but did they distinguish clearly between the temporary miraculous manifestations and the enduring indwelling presence? Scripture doesn't tell us exactly what they anticipated.

Mani and the Manichaeans – Claimed to be appointed as an Apostle of Jesus Christ in the middle of the third century in a method similar to Paul. But he and his followers were rejected by the mainstream Christians because he incorporated the teachings of Zoroaster and Buddha that superseded or corrected some prior New Testament revelations.

4. The enduring promise
Yet this didn't mean God's relationship with Christians was weakening.

Peter's promise in Acts 2:38–39 extended the gift of the Holy Spirit to future generations. Paul makes the indwelling Spirit a defining characteristic of belonging to Christ in Romans 8:9.

As we concluded in How to Worship God, Christians did not need the extraordinary miraculous gifts to maintain their relationship with God. That relationship had always depended on something far more fundamental: the indwelling Holy Spirit.

And this is why I believe this period offers such an important historical window. Christianity had passed through much of its initial immaturity. The destruction of Jerusalem had disrupted much of its original opposition. Miraculous gifts were apparently becoming less prevalent, while the elaborate institutions and rituals of later centuries had not yet fully developed.

These Christians had an opportunity to discover what it truly meant to rely on the indwelling Spirit.

What Jesus Promised

- The Spirit would dwell within believers — John 14:16–17, 23
  - The Advocate would remain forever
  - The Father and Son would make their home with believers
- The Spirit would teach and guide — John 14:26; 16:13
  - Teach and bring Jesus' words to remembrance
  - Guide believers into truth
- The Spirit would continue Jesus' work — John 15:26; 16:7–15
  - Testify about Jesus and glorify him
  - Convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment
- The promise beyond the Apostles — Matt. 28:19–20
  - Teach future disciples everything Jesus commanded
  - The Spirit's enduring presence extends beyond the first generation
- Restoration of God's original intention — Gen. 2–3; John 14:23
  - Returning to intimate communion between God and humanity

1. The Spirit would dwell within believers
Now that we've established the historical setting, let's examine what Jesus actually said about the indwelling Holy Spirit.

At the Last Supper, Jesus explained that he was about to leave his disciples, but he would not abandon them. In John 14:16–17, he promised another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who would remain with them forever.

Notice the distinction Jesus makes: the Spirit was with them, but would be in them. And in John 14:23, Jesus describes the Father and Son making their home with those who love him and obey his teaching.

This is an extraordinary promise. God's relationship with his people would no longer depend on his physical presence in a particular place, or even on Jesus remaining physically among them. God would dwell within his people.

2. The Spirit would teach and guide
But this indwelling presence was not merely symbolic.

Jesus said the Spirit would teach his disciples and remind them of everything he had said. Later, in John 16:13, he promised that the Spirit of truth would guide them into all truth.

We should be careful about the interpretation here. Jesus was speaking directly to the disciples who had accompanied him, so the promise of remembering his teachings certainly had an immediate application to them. But that does not necessarily mean the Spirit's teaching and guidance would be restricted to the Apostles.

Indeed, the continuing work of the Spirit in helping Christians understand and apply the teachings of Jesus seems entirely consistent with the broader New Covenant promise.

3. The Spirit would continue Jesus' work
Jesus also described the Spirit as testifying about him, glorifying him, and convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment.

These are important roles. The Spirit would not introduce an independent religious system or draw attention away from Jesus. His work would continue and illuminate what Jesus had already begun.

And notice that these roles aren't necessarily miraculous in the sense we've been discussing. Helping Christians recognize truth, understand Jesus, and confront sin does not require speaking in tongues or performing a supernatural sign.

4. The promise beyond the Apostles
One question we should ask is whether these promises were intended exclusively for the Apostles.

Before his ascension, Jesus gave the Great Commission, instructing his disciples to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything he had commanded.

That's important. Jesus expected his teachings to be passed on to succeeding generations of Christians. And he concluded that commission by promising to be with them always, to the very end of the age.

This doesn't prove that every promise made to the original Apostles applies identically to every subsequent Christian. But neither does it justify excluding later Christians from the Spirit's continuing work of teaching, guiding, and

maintaining their relationship with God.

5. Restoration of God's original intention
And here we should return to something we established in my very first series, The Era of the Spirit.

In that series, I proposed that Adam and Eve originally possessed the same indwelling Holy Spirit that Christians receive under the New Covenant. I also proposed that God intended their offspring to inherit that relationship with him, but that the Fall interrupted his original intention.

