

The Sign and Seal of the Lord's Supper

I. Types and Sacraments

Every week, we partake of the Lord's Supper together. Why do we do this? What does it really mean? And why every week?

We saw last week that the New Covenant isn't something outward. It's the inward substance to which the outward and typological Old Covenant was pointing. And yet there are two outward and physical ordinances (or sacraments) that are fundamental—and even essential—not to our justification, but to our full participation in the blessings of the New Covenant. How do these external New Covenant sacraments relate to the external Old Covenant shadows and types?

I use “sacrament” in the sense of a *holy and sacred visible sign and seal of an inward saving grace*. These inward saving graces were always operating during the days of the Old Covenant, but they were not, themselves, tied to or produced by the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant wasn't designed or intended to bring about any inward transformation. This explains why even though God was working inwardly and savingly in the hearts of Old Covenant believers, there were no Old Covenant “sacraments” in the sense in which we're using this word. The Old Covenant signs and seals were all external signs of outward and visible realities (e.g., circumcision was the sign of membership in an ethnic covenant community). Therefore the Old Covenant signs and seals were all typological because the Old Covenant itself was typological (it could only point ahead to the New Covenant as the grounds for any true inward transformation). The two New Covenant signs and seals, on the other hand, are sacramental because the New Covenant is, itself, the inward saving substance to which the Old Covenant was pointing. In the New Covenant sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) we hear and see God's word to us, confirming His saving work in us — in our hearts.

Last week, we saw that baptism is the sacred New Covenant sign and seal of these inward saving graces: Of our once-for-all cleansing from sin through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and of our once for all passing safely in Christ through the waters of death and judgment. So what about the Lord's Supper?

II. The key to understanding the Lord's Supper

The first part of the key to understanding the Lord's Supper is understanding that it's a *supper*—it's a meal, where we eat and drink (Mat. 26:26-27). In our day, we can tend to forget this since we're not eating around a table and since the amount of food we're eating wouldn't normally constitute a snack, much less a full meal. Maybe another reason Christians tend to forget that the Lord's Supper is a supper—a meal—is because it's often called “Communion.” There's nothing wrong with this in itself. Paul says that “the cup of blessing which we bless [is] a sharing [a communion] in the blood of Christ” and “the bread which we break [is] a sharing [a communion] in the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 10:16). And yet in the only place where Paul names this sacrament, he calls it “the Lord's Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20).

If the first part of the key to understanding the Lord's Supper is understanding that it's a supper, then the second part is understanding that it's the *Lord's Supper*. This is His table, where He is the Host and where He provides the food and drink.

In order to grasp fully the significance of this meal, we need to understand the Old Testament background.

III. The meaning of a meal in the ancient world

One commentator points out that “banqueting was one of the most important ancient institutions for social bonding” (Green on Jude 12). Another person says, “The act of dining together is considered to create a bond between the diners. In the ancient world this symbolism was carried by various elements of the banquet, such as the sharing of common food or sharing from a common table or dish” (Smith; quoted in Green). It's this bond created by dining together that explains the language of David in Psalm 41:

- Psalm 41:9 — Even my close friend in whom I trusted, **who ate my bread**, has lifted up his heel against me.

And it's this bond created by dining together that also explains why a shared meal often accompanied the making of a covenant between two parties.

IV. Covenant meals and sacrificial meals

So we read in Genesis 26:

- Genesis 26:26–30 — [Abimelech and his adviser Ahuzzath] said [to Isaac], “We see plainly that Yahweh has been with you; so we said, ‘**Let there now be an oath between us—** between you and us—and **let us cut a covenant with you**, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of Yahweh.’” **Then he made them a feast, and they ate and drank.**

Once they ate and drank together, it was socially unthinkable that either party should do the other any harm. We could say that the shared meal signified and sealed the covenant oath. We read in Genesis 31:

- Genesis 31:43–54 — Then Laban answered and said to Jacob “...**Come, let us cut a covenant**, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.” Then Jacob took a stone and raised it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his relatives, “Gather stones.” So they took stones and made a heap, **and they ate there by the heap**... And Laban said to Jacob, “Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me for harm. The God of Abraham... judge between us.” So **Jacob swore** by the dread of his father Isaac. Then **Jacob offered a**

sacrifice on the mountain and called his relatives to **eat a meal**; and **they ate the meal** and spent the night on the mountain.

