

The Lord's Supper

The other sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ is the Lord's supper. By the distributing and reception of broken bread and poured out wine the person and work of Christ is declared, remembered and sealed to believers. While baptism is the initiatory rite that begins discipleship in the visible church and points primarily to the work of the Spirit in regeneration and cleansing, the Lord's supper is the continuing rite; that is, a means of continuing sanctification in the body of Christ.

The Institution of the Sacrament

The institution of the holy supper is described in the synoptic gospels (Mk. 14:22-25; Mt. 26:26-29; Lk. 22:17-20) as well as 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. At a certain point in the Passover meal with His disciples (probably near the end of the meal) our Lord replaced the old bloody symbol which was fitting for the old economy with the bloodless symbol of bread and wine. Both Mark and Matthew say "as they were eating." All four accounts of the first supper say that Jesus "took bread." (The word bread [artos] refers to a loaf of leavened or unleavened bread. At the Passover meal a thin sheet of unleavened bread was used.) After the Lord picked up the bread He gave thanks. ("Like 1 Corinthians 11:24 Luke used 'thanks' [eucharistēsas], from which we get Eucharist, rather than 'thanks' [eulogēsas] or 'bless' as in Mark 14:22 and Matt. 26:26. There is little difference in meaning between these two Greek terms"¹²⁰). Then, He began breaking the bread into pieces. "The breaking of the bread to which reference is made in all four accounts, must be considered as belonging to the very essence of the sacrament."¹²¹ According to the Jewish Paschal tradition, the family-head "broke for each person present a piece and gave it to him, the bread passing from hand to hand until it reached all the guests. The distribution normally took place in silence."¹²²

After our Lord broke the bread and gave it to the disciples he said "take, eat; this is my body" (Mk. 14:22; Mt. 26:26; Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24) "which is given for you" (Lk. 22:19). The verb "is" (estin) mean "it signifies" rather than "it is identical with." The bread is a symbol of Jesus' body (soma) which was about to be sacrificed on the cross. After the bread was disturbed Christ said "do this in remembrance of Me" (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). The verb (poieite, present active imperative) indicates that this sacrament was to continually be celebrated. It is a

perpetual New Testament ordinance. “This do, i.e., ‘Do what I have just done; take bread, consecrate it, break it, distribute and eat it.’”¹²³ The phrase “in remembrance of Me” indicates that one of the main purposes of the Lord’s supper is to remember what Jesus has done in our behalf. When we participate in the holy supper we meditate on what the Mediator has accomplished and profess our faith in Him as the sacrifice for our sins.

Then the Savior took a cup (This cup contained “the fruit of the vine” [Mt. 26:29] which according to Jewish tradition would have been red wine), gave thanks (in the same manner as He had done over the bread) and passed the cup to His disciples saying: “This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many” (Mk. 14:24), “unto remission of sins” (Mt. 26:28); “This cup is the new covenant in my blood (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), which is shed for you” (Lk. 22:20). “The language ‘blood of the covenant’ is an allusion to Exod. 24:8, where blood, designated by this exact term, was sprinkled over the people to ratify the covenant. To this phrase Jesus added a direct allusion to Isa. 53:12, where the Lord’s Servant ‘poured out his soul to death’ and thereby ‘bore sin for many.’”¹²⁴ Luke and Paul make it very clear that Christ’s shed blood or sacrificial death inaugurates, ratifies, and secures all the blessings of the new covenant. “This covenant is called new in reference to the Mosaic covenant. The latter was ratified by the blood of animals; the new, by the blood of the eternal Son of God.”¹²⁵ Only Paul’s account adds the sentence, “This do [present active imperative], as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (1 Cor. 11:25). Before the words of explanation, Matthew’s account reads, “Drink from it, all of you” (26:27) while Mark notes, “they all drank from it.” Apparently one cup was passed from apostle to apostle. One cup per table (a real cup, not a plastic thimble; a cup of real red wine not Welch’s grape juice) was the practice of the original Presbyterians.

