

## The Lord's Supper

*<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> 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." <sup>25</sup> In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

*<sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor 11:23-32)*

### Introduction

My seminary years were a time when I discovered some of the deep and profound truths of the Christian faith. Hours were spent discussing and examining what were for me fresh and new concepts. Ironically, though, some of those discoveries were made in the familiar and commonplace things of the life of the church, things I had been around all my life, but the significance of which had never before occurred to me.

Each Wednesday evening at Trinity College in Bristol, England, we observed Holy Communion. While walking down the old stone steps on the way to the chapel for that service, one of those discoveries began to unfold for me. It suddenly occurred to me to ask, "What are we doing?" I knew most of the theology of the sacrament, so what I was really asking was this: "What is it that I am supposed to be doing during the Communion Service?" I had been in Sunday School and Church all my life and yet I don't recall *ever* having it explained to me. What does one do during the Communion Service? And what is its meaning?

Unfortunately, my ignorance is more typical than not. That which is supposed to be the high point of our worship and fellowship, and the clearest expression of unity in Christ, has been surrounded by conflict and shrouded in ignorance. The Reformation was nearly blown apart by the failure of the Zwinglians, Calvinists, and Lutherans to reach a consensus. Denominations as well as individuals are divided as to one's posture in receiving communion (standing, sitting, or kneeling), as to one's position in the church (in the pew, at the tables up front, or at the rail), and the form of the elements (a loaf of bread or crackers, wine or grape juice, a single cup or many cups). While some today continue to take a passionate interest in such things, the vast majority don't have any idea about the meaning or significance of any of these things, and frankly don't care.

This, of course, will never do. Communion is far too important in the life of the church to be allowed to suffer neglect. So, let us consider together what the Communion is, its purpose, and then its importance.

### **What it is**

*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread. (1 Cor 11:23)*

To state it most simply, the Lord's Supper is the Christian Passover. Paul refers in verse 23 to "the night when He was betrayed." What night? Passover eve. The Gospels emphasize that it was while observing the Passover that the Lord's Supper was instituted (cf. Mk 14:12ff; Mt 26:19; Lk 22:13). "As they were eating," Mark says (Mk 14:22). Eating what? Eating the Passover meal, the main element of which was the roasted lamb which had been sacrificed for the sins of the people. In this, the Passover lambs anticipated the Lamb who would come, and thus were symbols of the Christ, the Messiah, "The lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8), the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), "a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:19). Jesus takes the bread and declares it to be a new symbol for the Lamb, saying, "*This is my body.*" No longer would lamb represent The Lamb. Now bread would. Similarly with the cup. Whereas, the blood of the lamb in the original Passover was brushed on the doorpost of the house, He now says of the cup, "*This is my blood.*" Whereas, the central focus of the Passover was the remembrance of Israel's deliverance from the death angel through the blood of the lamb, Jesus commends a new remembrance, as we remember our deliverance from eternal death through the shed blood of Christ upon the cross. For, as Paul says,

*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*  
(1 Cor 5:7)

The Lord's Supper is the Christian Passover. In both, a symbol of Christ is eaten. In both, "remembrance" is central. In both, by eating, one participates in the benefits of the Lamb. In both, one eats with, as it were, one's "belt fastened" (Ex 12:11), in anticipation of the consummation of one's salvation. Because Jesus inaugurated a "new covenant," (Ex 12:25), He instituted with it new ordinances appropriate to it. The form is changed, but the central significance is the same. The Passover was fulfilled by and superseded by the Lord's Table. Holy Communion is the Christian equivalent of the New Passover service where we feed upon a symbol of Christ, participate in His benefits, and anticipate His return.

### **Its purpose**

*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 also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:24-26)*

What, then, are Jesus' purposes in establishing and perpetuating this ordinance? We have discerned already at least a four-fold purpose.

