



The Lord's Supper

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The Lord's Supper

Christians have been celebrating the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), known also as the Lord's Table or communion (1 Corinthians 10:16), for about two thousand years – ever since Christ instructed His disciples to continue to do so until He returns.

Unlike baptism, which is a one-time event, the Lord's Supper is a practice meant to be observed over and over again throughout the life of a Christian. It is a holy time of worship when we come together as a body to remember and celebrate what Christ did for us. Ever since Jesus instituted this practice at the Last Supper, it has served as a beautiful reminder of the sacrifice of His body and the shedding of His blood on our behalf. It is a sign of our continued participation in the atoning benefits of Christ's death. As we participate in the Lord's Supper, we remember and proclaim the death of Christ and signify our unity with other members of Christ's body. In addition, when we approach the Lord's Table in faith, accompanied by self-examination, we receive spiritual nourishment for our souls.

The Principle: The Real Meaning of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper was established by Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:23-25 quotes the Lord Jesus as calling His Church to follow His example of taking bread and the cup with the phrase, *"Do this in remembrance of Me."* Christ instituted this practice in Matthew 26:26-29, and because of his command to *"do this,"* it is not optional for the Christian. Note too that this practice was established by the authority of Christ, not the church.

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the church.

First, we believe that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the Lord. What we mean by this is that the Lord Jesus commanded it—He ordained it—in a way that would make it an ongoing practice of the church. As an ordinance, the Lord's Supper does not bring special grace in and of itself. Some Christians refer to the Lord's Supper a "sacrament" – something that is set apart as sacred – and consider the ceremony and elements to be holy in and of themselves. However, because we consider the Lord's Supper to be only symbolic and testimonial in nature, we believe it is more appropriate to refer to it as an ordinance, rather than as a sacrament. The Lord's Supper was ordained by Christ and is to be practiced in obedience to Christ – but not to receive some special grace.

The Lord's Supper is symbolic in nature.

The Lord's Supper is an "outward expression" of an "inward reality." In this way it is similar to baptism, which is an outward expression of the inner reality of our death, burial and resurrection to new life in Christ, as His substitutionary sacrifice for our sin takes effect on our behalf.

The bread and the cup are only symbolic of the body and blood of Christ. This understanding stands in marked contrast to several other views that have traditionally been held by various churches:

- Transubstantiation: the belief that as part of the ceremony, the bread and wine literally change into the body and blood of Jesus.
- Consubstantiation: the belief that Christ's literal presence does not replace but is added to the bread and wine and imparts grace.
- Real Presence: the belief that Christ is really present in the elements, but that this special presence is spiritual, rather than physical.

When Jesus said, "*This is my body*" and "*This is my blood*" (1 Corinthians 11:24-25), what would the original hearers of these words have understood them to mean? Knowing that Jesus often used illustrations from daily life in His teaching, His disciples would almost certainly have considered these words to be nothing more than pictures of spiritual truths. While sitting with Jesus at the Last Supper, the disciples could not possibly have understood Jesus' words, "*This is My body*" (Matthew 26:26), to mean that the bread was literally His body. Inasmuch as Jesus was still in His earthly body when He spoke, His disciples would no more have considered the bread to be the physical extension of His flesh than they would have considered Him to be a literal door when he said, "*I am the door*" (John 10:9), or to be a literal plant when He said, "*I am the true vine*" (John 15:1). The meaning of our Lord's words is this: "*This bread represents my body; this cup represents my blood.*"

There is no indication that Jesus meant, or that His disciples understood Him to mean, anything more than that. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic reminder of Christ's death, much as the memorials in the Old Testament caused Israel to remember God's work on their behalf (Joshua 22:9-16). Indeed, Jesus spoke these words within the context of the Passover, which was also given as a memorial to help people remember God's work (Exodus 12:14). Christ is our Passover Who was sacrificed for our sins (1 Corinthians 5:7). There is but one sacrifice for sins for all time (Hebrews 10:12), and as the bread is broken, we must recognize the finality of this sacrifice. Christ's body is not continually being broken for sin.

The Purpose: To Remember Christ

The Lord's Supper is a memorial to remind us of Christ's death.

Many people erect memorials to remember their dead. Christians come to the Lord's Table to remember, not millions, but "The One" who suffered and died for each of us. But just as there was no inherent power in the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, there is no inherent power or supernatural quality in the elements of the Lord's Supper. The bread and the cup are not holy in and of themselves, nor is the act of partaking of the bread and of the cup holy in and of itself. In other words, no special grace is conferred upon us when we observe the Lord's Supper. It is not a means by which God conveys His grace to sinners. God's grace is conveyed to us by Christ alone, through faith alone. The purpose of this memorial is not to convey grace, but rather to help us *remember* Christ's death and our commitment to follow Him as our Lord.