The institution of the holy supper sets forth an ordinance which is very simple, yet which has over time resulted in a number of different theories regarding this rite. While everyone except for a few radical modernists would acknowledge that Jesus Himself established the holy supper and that communion is a perpetual ordinance in the church; there is wide divergence over the meaning of the Lord’s supper, in particular the nature of the presence of Christ at or in the meal. Therefore, as our study proceeds we need to carefully study and understand the meaning of this sacrament.

The Names of the Holy Supper

There are various names attached to this special meal by Scripture and the post-apostolic church. These names shed light on the nature of the rite. (1) Paul refers to this ordinance as the “Lord’s supper” in 1 Corinthians 11:20. It is called a supper because it was first instituted immediately after the evening Passover meal. It replaced the paschal supper. Because the ordinance was established in the evening after supper and thus became “the Lord’s supper,” some Christians have argued that communion must only be celebrated in the evening at or around the time a supper would take place. Although the holy supper was established in the evening, both the post-apostolic and Reformed churches did not regard the time of the rite as essential to the meaning or practice of the ordinance. Some churches have communion at an evening service, while most have it in the morning. The exact time of this ordinance is circumstantial to its practice.

(2) Luke refers to communion as “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42, 20:7, 46; cf. 1 Cor. 10:16). There has been some debate over whether or not the phrase “the breaking of bread” always refers to communion or simply refers to a common meal and not communion at all. This discussion has arisen because ancient Greeks and Jews would often describe getting together with people to eat a meal as a coming together “to break bread.” Even though this phrase “the breaking of bread” was a common designation for a regular meal, it is likely that Luke was referring to communion and not simply a meal or love feast. Turretin writes, “That not common but sacred and eucharistical bread is thus denoted appears both from the Syrian interpreter (who translates it in ‘the breaking of the Eucharist’) and from a comparison with Acts 20:7, where the disciples are said to have come together ‘to break bread’ (tous klasai arton) (i.e., to the celebration of the Lord’s supper). It is so called from the rite of Christ, who ‘broke bread...’” 126

(3) Paul refers to the Lord’s supper as the “table of the Lord” in 1 Corinthians 10:21, “you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and the table of demons.” It is referred to as the table of the Lord because the bread and wine were placed on a table; and, it “is the table at which the Lord presides, and at which his people are guests.”¹²⁷ Paul’s point in this passage is that it is totally immoral and inconsistent for believers to commune with Christ the Savior and Lord and His holy people at communion and then commune with the devil’s followers at their special feasts.

“The basis of Paul’s prohibition is twofold: (1.) His understanding of the sacred meal as ‘fellowship,’ as the unique sharing of believers in the worship of the deity, who was also considered to be present. (2.) His understanding, based on the OT, of idolatry as a locus of the demonic.”¹²⁸

(4) The church fathers called the holy supper “communion” (koinonia) from Paul’s explanation of the supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” This is a common designation in our own day. The word communion is fitting, for the supper signifies and seals our union with Jesus in His death and resurrection and our communion with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. At the table God’s people have an intimate spiritual fellowship with each other that does not belong to the world—to those outside the wedding feast of the Lamb.

(5) The early church also called the holy supper “the Eucharist,” from the Greek word eucharistesa in 1 Corinthians 11:24, “when he had given thanks.” The holy supper is a time when we bless God (1 Cor. 10:16) and give Him thanks for the communion we have with our Lord’s sacrificial death and all the spiritual graces that flow from that redemptive work. It is also a time that we thank God for the sweet fellowship that we have with the people of God.