### **Commitment**

**First**, the Supper formalizes our commitment to Christ. The “blood of the covenant” (Mk 14:24), “the new covenant in my blood,” recalls the covenant made with Abraham, whereby God promised to be Abraham’s God, and Abraham promised to be His servant, and which was reaffirmed by succeeding generations. The “blood of the covenant” also recalls the words of Exodus 24:6-8, and the sprinkling of blood by which the old covenant was ratified. Like the Passover, and like the meal at the base of Mt. Sinai, the Lord’s Supper is a covenantal meal in which we participate in order to confirm or ratify our commitment to Christ, even as He confirms His commitment to us. The church father Tertullian (c.160 –c. 225 AD), a North African with a Semitic understanding of the significance of covenantal meals, coined the use of the Latin word *sacramentum*, a military oath used by soldiers to swear their allegiance to the emperor. The Lord’s Supper and baptism are sacraments. They are a form of oath-taking or promise-making. By inviting us to His table, Jesus sets before us the symbols of His death, His body and blood, and with them all the benefits thereby procured for us. Christ renews His promise of forgiveness of sin for the repentant, of salvation for the believing, of reconciliation with God and the gift of eternal life for all His disciples. We, in turn, renew our commitment to love, honor, obey, and serve Christ. Our mutual promises are thereby renewed, reaffirmed, confirmed, and ratified.

Faithful believers will find the Lord’s Supper to be a time of spiritual refreshment, as gospel promises are renewed, convictions deepened, assurance strengthened, and commitment renewed.

Lapsed or back-sliding believers will hear in the Lord’s Supper Christ’s call to repentance and revitalized faith, to recommitment and return to one’s “first love,” to “the deeds you did at first,” and a renewal of the covenant in Christ’s blood (Rev 2:5). With that call, they will see in the bread and cup the fresh offer for the benefits of Christ’s death: forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and the gift of eternal life.

Baptized but non-communing children will be reminded by the Lord’s Supper that they have unfinished business with God. The privileges of the table are not yet theirs. Those privileges come only with a public profession of their faith in Christ. It is vital that they confess Christ before men, that He might confess us before His Father in heaven (Mt 10:32). We are all required not only to believe in our hearts but also confess aloud with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead (Rom 10:9, 10). We urge you, the children and youth of the church, do not long delay in identifying yourself as a disciple of Christ, trusting in Him alone for salvation, and pledging obedience to Him. The Lord’s Supper is a time of spiritual renewal.

**Second**, the Supper is a *commemoration*. Twice, Jesus says to “do this in *remembrance* of me” (1 Cor 11:24, 25). As Jews remembered their redemption, their deliverance from death through the shed blood of the lamb as they ate, so we remember our deliverance as we eat. Thus, there is this focus in the first place upon the *past*. Remember! Remember the events surrounding His trial and death. Display and partake of the bread and the cup and, thereby, “proclaim the Lord’s death” (1 Cor 11:26). It is His death that is symbolized and His death that we remember. As I observe His table, I am to recall His suffering for us. Remember His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, when, upon entering, He said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Mt 26:38). Remember the drops of blood He sweat as three times He cried, “Let this cup pass from me.” Remember His betrayal, how He was deserted by all, betrayed even by a kiss (Lk 22:46).

Remember His trial: the mocking, the spitting, the beating, the scourging; they cried out, “Prophecy, who is it that struck you?” as they beat Him while blindfolded (Lk 22:64); they mockingly dressed Him in royal robes and drove a crown of thorns onto His head (Mt 27:29). “Away with this man. . . crucify Him,” the crowds cried out, preferring the murderer Barabbas to Jesus (Lk 23:18-21).