When the children of Israel crossed over the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land, the first thing Joshua did was to set up a pillar of stones *as a memorial*. Its purpose was to remind the future generations of Israel about the faithfulness of God in keeping His covenant promises by bringing the people out of bondage in Egypt, caring for them in the wilderness and bringing them into the Land. Similarly, the Lord's Supper is a memorial designed to remind us of God's faithfulness when He fulfilled His covenant to us by providing Jesus as a sacrifice in payment of the debt we owed to God because of our sins. In 1 Corinthians 11:24-26, Paul explains it like this: *"And when [Jesus] had given thanks, He broke [the bread] and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way [He took] the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink [it], in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."*

An instructive comparison can be made between the sign of the old covenant and the sign of the new covenant. Just as the Sabbath day represented the old covenant (Exodus 31:12-17), the Lord's Supper is a sign of the new covenant (Luke 22:20). A major purpose of the Sabbath was to remember how God had delivered Israel from Egypt (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:15); a major of the Lord's Supper is to remember how Christ delivered us from sin. This explains, in part, why the Sabbath is unique to the Old Testament and the Lord's Supper is unique to the New Testament. Also, just as the Passover was a memorial to celebrate God's work through the death of the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:1-28), in the Lord's Supper we proclaim God's work through the death of His Son until Christ returns (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Participation: The Requirements for the Lord's Supper

1. The Lord's Supper is part of the natural progression of our discipleship and is to be celebrated in an ongoing manner.

We believe that in New Testament times, new believers participated in the Lord's Supper only after having taken the initial step of obedience and discipleship commanded by Christ by publicly identifying themselves with Him through the waters of baptism (cf. Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38-42). It was their baptism that marked them as members of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13), and it was the members of that one body who symbolically participated in the body and blood of Christ by means of the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

The New Testament presents a natural progression for believers.

- First, there was a profession of faith and trust in Christ that was displayed through repentance (Acts 2:38).
- Then believers were called to obey Christ's command to be baptized, publicly displaying the internal work of salvation in their lives - routinely immediately upon conversion (Acts 2:38, 41, Acts 8:12; 8:36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:1-5; cf. Matthew 28:19).
- Then, following this initiatory ordinance that symbolized their entry into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), believers began participating in the ongoing commemoration of Christ's death, burial and resurrection through the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42, 46).

As we read in Acts 2:41-42: "Those who accepted [Peter's] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They [that is, those who had been baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Nevertheless, while this is our conviction, we recognize that not all genuine believers have the same understanding with regard to the New Testament's teaching about who may participate in the Lord's Supper. And because we do not wish to create division in the body of Christ, it is not our policy to exclude from the Lord's Table those believers whose understanding is different from ours.

2. *The Lord's Supper is for all who are walking in fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and with other believers.*

When we gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper, the elders will regularly admonish those who are present to examine their hearts and lives before participating – confirming that they are walking in fellowship with and in obedience to Christ. Some of the ways the New Testament speaks of walking in fellowship and obedience include:

- Having submitted themselves to the lordship of Christ by turning to Him as Savior and Lord.
- Having taken the first step of obedience and discipleship commanded by Christ to publicly identifying with Him through the waters of baptism.
- Having made everything right with God by confessing any recent sins and renewing their commitment to live for Him.
- Harboring no resentment or other ill feelings toward any fellow believer, inasmuch as the New Testament teaches that those who have been forgiven are themselves to extend forgiveness.

If you find yourself out of fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ at the time the Lord's Supper is being shared, we would encourage you to repent and make right your wrong before participating – or, if that is not possible, to abstain from participating and then go and make right your wrong.

Matthew 6:12; 26:26-30; 28:19-20; Luke 22:19-20; Romans 10:9-13; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 21; 11:23-28; 1 John 1:9

3. *We should partake in a worthy manner.*

None of us is worthy to stand before God. None of us deserves what God did for us through His Son. This is the great message of God's grace and mercy. But we need to make sure that we participate in the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner, and not carelessly. The Bible says that if we eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner, we are eating and drinking judgment on ourselves, because we are failing to discern or recognize the Lord's body (1 Corinthians 11:29). When people do not take the Lord's Supper seriously, they treat the Lord Himself with indifference. He therefore calls us to examine our motives, in order to keep us from needing His corrective discipline, which might include sickness or even death. (1 Cor. 11:30)

The Place: The Role of the Church

The Lord's Supper is to be celebrated within the context of gatherings of believers in Christ.