If that understanding is correct, then Pentecost wasn't simply the beginning of something entirely unprecedented. It marked the restoration of the intimate relationship God had intended for humanity from the beginning.

The greatest spiritual reality wasn't the ability to perform miracles. It was that God could once again dwell within his people, maintaining an intimate, personal relationship with them.

That, I believe, is what Jesus was promising.

Living by the Spirit

- The Spirit belongs to every Christian — Acts 2:38–39; Rom. 8:9
  - Received through repentance and baptism
  - The defining characteristic of belonging to Christ
- The Spirit establishes our relationship with God — Rom. 8:14–16; Gal. 4:6
  - Adoption as God's children
  - Assurance that we belong to him
- The Spirit helps and transforms us — Rom. 8:26–27; Gal. 5:16–25
  - Helps in weakness and prayer
  - Produces the fruit of the Spirit
- Christians collectively become God's dwelling — 1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:21–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5
  - Living stones forming a spiritual house
  - A community united through the Spirit
- The Spirit shapes everyday Christian life
  - Communion with God and fellow Christians
  - Spiritual life extends far beyond gatherings

1. The Spirit belongs to every Christian
At Pentecost, Peter promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who repented and were baptized, extending the promise to their children and to future generations.

Paul goes even further in Romans 8:9, declaring that anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ.

This is essential to understanding the New Covenant. The indwelling Spirit isn't an extraordinary gift reserved for a few especially spiritual Christians. It's the defining characteristic of belonging to Christ.

2. The Spirit establishes our relationship with God
Paul describes one of the Spirit's most important roles in Romans 8:14–16. The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Paul describes the same relationship in Galatians 4:6, where the Spirit enables Christians to cry out to God as their Father.

This isn't simply a theological designation. It's a relationship between God and the Christian, grounded in God's presence within us.

We are not merely people attempting to obey a distant God. We have become his children, with his Spirit dwelling within us.

3. The Spirit helps and transforms us
Paul also explains that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, particularly when we do not know what we ought to pray for. In Romans 8:26–27, he describes the Spirit interceding for us according to God's will.

And in Galatians 5, Paul contrasts living according to the flesh with living by the Spirit. The result is what he calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Notice that these are not extraordinary miraculous abilities. They're changes in character and conduct. They affect how we think, how we behave, and how we relate to one another.

4. Christians collectively become God's dwelling
But the Spirit's work doesn't stop with the individual.

Paul describes Christians collectively as God's temple, and in Ephesians 2, as a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit. Peter likewise describes Christians as living stones being built into a spiritual house.

As we examined in The Christian Assembly, Christians were never intended to live as isolated individuals. They were part of a community in which each person contributed to the spiritual growth and well-being of the others.

The Spirit dwells within individual Christians, but those individuals collectively form a spiritual community in which God's presence is expressed.

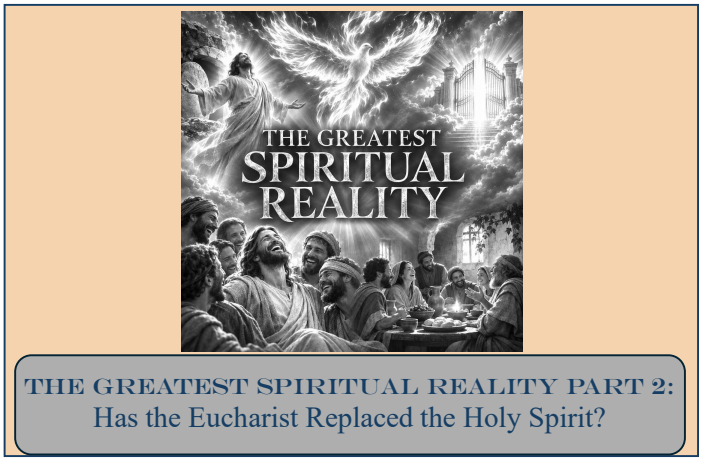
5. The Spirit shapes everyday Christian life
This brings us back to How to Worship God. We established that the Christian life should not be confused with attending religious services or participating in particular ceremonies.

The indwelling Spirit is with us throughout our everyday lives. Our relationship with God isn't restricted to specific locations, times, or religious activities.

And when Christians come together, their communion should reflect the Spirit's presence within each of them. Prayer, encouragement, teaching, correction, service, and mutual care are all natural expressions of that shared spiritual life.

This brings us to the central question for the rest of this series: If God has placed his Spirit within every Christian, how should that change the way we live, both individually and together?

