



COMMUNION

Covenant Church of Naples | PCA

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WHAT WE BELIEVE

The Lord's Supper: A Means of Grace

Text: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:17-34

We rarely appreciate things we do not understand. I can remember watching tennis several years ago with very little appreciation because I never really played the game. Now that I play, when I watch tennis I have a great appreciation for what's happening there. Those who've never studied music or played an instrument have a limited appreciation for a world class orchestra. Only after you have begun to understand just what is happening can you appreciate the difficulty and skill that goes into what you're hearing.

The same is true of the Lord's Supper. Many of us have not had the privilege of reflecting on and understanding at a deep level what this practice is, why we do it, and what it means. The result is that we tend to lack appreciation for it, which largely reflects our lack of understanding. Now, when it comes to an understanding of the Lord's Supper, we have people at Covenant who come from Reformed backgrounds, Baptist backgrounds, Lutheran backgrounds, Roman Catholic backgrounds, and more. Each of these traditions has a particular understanding of the Lord's Supper historically, but within each group I would guess that most people do not actually understand what their distinctive view is. With all due respect to the various backgrounds comprising our church, and recognizing that some of you are new to the faith and some have no faith yet at all, the purpose of this paper is to go back to the Scripture and help you understand the Lord's Supper as we understand it at Covenant.

A theology professor by the name of R. Scott Clark surveyed the theological opinions of about 200 undergraduate and graduate students at Wheaton College from 1995-1997. They represented a pretty good cross section of American evangelicalism. And here's what he found: ["Almost uniformly at the outset of their basic theology course they confessed that they had been taught that the Supper is one's declaration of faith in Christ. Most had never been taught a connection between the Supper and the Gospel."](#) So a majority view in evangelicalism is that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (and of baptism also) is primarily a declaration of your faith.

When the Lord's Supper does happen to be connected to the gospel it is usually seen as nothing more than a cognitive aid for rehearsing the sacrificial death of Jesus. In other words, for some, the primary point of the Lord's Supper is to help you remember and appreciate the death of Jesus for you. We call this the "memorial" view of the Supper: the Supper is a means of remembering (hence "memorial") the death of Christ. Unfortunately, while this view is common, and many wonderful Christian brothers and sisters understand the sacrament that way, it falls short of the robust view given in Scripture. A better understanding is set forth by R. Scott Clark: ["The sacraments are not about what one has or has not done; rather, they testify and seal to us what Christ has done for us and in our place."](#) So the Lord's Supper is not about me professing faith as I do something as much as it's about me receiving by faith what Christ has done for me. In this way we understand the Lord's Supper to be a means of grace. It's one of the ways Christ shares with us the benefits of the redemption He accomplished for us, but it's not the only way. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, ["The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation."](#) (Q. 88)

The Lord's Supper is one of God's primary delivery systems through which what is signified in the Supper is actually given to His people. In the same way that the Bible and prayer are vehicles through which God works in the lives of believers to build them up in the faith, so He also works through the sacraments in those who believe. Let's take a look at the central text of Scripture that describes the Lord's Supper to gather what we can about the wrong way to celebrate the Lord's Supper and the right way to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

I. There is a wrong way to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the following verses the apostle points out the wrong ways they went about the Lord's Supper in Corinth. We'll only consider this briefly.

1. If we're worse for coming together rather than better, we're not doing it right. Paul writes in **verse 17**, **"But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse."** (1 Corinthians 11:17) Can you imagine being Paul and having to say to the church, "when you all get together, you actually get worse!" But that was the case here. Their assembling for these love feasts (which would've included the celebration of the Lord's Supper) was actually the occasion for their sinning.

2. If we're not coming together in unity, we're not doing it right. The specific way they were getting worse was that the Lord's Supper became an occasion for division, selfishness, and mocking the poor. Listen to what he says in **18-22**, **"For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not."** (1 Corinthians 11:18-22) So the historical context here is that they celebrated communion in the context of these bigger meals called "love feasts" to which everyone brought food; that is, everyone brought food who *could*. At Corinth people were bringing their food and eating it without sharing with those who had none. Not only that, but people who brought their own wine were drinking it all themselves and not only not sharing but getting drunk!

These particular wrong ways of celebrating the Lord's Supper are not so common today as they were in the first century church, primarily because we don't celebrate the Lord's Supper as a separate meal but, rather, right here in our worship service. It's difficult to get drunk from one shot of grape juice, no one brings their own food, and everyone gets the same portion. Yet we have our own ways of not coming together. When we are not cognizant of the needs of brothers and sisters around us, when our recognition of their need and our unity in the body of Christ does not compel us to do all that we can to meet their need, we're not celebrating the Lord's Supper rightly. That's why the church through most of history has taken an offering for those in need at the end of the communion service, as we do for our mercy ministry fund each time we have the Lord's Supper. It's the natural and expected response to celebrating the communion we share with Christ and one another. I want to encourage you to come to the communion service prepared to meet the needs of brothers and sisters through giving to the Mercy Ministry fund administered by our Deacons. But now I want to focus primarily on the right way to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

II. There is a right way to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This isn't the place to say everything there is to say about the Lord's Supper, but if I were to boil down into four statements what we do when we celebrate this meal, I believe it can be summarized in "four looks".