Notice that in this example, the food that's eaten is from an animal offered in sacrifice to God. In other words, it's a sacrificial meal. The point here is to emphasize that God Himself is a witness to this meal which they share together as a sign and seal of their covenant oath.

While there's no covenant explicitly mentioned in this next passage, it does appear that a covenant—or some type of formal bond—is being established.

- Exodus 18:12 — Then **Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God**, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to **eat a meal** with Moses' father-in-law **before God**.

In all three of these examples we have horizontal covenants made between men. But what happens when we have a vertical covenant that God initiates with men?

V. Two meals at Mount Sinai

We read in Exodus chapter 24 (when the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai):

- Exodus 24:5–8 — [Moses] sent young men of the sons of Israel, and **they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to Yahweh**. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took **the book of the covenant** and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people and said, “**Behold the blood of the covenant, which Yahweh has cut with you** in accordance with all these words.”

It's immediately upon the ratifying of this covenant that we go on to read in verses 9-11:

- Exodus 24:9–11 — Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel [representing the people of Israel as a whole], and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; **and they beheld God, and they ate and drank**.

What were they eating and drinking? I believe it must have been the meat from the animals offered in sacrifice. And why were they eating and drinking? I believe it must have been because Yahweh Himself had called them to this meal as a sign of the covenant bond now established between Yahweh and His people. Of course, we can't think of God actually eating the food with them, but we can think of God as the host at the meal and the one who provides the food on the table by means of the covenant sacrifices.*

* There *is* a horizontal dimension to this meal because God is making this covenant not with an individual, but with an entire people (cf. all of Israel's sacrificial/cultic meals; Deut. 12:6-7; Exod. 12:5-8). When Moses and Aaron, and Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel eat a meal in God's presence there is, by default, a

It's against the backdrop of this meal eaten in the presence of Yahweh that we feel the full weight of Israel's betrayal in Exodus chapter 32.

- Exodus 32:3–6 — Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he took this from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” And Aaron looked and built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh.” So the next day they rose early and **offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings**; and the people sat down **to eat and to drink...**

The people who had eaten a meal in the presence of Yahweh now eat a meal, as Paul would say, in the presence of demons (1 Cor. 10:20), effectively breaking—in this way—their covenantal bond with Yahweh (Exod. 32:7-8, 15, 19).

It wasn't only at the initiation of the covenant that the people ate a meal before Yahweh. These meals were woven into the very heart of Israel's worship.

VI. Meals at the temple

Many of the sacrificial animals that the people of Israel offered on the altar were to be eaten in God's presence by the household of the man who brought the sacrifice.

- Deuteronomy 12:6–7 (cf. 27:5-7; Lev. 7:15; 1 Sam. 9:12-13) — “There [to the place which Yahweh chooses for His dwelling] you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the contribution of your hand, your votive offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. **There also you and your households shall eat before Yahweh your God...**”

What was the significance of eating the sacrifices that were offered on the altar “before”—or in the presence of—Yahweh? Paul answers this question in 1 Corinthians chapter ten:

- 1 Corinthians 10:18 — Look at Israel according to the flesh. Are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers [participants] in the altar?

What Paul is saying is that “[all] those eating the meal from the food taken from the altar are counted as those who offered the... sacrifice” and so they all... share in the benefits arising from the altar (Ciampa-Rosner on 1 Cor. 10:18; cf. Barrett). The material benefit of food arising from the altar represents the spiritual benefit of a right (old) covenant standing before God which also arises from the altar (cf. Deut. 12:7b). Therefore, eating food that was offered in sacrifice to Yahweh on His altar is the sign of a covenant bond with Yahweh Himself — and of a

“fellowship” with one another (representing the bond that exists between *all* the members of the covenant people). But as important as this horizontal dimension is, it's wholly subservient to the vertical bond of fellowship that—together—they're experiencing with their covenant Lord.

participation in His redemption (His Old Covenant redemption).[†] Eating Yahweh's food in Yahweh's presence was a powerful sign of the covenant bond of fellowship that He had entered into with His people.