Next week we'll talk about how the reliance on the Spirit gradually changed in the second and third centuries, which set the stage for an even more abrupt change in the fourth century.



I've titled part 2, **"**Has the Eucharist Replaced the Holy Spirit?**"**

Jesus promised that those who believe in Him would receive the Holy Spirit, who would dwell within them *permanently*. Through the New Covenant, Christians would enjoy a direct, personal relationship with God without needing priests, altars, temples, or recurring sacrifices. Yet within generations of the Apostles, Christians began developing an increasingly elaborate ritual centered on the mysterious presence of Christ in bread and wine.

Why? Why would Christians who already possessed the living presence of God within them need a recurring ritual to sustain their spiritual relationship with Him?

I shouldn't presume everyone knows what *Eucharist* means and represents:

- Eucharist comes from the Greek *eucharistia*, meaning "thanksgiving," and is the Christian practice commonly called the Lord's Supper or Communion.
- The practice originated with Jesus' final meal with his apostles, when he shared bread and wine, associating them with his body and blood and instructing his followers to remember him. Christians differ significantly,

however, in what they believe happens during the Eucharist.

- In the Memorialist view, common among Evangelical Christians, the bread and wine symbolize Christ's body and blood, and the practice commemorates his sacrifice.
- In the Real Presence view, held in different forms by Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Lutherans, and others, Christ is genuinely present in the Eucharist—not merely remembered or symbolized. These traditions differ considerably in how they explain that presence.
- Reformers distanced themselves from the Catholic Mass, rejecting its sacrificial theology and highly ritualized practices. In doing so, they increasingly favored biblical terms such as *the Lord's Supper* and *Communion* over terms associated with Catholic sacramental traditions, including *Eucharist*.

In this second episode of *The Greatest Spiritual Reality*, we revisit the evolution of the Lord's Supper into the Eucharist, drawing from the writings of early Christians to investigate how the Real Presence developed and how it influenced Christian assemblies. But more importantly, we'll consider a troubling possibility: **Did early Christians begin losing their awareness of and reliance upon the indwelling Holy Spirit, creating a spiritual void that the Eucharist came to fill?**

If so, the consequences extend far beyond the Catholic and Orthodox churches that embrace the Real Presence. Even Protestant churches that reject it *may perpetuate the same underlying problem* when they teach that Christians must participate in Communion or church services to remain spiritually healthy (whether explicitly or implicitly). Rather than cultivating dependence on the indwelling Spirit, such practices do the opposite, they reduce dependence on the Spirit and create dependence on the institution of the church.

Could a ritual intended to bring Christians closer to God actually be distracting them from the God who already lives within them?

When Was Christianity Closest to Its Ideal?

- **Review of Episode 1 — The Role of the Indwelling Holy Spirit**
  - The New Covenant gave Christians direct, continuing access to God through His indwelling Spirit (John 14:16–17; Romans 8:9–11).
  - Their spiritual relationship with God was no longer dependent on temples, priests, or recurring sacrifices (Hebrews 10:19–22).
  - Christian assemblies existed to build up Spirit-indwelt believers, not to supply God's presence (1 Corinthians 14:26).
- **A Candidate for the Christian Ideal: AD 70–110**
  1) Greater understanding of the Gospel and New Covenant after decades of apostolic teaching. e.g. They understood without question that Gentiles could be saved.
  2) Diminished influence of Judaizers following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.
  3) Miraculous gifts were waning, allowing the continuing indwelling Spirit to become more central.
- **The Question for This Episode**
  - *If Christians of this period were closest to the ideal, why would later generations need additional rituals to sustain their spiritual relationship with God?*

Last week we explored the role of the indwelling Holy Spirit under the New Covenant. We saw that through Christ, God has established a permanent dwelling within Christians. This is an enormous departure from the Old Covenant, where approaching God involved priests, temples, and sacrifices. Under the New Covenant, every Christian possesses the Holy Spirit and has direct access to God.

Christian assemblies, therefore, serve a different purpose from Old Covenant worship. Christians gather to encourage, teach, strengthen, and build one another up. They don't gather to obtain God's presence, because God already lives within them.

This raises an interesting question: When in history did Christian communities most closely resemble God's ideal for the New Covenant?

I believe the period from approximately AD 70 to the beginning of the second century is an especially good candidate, for three reasons:

1) Christians had benefited from roughly forty years of apostolic preaching, teaching, and experience. The Gospel had spread throughout much of the

Roman Empire, and the implications of the New Covenant had become better understood.
2) Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70, the influence of Judaizers—those who sought to impose the Mosaic Law on Gentile Christians—likely diminished significantly. Christianity was increasingly able to distinguish itself from the Old Covenant.
3) I believe the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were beginning to wane. These gifts had been important in establishing the church and confirming the Gospel, but they were temporary. The indwelling Spirit, on the other hand, was permanent.