Then came the cross itself. The nails were driven into His hands and feet. Naked and shamed [a shame which, by the way, He despised (Heb 12:2)]. He endured the taunts of the crowd. “Save yourself,” they said (Lk 23:39). “He saved others; he cannot save himself” (Mt 27:42). Finally, in anguish, He cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). Remember! Remember, as the hymn leads us,

*O sacred head now wounded,  
With grief and shame weighed down;  
Now scornfully surrounded,  
With thorns thine only crown.*

We can appreciate why, in some traditions, they refer to the Lord’s Supper as the “Eucharist.” “Eucharist” is taken from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” We remember and cannot but give thanks for the One who was “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8), who “for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2), who, though He “knew no sin,” was “made . . . to be sin” for our sakes (2 Cor 5:21)! For me! For you! This is “amazing grace!” This is “amazing love,” as Charles Wesley wrote, asking, “How can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me?” Me, the rebel; me, the enemy; me, the slave of sin. He died for me!

In the bread we remember the tortured body of that perfect, righteous man. In the wine we remember His death, the sacrifice that was acceptable to God. We remember and give thanks.

**Third**, the Supper is a time of *communion*. As important as remembrance is, the Lord’s Supper is more than a memorial service. There is, in addition to the focus upon the past, a *present* reality to be experienced. By this we mean two things:

1. We experience *communion with Christ*. When Jesus says, “This is My body” (1 Cor 11:24), what does He mean? In what sense is the bread His body? In what sense is His body present in the elements? Is it His body physically, spiritually, or symbolically?

At the time of the Reformation, four views of His body’s presence, or personal presence, came to the fore:

- *Transubstantiation*, the Roman Catholic view, argued that the bread and wine became the actual body and blood of Christ, that there is a *transformation* of the *substance* of the elements into the substance of His physical body, though the “accidents,” the appearance, taste, touch, and smell remain that of the bread and cup. With this view comes a host of convictions and practices. The covenantal meal becomes a mass, the Supper becomes a sacrifice. Christ’s body and blood are offered on an altar, not served on a

table, by a priest, not a mere pastor or preacher. Priests elevate the host and parishioners bow and kneel before the host, giving to it the same adoration (*latria*) that is given to God. The mass is seen as a sacrifice offered to God; the laity were not permitted to receive the cup (lest through clumsiness they spill it); and celluloid wafers were sometimes used for bread (lest the crumbs of His body be left on the floor).

- *Consubstantiation*, the Lutheran view maintains, like the Roman view, that Christ is physically present but insists that this presence is in, under, and alongside that of the elements, while the substance of the bread and cup remain unaltered. At the Marburg Colloquy, Luther drew a circle within which he wrote, “This is My body,” adamantly insisting that Christ must be physically present, to the dismay of Zwingli and Bucer and the other Reformers attending.
- *Symbolic/memorial view*, identified (wrongly) with Zwingli and with present day Baptists, argues that there is no special presence of Christ at all, but that the service is merely a memorial service, the critical element being faith, and nothing in particular being gained by partaking of the elements.
- *Spiritual presence*, which we believe is the biblical view, argues that Christ is uniquely present in the bread and wine, that they are His body and blood *spiritually*. His presence is a spiritual presence. Thus, while He is not physically present, neither are the elements merely symbols. There is a special, spiritual presence of Christ in the elements so that they become His body and blood in a “true” sense, though in a spiritual sense. His words, says Cranfield, are “the pledge and the means of His real personal presence with them, though unseen . . . The primary gift of the Eucharist is the real personal presence of the risen, glorified Lord.”<sup>1</sup> Christ is uniquely present in the bread and cup. They are His body and blood, *spiritually*. His presence is a spiritual presence. While He is not physically present, neither are the elements merely symbols. There is true presence of the whole Christ in the elements, in the fullness of His humanity and divinity, so that they become His body and blood, in a “true” sense, though a spiritual sense.<sup>2</sup>

Reformed Protestants have argued that the finality of Christ’s sacrifice, His “once for all” atonement, make a sacrificial understanding of Communion untenable. Moreover, the natural understanding of Jesus’ words of institution would be metaphorical, not literal. One might compare “this is my body” with “I am the door” (Jn 10:9) or “I am the true vine” (Jn 15:1). These clearly are metaphors and surely would have been understood as such by His disciples. Both *theologically* (the doctrine of atonement) and *exegetically* (the natural reading of Jesus’ words) eliminate both transubstantiation and consubstantiation from consideration.