1. We Look Back. When Paul recounts for the Corinthians what this is about, he recounts for them what happened in the upper room on the night Jesus was betrayed. We read in verses 23-26, **"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, 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.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."** As we consider these words of institution, there are at least two things to understand about this meal.

a. Jesus Instituted the Lord's Supper at the Passover Meal. Without going into great detail, we can observe that celebrating the Passover is what they were doing in the upper room that evening. Jesus is instituting the New Covenant meal in the course of the celebration of an Old Covenant meal. The fact that Jesus chose that time to institute the Lord's Supper clues us in as to the meaning of the Lord's

Supper itself. The Passover, if you recall, was instituted in Exodus 12 on the day that God delivered His people out of their slavery in Egypt. On that night, God accepted the death of a substitutionary lamb in place of the death of the firstborn of all Israel. Every household that had the blood of the lamb on the door was “passed over” when the angel of death came through destroying and they were spared from death. And God having killed the firstborn of all the Egyptians, then brought His people out of slavery and into salvation. Every year the people of Israel were to commemorate this event by celebrating the Passover in a very particular kind of way to help them look back at God’s mighty act of salvation on their behalf through the blood of the lamb. But God’s people no longer sacrifice a lamb. Why not? As Paul will say in **1 Corinthians 5:7**, “**Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.**” And in this meal Christ is showing his disciples in advance that He is the one whose blood will save them from the judgment of God and deliver them from their slavery to sin, death, and hell.

b. We Eat and Drink in Remembrance of Christ and His Saving Work. This is Jesus’ explicit instructions as they are recounted by the apostle Paul. Twice Jesus says that, when you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are to “**do this in remembrance of me.**” In remembrance of what particularly? We remember that God gave us the Lamb, His Son, to be our substitute who was given for us and bled out in our place. We deserve our bodies to be broken and our blood to be poured out for our rebellion against God. Through His sacrificial death on the Cross, we have been saved from that judgment. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are not re-sacrificing Christ as is understood in Roman Catholic dogma. Our confession of faith makes clear: “**Christ is not offered up to his Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all..**” We are remembering His one sacrifice which was sufficient to accomplish the salvation of all His people, taking away our sins and reconciling us to God once for all! So the Lord’s Supper is a look back to God’s saving work in the Passover and His far more perfect saving work through the sacrificial death of Christ. In fact, Paul says in verse 26, “**For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.**” Not that Christ is sacrificed over and over, but that we proclaim His sacrifice over and over until He returns.

2. **We Look Up.** Throughout much of church history, nearly everyone has agreed that we are somehow communing with the risen Christ in the celebration of this meal. How exactly that works has been the subject of much debate. But in very short order I want to make the case to you here that when we eat the Supper, contrary to Roman Catholic thinking, we’re not eating the actual flesh and blood of Christ and, contrary to much Baptist or Memorialist thinking, we’re not simply remembering something that happened in the past. We’re actually participating in something real, in the present. Let me answer two common questions, then share our view.

a. Is Christ physically present? There are many arguments against believing that the bread and wine are the actual body and blood of Christ. But the simplest one is this: Christ the God man was sitting there with the disciples in flesh and blood when he instituted the Supper. He was embodied. His blood was within Him. Bread and wine did not become His flesh and blood in that moment, and He did not intend for us to think that this is what’s happening now. When He said, “This is my body” referring to bread, He is very clearly speaking symbolically. Much the same way that the man in the old public service announcement would hold an egg and say, “This is your brain.” Then he’d drop it in the frying pan and say, “This is your brain on drugs.” He’s clearly speaking symbolically. None of us mistake him to mean that our brain has turned into an egg.

b. Is Christ present at all? If we were to say that in celebrating the Lord’s Supper we’re only remembering something that happened long ago and that nothing is happening presently in relation to Christ we would also be mistaken. This meal is not an ordinary meal. When we eat and drink with faith we do actually share in communion with Jesus. Paul says earlier in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, “**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? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we are actually sharing in Christ. The word for "participation" here is the word we saw a few weeks ago, **koinonia**. It refers to sharing in something in a very real and practical way. Paul says that in this meal, we share in Christ Himself and also in the benefits He has accomplished for us through His broken body and shed blood. And this is not a new idea. In verse 18 he shows how this was true in the Old Testament, "Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?" Those who ate the old sacrifices in faith really shared in the benefits of what those sacrifices represented. The eating was significant, and it remains so in this new covenant meal. But why?

c. Christ is spiritually present. The bread and cup represent His body and blood. We're told to eat and drink them. But if the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial as many claim, then why do we need to eat and drink them? Can't we simply look at them, or even better simply look at the Cross to remember His sacrifice? Of course. But Jesus wants us to do more than remember. He wants us to eat and drink which is our participation in what these elements represent: Christ's saving death on our behalf. When we actually eat and drink the Supper, we're not simply remembering an event that happened a long time ago, but we are proclaiming, "On the Cross, Christ died for me, and I'm sharing in the benefits of that death right here and now." **We believe that when we eat and drink with faith, Christ is spiritually present and we not only participate in the benefits of Christ, but we commune with the person of Christ.** The effect is that we are nourished and refreshed by His person and work in a very personal way.