It appears that the Lord's Supper is a celebration to be observed not privately, but publicly. The Lord Jesus gathered His disciples together for the Supper, and the church at Corinth was instructed collectively to eat the bread and drink the cup. Note that 1 Corinthians 11:26 refers in a plural sense to eating, drinking and proclaiming, while verse 27 refers in a singular sense to self-examination. The gathered believers (plural) partake together, while each participant (singular) individually examines himself or herself.

The Lord's Supper is for the church.

The New Testament speaks only about the Lord's Supper being served within the context of the worship experience of the early church (1 Corinthians 10:17; 11:33-34). The frequency of the celebration of the Lord's Supper is often set by the times a church gathers in its regular meeting location. The Word of God does not mandate how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper. It says only, "*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup . . .*" (1 Corinthians 11:26), indicating flexibility in terms of frequency.

The Lord's Supper is to be administered by the elders of the church.

Inasmuch as the Lord's Supper is intended to be celebrated during public worship services, it seems consistent with New Testament practice that elders should ordinarily be the ones to lead the congregation in the celebration of this ordinance – although on certain occasions they might delegate this responsibility to other qualified men.

The Profit: Our Response to Christ

The Lord's Supper encourages us.

Our public observance of this ordinance is of great practical value for our lives, providing us with opportunities to:

- Examine ourselves—to acknowledge our sin and need of a Savior.
- Personally testify—to present the message of Christ's sacrifice for sin.
- Strongly confirm—to state our faith and commitment to His Lordship.
- Excitedly react—to live as if Christ's return is imminent. It is!

By partaking in the Lord's Supper as an act of obedience, we show the Savior that we trust Him and are grateful for our salvation. We also testify before other people that our faith is in the living Christ and that we expect Him to come again.

The Lord's Supper encompasses us.

Observance of the Lord's Supper is multi-dimensional. When we come to the Table of the Lord, it is appropriate to look in three directions:

We look behind – to the past event of Christ's death.

The Lord's Supper looks back to Calvary and the death of Jesus on our behalf. Jesus said, *"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."* In the bread we see a symbol of Christ's body that was broken for us. In the cup we see a symbol of His blood that was shed. A backward glance instills gratitude to Christ for the price He paid for our salvation. This should move us to greater obedience to Him.

We look ahead -- to the future event of Christ's return.

We look ahead in time. *"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."* This ordinance will remain a focal point of our worship until the Lord returns. At that time, we will be with Him and will therefore have no further need for reminders. A forward glance reminds us of the promise of His return and of the joy of living with Him forever in His Kingdom.

We look within – to the present work of Christ's Spirit.

Paul said that we should partake of this Supper after a time of personal evaluation. We should ask ourselves questions such as, Am I right with God? Have I done anything to disrupt my fellowship with Him? Am I in good standing with others in the body of Christ? Are my attitudes and actions consistent with my profession of faith? These are good questions to ask. The Spirit of Christ will use the time of the Lord's Supper to build a

heart within us that is yielded to Him and sensitive to His will. A current probe into our souls, confessing our sins and making things right before we partake of the Lord's Supper, can be a powerful tool to help us mature toward a righteous life.

Conclusion

Just as people were not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for people (Mark 2:27), so people were not made for the Lord's Supper, but the Lord's Supper was made for people. The Lord's Supper was not given as a ritual for us to follow mindlessly or to infuse us with special grace from God. Rather, our Lord gave us this ordinance as an external expression of our inward faith, to encourage us to remember His sacrifice for sin and to renew our commitment to follow Him with our whole heart.

Covenant

Based on our acceptance of the preceding principles we affirm the following covenant:

- We affirm that Christ established this meal as a remembrance of his death, burial and resurrection.
- We affirm that our salvation is obtained solely by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.
- We affirm that this ordinance serves as a continuing proclamation of the public profession we made at our baptism.
- We affirm that this Supper is an outward expression of the inward reality of our salvation.
- We affirm our recognition of the Lord's Body, which was broken for us on Calvary.
- We affirm our need for personal examination and confession of sin.
- We affirm our commitment to celebrate this Supper until our Lord returns.

Based on this public affirmation, let us partake together.