VII. The Cover-over (Passover) meal

When it comes to Old Covenant cultic meals (meals associated with Old Covenant worship), the one meal that stands out among all the rest is the annual Cover-over (Passover) meal (for "Cover-over" see sermon on Exodus 11:1-12:36 Part I). We read in Exodus chapter twelve:

- Exodus 12:5–8 — “Your lamb shall be a male, without blemish, a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. And you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. Moreover, they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. **And they shall eat the flesh** that night, roasted with fire, and **they shall eat it** with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.”

The blood of the Cover-over lamb or goat applied to the doorposts and lintel of the house meant that instead of entering that house to destroy the firstborn, Yahweh would “cover over” that house and protect those who were in it. More than that, He would deliver these people from their slavery to the Egyptians (the crossing of the Red Sea), form them into a nation in covenant with Himself (Mount Sinai), and give them the promised inheritance of Canaan. So when the people ate the Cover-over meal (which included the meat from the lamb or goat whose blood had been applied to the doorposts and lintel) this was a sign of their participation in all the benefits of Yahweh's redemption. It was a sign of the covenant bond of fellowship that was being established between Yahweh and His people.

Remember that this Old Covenant redemption was an external and typological redemption (deliverance from Egypt; crossing the Red Sea; an ethnic covenant people; a temporal inheritance). Most of those who ate that first “Cover-over” meal and who were spared the death of their firstborn were not true believers (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-11; Heb. 3:12-19). Their participation in this meal and this outward Old Covenant redemption was a type pointing to their need for a participation in the “true” redemption that would one day be accomplished through Christ our Cover-over Lamb, and the blood of the New Covenant (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7).

VIII. The Lord's Supper

Are we prepared, now, to understand the power and the beauty of “this” meal (the Lord's Supper)? In light of the meaning of sharing a meal in biblical times, and in light of how sharing a meal was often used as the sign and seal of a covenant oath and bond of fellowship, and in light of how sharing in a sacrificial meal was a sign of sharing in all the redemptive benefits that that sacrifice represented, and in light of how all these realities come to perhaps their fullest Old Covenant expression in the Cover-over sacrificial meal, we can understand, now, the meaning of what Jesus does while eating this Cover-over meal with His disciples.

[†] Contrariwise, to eat food offered in sacrifice to an idol (Exod. 32:3-6) is, according to Paul, to become “sharers [or participants] in demons” (1 Cor. 10:20; cf. Garland and Hendriksen on 1 Cor. 10:18).

- Matthew 26:26–28 (cf. Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:17-20) — **While they were eating**, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it. And giving it to the disciples, He said, “**Take, eat; this is My body.**” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “**Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.**”

Jesus takes this Old Covenant typological meal and transforms it now into a New Covenant sacramental meal. No longer is this meal the sign of an outward and temporal redemption (a type); now it’s become the sign of an inward and eternal redemption (a sacrament). And so we see that in reality it’s no longer the same meal at all. The “Cover-over” meal is rendered obsolete, along with all the other sacred Old Covenant meals, because they’ve all been fulfilled in this one meal (the Lord’s Supper).