(f) Some of the early fathers referred to the holy supper as a “love feast” because in the apostolic church the Lord’s supper was connected with or immediately followed a fellowship meal of believers. This assertion can be deduced to a certain extent by 1 Corinthians 11:20 ff., in which Paul rebukes certain abuses which were connected to the Lord’s supper. The Apostle’s description of these abuses is very brief. Some were eating their meals ahead of others, some were getting drunk and some were left without adequate food. Apparently some rich believers were eating abundant amounts of food in the presence of poor believers (possibly slaves and poor freemen) and were not sharing with their needy brethren. This lack of charity, compassion and unity the apostle condemns with a stinging rebuke. Paul says that those people who are guilty of this infraction are despising the church—the body of Christ. Such people are not discerning the body. His solution is: “When you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home” (1 Cor. 11:33). Some commentators (e.g., Charles Hodge, Leon Morris)

believe that Paul is eliminating the love feast (e.g., “satisfy your hunger at home”) and exhorting the Corinthians to come together only to celebrate the Lord’s supper. Other scholars (e.g., Godet, Gordon Clark) believe that the Corinthians are exhorted to wait for each other to celebrate the love feast and the holy supper together in unison. “The apostle wished, that all seating themselves to eat together, the supper of each may become that of his neighbours; thereby it is [by] that the feast becomes a true agape.”¹²⁹ If one holds this interpretation the exhortation to eat at home if one is hungry would have the sense of, “If you are so hungry that you can’t wait to eat with your brothers then eat some food at home before hand so that you can wait.” “Paul wishes all to eat in common, so that the rich may assist the poor with their abundance.”¹³⁰

Turrentin notes that the love feast eventually was discontinued. The Council of Carthage (A.D. 417 or 418) decreed that “the sacraments of the altar should be celebrated only by fasting men” (Canon 29).¹³¹ The Council of Laodicea declares; “It is not right to hold love feasts so-called in the basilicas or churches, nor to eat in the house of God.”¹³² These prohibitions are very likely rooted in unbiblical superstitious views regarding the Lord’s supper and the church building as a sacred site common at that time. The biblical connection of a love-feast that is apparently closely connected with the holy supper raises a few important questions. Should the Reformed churches of today have a love feast in connection with the Lord’s supper? Does Scripture require the love feast during public worship? While it is likely that at one time fellowship meals preceded the Lord’s supper, there is no indication in the Bible that the love feast is necessary or required. This conclusion is based on the following observations. The Lord’s supper is a means of grace that is commanded by Christ while the love feast is not. Times of fellowship and mutual love are required by Scripture. However, fellowship in the sense of a meal, feast, picnic, party or whatever can take many forms and can occur at many different times or places.

The Meaning and Purpose of the Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s supper was instituted by Christ to serve a number of purposes. These purposes are intimately connected to the holy supper’s meaning. The important aspects of communion are as follows.

(1) There is a commemoration of the sacrificial death of Jesus. This commemoration involves a number of things. First, there is a remembrance of what our Savior did: “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Lk. 22:19b; 1 Cor. 11:24, 25). The observation of the elements, the breaking of the bread, the cup of wine, the words of explanation, and the consumption of the elements focus our attention upon Christ crucified. “In this Ordinance, the Bread broken represents the covenant sacrifice of the Lamb of God; the Cup represents the covenant itself sealed.”¹³³ The wine is separate from the bread indicating that our Lord’s blood was poured out by sacrifice. The Lord’s supper serves a similar purpose to the Passover where the children of Israel were to commemorate and remember their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt by God (Ex. 12:11-14; 24-27; 13:8-10; Dt. 16:1-8). Both the Passover and the holy supper involve a corporate remembrance. Both look back to real redemptive historical events. The Passover, however, is a type while Jesus is the antitype, the fulfillment of all sacrificial and redemptive types. In the Lord’s supper we “celebrate with grateful minds the immense love of Christ, who did not refuse to suffer a dreadful death for us and to pour out his blood.... Hewished to give the most appropriate symbol of this in the broken bread and the poured out wine; and not only broken and poured out, but distributed to us that even from this it might be evident that all this was designed and obtained for us.”¹³⁴ The Lord’s supper reminds us of the personal nature of Jesus’ redemptive work. Christ died for my own sins in particular. He personally loves me and cares for me so much that He invites me to come to His feast, to dine with Him and His people. This reality ought to strengthen our faith and encourage our hearts.