What does this mean for us? It means that though it is a mystery (and the mystery must be maintained!), through the table we enjoy what Paul calls *koinonia*, a “participation” in His blood and body (1 Cor 10:16). In other words, by partaking of His body and blood, we enjoy uniquely

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<sup>1</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, The Gospel According to Mark*. (1959; Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 426.

<sup>2</sup> For more from the present author on this subject, see *Worshipping with Calvin*, 149-179; and for further implications, *Serving with Calvin*, 250-273.

His personal fellowship, His personal presence with us. Take it a step further. Because He is uniquely present and there is a special fellowship to be experienced, there is also a special blessing to be received. Through our fellowship with Him at the table, our faith is strengthened, our character built, our love inflamed in a way that is unparalleled in our Christian experience. This is why Calvin, to the end, fought for weekly communion and why Knox advocated monthly communion, and why the Westminster Directory says, “Communion. . . is *frequently* to be celebrated.” Why? Because our Lord is to be enjoyed and His blessing received through His Table in a way which is unique and cannot be made through other means. Grace is not merely symbolized but actually imparted. Through the Lord’s Table we receive and have strengthened the grace by which we were born again and united to Christ and by which we were justified, adopted, sanctified, and will be glorified.

We might ask of any believer, is there not something distinctive about the Lord’s Supper? Isn’t there a dynamic presence that we experience there and nowhere else? Do we not partake of Christ deeply, uniquely, as we feed upon Him by faith? Is there not a strengthening of our souls that occurs as we see and taste and touch the One of whom we previously had only heard? These elements are not mere symbols. Through the elements we enjoy communion, a “brief, bright hour of fellowship,” *koinonia* with our Lord.<sup>3</sup>

2. We experience *communion with one another*. Because we enjoy fellowship with Christ, and we are all in Christ, we enjoy fellowship with one another. We look again at 1 Corinthians 10 and watch how consideration of fellowship with Christ naturally leads to consideration of fellowship with one another.

*<sup>16</sup>The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup>Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor 10:16, 17)*

The Apostle identifies an essential unity in the church. We are one. We eat “one bread,” and though we are “many,” we are “one body” in Christ. We are united to one another and through the table we enjoy and express and deepen that unity.

We are reminded through this service that we have a stake in one another. We “break bread” together as a sign of our commitment both to the Lord and to each other. It is a covenantal, a meal for the community of faith in covenant with one another and with the Lord.

Once again, surely this is our experience. This meal draws us together. By sharing in His body and blood, we do sense a greater closeness to each other and commitment to each other. Our love for each other grows. Our interest in each other grows. Our desire to see only good done in each other’s lives grows. Is this not our experience? If not, the reason lies not in the meal itself but in what goes on before and after the service. Because of social barriers, because of disinterest and

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<sup>3</sup> Horatius Bonar, “Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face,” *Trinity Hymnal*, #378, stanza 3.

lack of love, because of unreconciled offenses, we do not always experience the fellowship that we ought.

Disinterest, apathy, discord, unrest: these are fundamental betrayals of the meaning of the communion service. Indeed, if I have wronged, or even if I harbor resentment against a member of this body, I ought not even participate in this meal until that relationship is resolved. Why? Because by partaking we are saying we are one, and if we are not one, we bear false witness against ourselves.

May the symbol become a reality! May we become one in faith, one in purpose. May we remove whatever barriers there are to deep, even mysterious unity that we have with one another in Jesus Christ.