IX. A sacramental sign and seal

It’s in and through the New Covenant that Jesus gives us the food to eat which “endures to eternal life” (Jn. 6:27). This is a food that we partake of not literally with our mouths, but spiritually by faith. So Jesus says in John chapter six:

- John 6:47, 53–56 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life... [U]nless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood [a metaphor for savingly appropriating the benefits of His sacrificial death by faith], you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood [He who believes] has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is *true* [spiritual] food, and My blood is true [spiritual] drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”

Not only does Jesus provide the meal as the host at the table, but He is Himself the food at the table as by faith we partake of all the redemptive blessings that come to us through His sacrificial death. While Old Covenant believers did partake of Christ by faith (cf. 1 Cor. 10:4; Heb. 11:24-26), this wasn’t a blessing belonging to the Old Covenant. They partook of Christ only by virtue of a Covenant not yet established. This is why there could be no Old Covenant sacramental sign and seal of eternal redemption. But now that the New Covenant is here, this meal that we eat is, in fact, the sign and seal of our spiritual participation in all the “true” and eternal blessings that come to us through Christ’s sacrifice — up to and including that day when Jesus will eat and drink “with [us]” at the Messianic banquet in His consummated kingdom (Mat. 26:29; 1 Cor. 11:26). Here in this meal that Jesus provides for us and that we eat in His presence (mediated through His Spirit; 1 Cor. 3:16; Rom. 8:9) is the sign and seal of our covenant bond of fellowship with Him—and even of our being nourished upon Him, who is Himself our food and drink. So intimate is the connection here that Paul refers to the spiritual reality *by means of* the external sign.

- 1 Corinthians 10:16 — Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?

And so we can see, now, how our regular observance (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26) of this sacrament is fundamental—and even essential—not to our justification, but to our full participation in the

blessings of the New Covenant. It's only when we eat this meal—and at no other time—that we hear by faith Jesus' own constantly renewed word to us: "Take, eat; this is My body... Drink... all of you; for this is My blood." This is why it's biblically appropriate for us to eat the Lord's Supper *every* Lord's Day—because it's impossible that we should ever hear these words too often.

X. "Do this in remembrance of Me"

When Jesus said, "Do this in *remembrance* of Me" (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25), He wasn't saying that this meal is only a "bare" memorial. When Yahweh reveals His name to Israel, He says:

- Exodus 3:15 (Ps. 45:17; 102:12) — This is My name forever, and this is My remembrance-name [the name by which I am to be remembered (worshiped and called upon)] from generation to generation.

God says in another place:

- Exodus 20:24 — In every place where I cause My name to be remembered [worshiped and called upon at My altar], I will come to you and bless you.

So when Jesus says, "Do this in *remembrance* of Me," what He's saying is that in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, God is revealing His name to us in Christ so that we might then call upon that saving name in thanksgiving and praise (a picture and expression of our covenant bond of fellowship). When Jesus says, "Do this in *remembrance* of Me," He's promising that in this meal where God is revealing His name to us in Christ and where we are calling upon His name by faith, He Himself comes to us and blesses us (an expression of our covenant bond of fellowship with Him and participation in His redemption. This is another reason why it's biblically appropriate for us to eat the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. It's impossible that we should ever have His name revealed too often, or that we should ever hear too often the assurance that He comes to us and blesses us.

XI. "There is one bread"

We've been emphasizing that in this meal we have the sign and seal of our covenant bonds of fellowship with Christ (who is the Host at the table), and our participation in Christ (who offers Himself to us as true spiritual food and drink; see Thiselton on 1 Cor. 10:16). But because this covenant is made not with separate individuals, but with the one bride (cf. Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 21:2, 9-10) and the one body of Christ (cf. Eph. 1:22-23), therefore this meal that we eat together is also the sign and seal of our covenant bond of fellowship with one another.

- 1 Corinthians 10:17 — Since there is one bread, [Paul says,] we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

This isn't to say that the Lord's Supper is a time for conversation with one another (such as we engage in at a church picnic or potluck), but it is to say that nowhere do we have more

powerfully represented to us our oneness in Christ than we do in this sacramental meal that we all share in together (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29).[‡] Here is yet another reason why it's biblically appropriate