So here we have Christian communities with a mature understanding of the Gospel, fewer pressures to conform to the Old Covenant, and an increasing emphasis on living through the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now consider what happens in the following centuries. The Lord's Supper develops into a sacred ritual involving the Real Presence, sacrificial terminology, and eventually a specialized priesthood and elaborate worship services.

If these developments were necessary advancements in Christianity, then the earlier Christians were missing something essential. They could not have been living the Christian ideal.

The Question for This Episode: *If Christians of this period were closest to the ideal, why would later generations need additional rituals to sustain their spiritual relationship with God?* In other words, how could first century Christians persist healthily while missing such an important aspect of the Christian life?

The Negative Approach: If Not Then, When?

- **The Apostolic Era (AD 30–70)?**
  - The Gospel was still spreading, and its implications were being understood.
  - Judaizing influences and disputes over the Mosaic Law were widespread.
  - Miraculous gifts played an important role in establishing the church.
- **The Early Post-Apostolic Era (AD 70–110)?**
  - Favorable conditions for a mature, Spirit-dependent Christianity.
  - Our leading candidate, though the historical record is incomplete.
- **The Following Centuries (AD 110 onward)?**
  - The Lord's Supper developed increasingly sacramental characteristics.
  - Church hierarchy, religious rituals, and eventually dedicated worship buildings became increasingly prominent.

Or has Christianity never approached its New Covenant ideal?

Of course, identifying a period when Christianity may have come closest to its ideal requires some historical reconstruction. We don't have a complete picture of Christian life during the late first and early second centuries, and I'm certainly not suggesting that every Christian community was ideal.

But if we reject this period as our best candidate, then what period should we choose instead?

We could look earlier, to the Apostolic Era, from Pentecost until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Certainly, those Christians enjoyed the direct teaching and guidance of the Apostles, and they suffered and died for their faith. But they were also struggling to understand the implications of the Gospel, particularly the enormous differences between the Old and New Covenants, and, surprisingly, just who can become a Christian? Much of Paul's ministry involved correcting these misunderstandings.

Or perhaps we should look later, into the second, third, or fourth centuries. But as we'll see, this is precisely when Christians began introducing increasingly elaborate religious practices, especially those surrounding the Eucharist. If these

were improvements that brought Christians closer to God's intentions, then perhaps we should look to these centuries instead.

And what about the Great Schism of 1054? Or the Reformation? Or the Restoration? Did Christianity finally begin approaching its ideal after ten centuries, fifteen centuries, or 19 centuries of development? Or should we look to the present day, with its extraordinary diversity (and disagreement) of Christian practices and beliefs?

There is also another possibility: perhaps Christianity has never come particularly close to the New Covenant ideal.
That would be a disturbing conclusion. Jesus promised that His followers would receive the indwelling Holy Spirit, who would guide them and transform their lives. The Apostles then spent decades teaching Christians how to live under the New Covenant.

Are we really prepared to conclude that, despite all of this, Christianity never came close to what God intended?
I don't believe we need to reach that conclusion. I think the period from AD 70 into the early second century remains our strongest candidate.

But this creates a problem for the claim that the Eucharistic developments of subsequent centuries represented necessary spiritual advancements.

If Christians were already enjoying the fullness of the New Covenant, what exactly was missing that those developments needed to provide?

If we can agree that Christianity was already closest to its ideal before these Eucharistic developments, were those developments really advancements—or evidence that something had begun to go wrong?

Was the Eucharist a Symptom of Spiritual Decline?

- Early Christians increasingly neglected their relationship with the indwelling Holy Spirit.
  - They began to lose their awareness of, and reliance upon, God's presence within them.
  - This created a perceived need for additional spiritual nourishment.
- The Eucharist evolved to fill this spiritual void.
  - The Real Presence offered a tangible encounter with Christ.
  - Rituals, priests, and eventually church institutions became essential to maintaining spiritual health.
- The supposed solution may have perpetuated the problem.
  - Christians increasingly depended on the church rather than the indwelling Spirit.
  - Even churches rejecting the Real Presence can perpetuate this dependency.

If true, the Eucharist didn't remedy a spiritual deficiency—it concealed it.

So, let's return to the question we started with: Why did the Lord's Supper evolve into the Eucharist?