Therefore the character of this meal should be one of deep joy. Yes, we're acknowledging our need for Christ's death on account of our sins, but the overarching note is joy in the gospel message that He has actually given Himself for us! One pastor tells the story of how a little boy was sitting in the pew with his mother and sister during the Lord's Supper. And his sister was being kind of fussy. And the boy says loud enough that others could hear, "Shhh! Mom's trying to feel bad for her sins!" The Lord's Supper is not primarily a time we wallow in our sins but when we celebrate Christ's victory over our sins! Because of this sharing with Christ, it's important that we not only look back and look up, but also,

3. **We Look Around.** Paul warns against partaking in the Supper in an unworthy manner in verse 27, "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." (1 Cor. 11:27) As we saw earlier, there is a right way and a wrong way to approach the Lord's Supper. To partake in an unworthy manner is to be guilty of the body and blood of Christ. We typically think of partaking in an unworthy manner as having unconfessed sin in our lives, and that's true. But in the context, the particular sin Paul is addressing has to do with their attitudes and actions toward each other, especially toward the needy among them. For the people to be selfishly consuming their food while excluding and embarrassing their poorer brethren was contrary to the self-giving love of Christ displayed at the Cross. **For us to come to the table without being cognizant of our actions and attitudes toward our brothers and sisters in Christ is contrary to the Spirit of Christ who gave Himself up for us all.** The solution is not to abstain from the Supper. Rather, we read in **verse 28**, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." After examination, and presumably confession and repentance, only then we should participate. It's an opportunity to recalibrate our lives to the truth of the gospel.

Then Paul goes on to explain further what he means in **verse 29** "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." So before eating and drinking, we must discern the body. What does it mean to discern the body? Clearly he's speaking of the body of Christ. In what sense? I believe he's using the phrase in two ways. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we are participating in His body which was given for us. And precisely for us, the body of Christ. **If in our examination of ourselves as part of the body of Christ, we are not recognizing the corporate body of Christ, we are not participating in a worthy manner.** This is also why unbelievers are not to eat the

Supper, because they do not discern the body, nor are young children, who are unable to discern the body.

The consequence of not examining themselves is found in **verses 30-33**, "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world."

Paul is telling them that it is precisely their party spirit and disregard for their poorer brothers and sisters in the Lord's Supper that has prompted the Lord to discipline them through sickness and death. This in itself is worthy of a full paper but, suffice it to say, these are believers who are getting sick and dying on account of their unworthy participation. The Lord loves His people enough to afflict us with sickness and death so as to preserve us from eternal damnation. What's the solution to the dangers of unworthily partaking? To avoid the Lord's Supper, or only do it once a year because it's better safe than sorry? No, he tells us in **verse 34**:

"So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment." In other words, when you come together for the Supper, look around, be cognizant of the fact that you are part of one body and let your actions and attitudes reflect that fact. Where our actions and attitudes do not reflect the selfless and self-giving love of Christ, we must humbly confess and repent and rejoice that the blood of Christ takes away all our sins! Finally, we look back, we look up, we look around, and

4. We Look Forward. In the Supper we are most certainly looking back and remembering what Christ has done, but when Jesus instituted the Supper, He also was teaching us to look forward to His return. What we discover is that this meal is just a foreshadowing of a much greater feast that's still on its way. Jesus said in **Matthew 26:29**, "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Jesus said this as He was drinking the cup. A day is coming when Jesus, with all of His disciples will celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb. Then the communion, the fellowship with Christ that we experience now only as "through a glass darkly" will come to its fullest realization. Not only that, but the fellowship we share with each other will reach its full consummation.

So the next time we come to the table to celebrate the Lord's Supper, I want to encourage you to take four looks. First of all, look back. Remember that you were a slave to sin as surely as the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. You could not set yourself free from the debt of sin. But Christ the Passover lamb was slain for you and by His death your debt has been paid and you have been set free. This meal declares: "You are free!" Second, look up to Christ with whom you have fellowship in this meal. He offers you to eat of His body and drink of His blood in a spiritual sense so that your soul may be strengthened in this gospel truth as surely as your body is fed by the bread and juice. Third, look around. All of us who are trusting in Christ are sharing in Him as is evident by the fact that we all eat from the same source. Examine yourself and ask if your life toward your brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly the neediest among us, reflects Christ's self-giving sacrifice. If there is sin, confess it and rejoice that Christ's once-for-all sacrifice was enough to cover it all. Then finally, look forward. The Scripture tells us that Christ will come again and, when He does, He will consummate a wedding feast like nothing we could ever imagine. As you eat the bread and drink the cup, rejoice that one day we will eat and drink together with Him in the Father's kingdom. Your grief, your trials, your struggles against the world, the flesh and the devil will not go on forever but will come to an end the moment that trumpet sounds. So with good courage and hope, let us eat and drink and proclaim His saving death continually with great joy until He comes again.