Second, this supper involves a proclamation. By this celebration the saints proclaim (katangellete, 1 Cor. 11:26) Jesus’ sacrificial death until he returns, “that is, they declare the good news of their salvation that makes them all one.”¹³⁵ “The Lord’s death is preached in the celebration of the Eucharist.”¹³⁶ “[T]he Lord’s supper is, and was designed to be, a proclamation of the death of Christ to continue until his second advent. Those who come to it, therefore, should come, not to satisfy hunger, nor for the gratification of social feelings, but for the definite purpose of bearing their testimony to the great fact of redemption, and to contribute their portion of influence to the preservation and propagation of that fact.”¹³⁷ “Paul...understands by the katangellein announes, the individual and collective proclamation of Christ’s love in His sacrifice, and of the glorious

efficacy of this act. Each one confesses that he owes his salvation to this bloody death.”¹³⁸ Matthew Henry writes, “We declare his death to be our life, the spring of all our comforts and hopes. And we glory in such a declaration; we show forth his death, and spread it before God, as our accepted sacrifice and ransom. We set it in view of our own faith, for our comfort and quickening: and we own before the world, by this very service, that we are the disciples of Christ, who trust in him alone for salvation and acceptance with God.”¹³⁹ Thus, we can see that neglecting this ordinance by the church or by individuals for whatever reason (whether a faulty interpretation of Scripture, a refusal to repent of sin, a purposeful neglect of the ordinance, a refusal to join the local church, etc.) is a serious violation of Scripture.

(2) The consumption of the bread and wine symbolizes our union with Christ and our participation in all the redemptive benefits of that union. Paul writes, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 10:16)? The word communion (*koinonia*) (from the verb *koinoneo*, “to partake of”) in this context refers to our participation in the body and blood of Christ by faith during the holy supper. This does not mean we literally eat or share in Jesus’ real flesh and blood but that by the Holy Spirit we are mystically united to the Savior in His suffering, death, burial and resurrection. A person who truly believes in Jesus, who has the Spirit of Christ within him (Jn. 6:56), who worthily partakes of the holy supper, communes with the Lord and His redemptive work by faith in a special way. The Lord’s supper is a true means of grace. It really gives spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. This point is stated beautifully in the Westminster Larger Catechism which reads: “As the body and blood of Christ are not corporally or carnally present in, with, or under the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper, and yet are spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses; so they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death” (Answer to Question 170).

“[T]he virtues and effects of the sacrifice of the body of the Redeemer on the cross are made present and are actually conveyed in the sacrament to the worthy receiver

by the power of the Holy Ghost, who uses the sacrament as his instrument according to his sovereign will.”¹⁴⁰ The spiritual nourishment that we need is both symbolized and truly received during our participation in the holy supper.

(3) The coming together as a body to eat the bread and drink the wine also symbolizes our unity, love and fellowship with other believers in the kingdom of Christ. “For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). “The design of the apostle is to show that everyone who comes to the Lord’s supper enters into communion with all other communicants. They form one body in virtue of their joint participation of Christ.”¹⁴¹ Paul is not teaching that Christians become that body when they partake of the holy supper, for earlier (1 Cor. 12:13) he says that all believers were baptized into one body by their baptism with the Holy Spirit. Rather, the Lord’s supper symbolizes and affirms what the Holy Spirit has already done as a consequence of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. Our union with Christ in His suffering, death, burial and resurrection is what brings us together under a common Head and makes us members of the same body. The Lord’s supper symbolizes salvation and its effects both individually and corporately. Our growth in grace helps us live consistently with our unity in the Spirit. That is why not discerning the body (the local church and its members) during the love feast immediately prior to the holy supper was such a hypocritical farce in Paul’s eyes. The apostle’s strong rebuke (1 Cor. 11:22) presupposes this aspect of communion.



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