**Fourth**, the Supper anticipates the *consummation*. We are to focus our minds, not just on the past and present, but on the *future*. By observing the Lord's Supper, we proclaim His death "until He comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Thereby, we are directed to consider the Supper's place in light of the whole plan of redemption, even in what lies ahead. The Lord's Supper is a spiritual meal for this era which sustains the people of God until Christ returns and eternity overtakes time. As we partake, we are to look ahead to the great work that He *will do* at the end of all things. We are to lift our eyes from this world to the next, and to the great Messianic banquet which this meal anticipates, when we shall "recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God" (Mt 8:11); when He "is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God" (2 Thess 1:7, 8); when every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10, 11); when the new heavens and new earth are ushered in and we live in a world without sorrow, without pain, where Christ wipes away every tear (Rev 21:1-5); when the lion and lamb lie down together; when the weapons of our warfare are beaten into plowshares. All this we are to recall, and by so doing realize that

*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom 8:18)*

The world can be tough and disheartening. Life is filled with discouragement and heartaches. The Communion service reminds us that

*light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor 4:17).*

Sometimes it is not the discouragement of the world but the excitement that ruins us. Easily we get caught up in the things of this world and find ourselves living as though the here and now were all there is. The Supper is to calm and comfort us by reminding us that we are but "sojourners and exiles" in this world (1 Pet 2:11). Our "citizenship" is in heaven (Phil 3:20). We look forward to a "better country" (Heb 11:16). As bad as this world gets, we do not despair, remembering that our Lord shall return and bring with Him a perfect world, and we shall be in the presence of Him whose presence is the fullness of joy.

## Importance

*<sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup> That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor 11:27-32)*

The stern, even frightening verses that follow present the importance of eating the supper rightly. Not only must we regularly receive this spiritual meal, we must have it in the right way. Eat in an “unworthy manner,” and you “will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). Fail to “judge the body rightly,” and one “eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:29). Indeed, some had become sick and some had died because of abuse of the table (1 Cor 11:20). Therefore, “let a man examine himself” (1 Cor 11:28). This is why we “fence the table,” as it traditionally has been called, excluding those who are unrepentant or ignorant of the Supper. This is why churches traditionally have viewed the communion table as the point at which church discipline is to be exercised, as the poisonous leaven of immorality must be cleared out by the excommunication of the unrepentant (1 Cor 5:6-8). This is why a substantial level of accountability is necessary, and membership in an evangelical church is required. This is why we call all who partake to self-examination. It is a very serious thing that we do here, and is never to be entered into lightly.

A “low” view of the meal is impossible in view of these verses. There is a spiritual dynamic at work in the eating and drinking, the violation of which brings judgment that far outstrips what would have been if these were mere symbols. It is the very body and blood of Christ with which we deal and, therefore, the table is to be approached with great reverence and respect. It is our necessary spiritual food. What else did Jesus mean when He said,

*<sup>53</sup> So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. <sup>56</sup> Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (Jn 6:53-56)*

Is He not choosing a form of words calculated to direct our minds to the Upper Room and His Supper? Why would He speak of eating His flesh and drinking His blood if He did not mean for us to hear in that choice of words an echo of the words of institution? And this spiritual eating of His flesh and blood is vital for salvation. Through it we have “eternal life” (Jn 6:54). Through it we enjoy “true food” (Jn. 6:55), what the Apostle Paul calls “spiritual food” (1 Cor 10:3). Through it we “abide” in Him (Jn 6:56).



Are we now teaching a form of sacerdotalism? No. We are not saying the Sacrament saves. Yet are we saved without it, or, say, by confessing Christ but knowingly refusing His Supper? I doubt it. But what, at least, is perfectly clear is that we neglect the eating and drinking to the impoverishment of our souls. Through His Supper our souls are spiritually fed and we are blessed at depths which cannot be made up through any other means. This is a vital, crucial, necessary food for our souls.

So then, by observing the Supper, the Christian Passover, we commit ourselves to Christ afresh, we *remember* our redemption in Jesus Christ, we eat spiritual food and drink (1 Cor. 10;3, 4) and, thus, *commune* or fellowship with Him in His body and blood, and we *anticipate* His return to glory. How is it that we can undervalue this occasion? How can we neglect or abuse the Sacrament? Let us then frequently turn to the table, cleansing our hearts, focusing our minds, that we might feed upon Christ's body and blood by faith.