We've considered the possibility that Christianity came closest to its New Covenant ideal between AD 70 and the beginning of the second century. If that's correct, then the ritualistic developments of the following centuries weren't necessarily advancements in Christianity. They may actually represent a decline. In other words, how could this era of Christianity be the most ideal if they were missing the Real-Presence in the Eucharist?

And I have a theory about what caused that decline: I believe Christians were gradually losing their awareness of, and reliance upon, the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Remember what we established in Episode 1. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would live within His followers permanently. They didn't need to travel somewhere or to some elaborate building to encounter God, nor did they need a priest or a recurring sacrifice to maintain that relationship. God Himself was already living within them!

But what happens when Christians stop recognizing and utilizing that relationship? What happens when they recognize a void that only the indwelling Spirit can fulfill? Note that this is *not* because the Holy Spirit has abandoned them, but because they've stopped living in dependence upon Him.

And this is where I believe the Eucharist entered the picture.

The simple community remembrance of Christ's sacrifice gradually became a sacred ritual through which Christians believed they could receive spiritual nourishment. The Real Presence offered something tangible—something they could see, touch, and consume. Eventually, the practice became associated with priests, altars, buildings, and increasingly elaborate religious institutions.

But here's the troubling part: If the deficiency was a neglected relationship with the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Eucharist wasn't actually addressing the problem. It was providing an alternative means of obtaining spiritual reassurance.

And that alternative may have made the underlying deficiency worse.

Instead of teaching Christians to recognize and rely upon the Spirit already dwelling within them, *the church increasingly taught them to depend upon a recurring ritual that could only be administered by the institution*.

Now, this problem isn't limited to churches that believe in the Real Presence. Many Protestant churches reject that doctrine but still teach that regular Communion, worship services, or other church activities are necessary to remain spiritually healthy. And where the importance of the Communion was reduced, the sermon, delivered by a professional pastor, increased. Although they rejected priests, only a few had the skills to deliver the sermon properly.

In my view, that can perpetuate the same underlying problem.

I want to be clear that I'm not suggesting Christians should abandon the Lord's Supper. Jesus gave us a beautiful way to remember His sacrifice, and sharing that remembrance with other Christians is entirely appropriate.

But remembrance is one thing. Believing that a ritual is necessary to sustain the spiritual life God has already given us is quite another.

So, here's my conclusion, and it's a disturbing one: The Eucharist evolved because Christians were losing sight of the greatest spiritual reality of the New Covenant—the living presence of God within them. Rather than restoring that

relationship, the Eucharist concealed the deficiency and created a dependence on the church that continues to this day

If so, we haven't simply misunderstood the Lord's Supper—we've misunderstood what it means to have the Holy Spirit living within us.

Granted, if you don’t understand or recognize that the Spirit is the Greatest Spiritual Reality, then none of this will make sense.

Communion is for Christians to Commune

Go figure, right? It's right in the word.

- **Remembrance of Christ's Sacrifice** (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26)
  - Like the Passover, it commemorated a completed act of deliverance.
  - It reminded Christians of the New Covenant established through Christ.
- **Communion with One Another** (Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 10:16–17)
  - Christians shared a meal with thanksgiving, joy, and unity.
  - The shared bread emphasized their identity as one body in Christ.
- **Not a Replacement for the Indwelling Spirit** (Romans 8:9–11)
  - Christians already possessed God's continuing presence.
  - Their spiritual life did not need to be replenished through a recurring ritual.

Communion is a meal meant to celebrate what Christians already possess—not provide what they are missing. It is meant to promote unity.

I want to finish by returning to the original Lord's Supper and asking a simple question: Who was Communion for?
It was for the Christians!

Jesus used the Passover meal, which commemorated God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, to establish a new remembrance—one commemorating His sacrifice and the establishment of the New Covenant.

The first Christians shared meals together, remembered what Christ had done for them, gave thanks, and enjoyed their fellowship as members of one body.

But notice what they weren't doing. They weren't trying to bring God's presence into their lives through the bread and wine. They already possessed the indwelling Holy Spirit!

The Lord's Supper didn't need to sustain their salvation or replenish their spiritual health. It was a wonderful opportunity to remember and celebrate what Christ had already accomplished and what God had already given them.

And this is what I believe we need to recover.

Communion isn't something God needs from us, nor is it something we need to perform to keep God living within us. It's something Jesus gave us for the benefit of the body, to remember His sacrifice and to share in the joy of our common salvation.

We don't partake of Communion to obtain or maintain God's presence. We partake because God's presence is already within us.

Next week: What does the Spirit do for us, really?