[‡] In the early church, the bread and the cup were partaken of in the context of a full meal (1 Cor. 11:20-22, 33-34); what Jude refers to as a “love [feast/meal]” (Jude 12). This name “must derive from the dominant early Christian sense of the love of God reaching men through Jesus Christ [vertical] and creating a fellowship of love among Christians [horizontal]” (Bauckham). I am not aware of any clear evidence as to what this meal looked like. Lenski (with others) believes that the “Agape” (love [feast]) preceded the sacramental meal, and so was more easily distinguished—and ultimately separated—from it (Lenski on 1 Cor. 11:20). In this case, we might assume that the love feast was horizontally focused (and “less sacred” in character) while the sacramental meal was vertically focused (cf. Moo on Jude 12; Kelly, however, points out that even on this assumption the love feasts must have had “profound religious significance”). On the other hand, Davids (with others) believes that “at least until A.D. 250, when the concepts of priest, sacrifice, and altar begin to appear with respect to the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper[/love feast] was a reenactment of the Last Supper [and/]or the fellowship meals of Jesus and his disciples. That is, it was a common[?] potluck meal with bread broken at the beginning and a cup of wine shared at the end” (Davids on Jude 12). I would argue, however, that in this case, the *entire* meal is sacred (and—we may assume—vertically focused) precisely because of the bread broken at the beginning and the cup of wine shared at the end. If, indeed, the Lord’s Supper was a “reenactment” of the Last Supper which was, itself, eaten in the context of a “Cover-over” (Passover) meal, then we may look to the traditional Jewish observance of “Cover-over” for possible insight into what a love feast might have looked like (see below). This would confirm our suggestion that the love feast was preeminently “vertical” in nature, resulting by default in a horizontal experience of Christian fellowship. In any case (and notwithstanding Davids’ reference to A.D. 250), the general consensus seems to be that by the middle of the 2nd century, the love feasts had become in some places—if not everywhere—independent of the Lord’s Supper (cf. Kelly; Bauckham; Justin Martyr [below]). Lenski observes that the love feasts “were eventually dropped and were never revived; the Lord’s Supper was celebrated at the public Sunday services without a meal preceding it” (cf. Hendriksen’s distinction between the love feast and the “church service” proper; see also Justin Martyr [below]).

“The Passover ritual is outlined in *m. Pesahim* 10:1–7. Here a benediction is offered to God over the *first cup*; seasoned food including unleavened bread (cf. 5:7 above) and *haroseth* (paste of nuts and fruit pounded together and mixed with vinegar) is brought before the host; *the second cup* is mixed, and the son asks the father about the meaning of the ritual; “Why is this night different from other nights?” (*Pes.* 10:4). The father begins the recital of God’s redemptive acts, including Israel’s corporate self-involvement in, and witness to, these events: “A wandering Aramaean was my father . . .” (Deut 26:5ff.; cf. Exod 12:37–39). Bitter herbs are eaten “because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our fathers” (*Pes.* 10:5). The self-involving character of the narrative becomes explicit in the use of the first person singular in the Mishnah: “It is because of what the Lord did for *me* when *I* came forth out of Egypt” (*Pes.* 10:5). The *seder* (i.e., set quasi-liturgical order) proceeds with an expected response of praise, using the first part of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113–114. . .), concluded with a blessing, but specifically a blessing (of God) for *redemption*. . . Probably the majority of scholars associate **the cup of blessing** in this verse with *the third cup* of the Passover *seder* which now follows. Sharing this cup represents a participation. . . in the redemption achieved in this context not by liberation from the oppression of Egypt but the costly purchase of freedom from sin (1 Cor 6:19) won through the “body and blood” of Christ. However, after the third cup, the head of the household or the host leads in further praise by completing the *Hallel* (Psalms 115–118), usually associated with [the hymn] of Mark 14:26 (Matt 26:30), and a blessing is finally offered over *a fourth cup*. D. Cohn-Sherbok argues for the view that [the ‘cup of blessing’] in this verse denotes this fourth cup, after which there was allowance for further praise” (Thiselton on 1 Cor. 10:16).

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine [mixed with] water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given [the eucharistic elements], and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons” (Justin Martyr, early 2nd cent.; quoted from “The Ante-Nicene Fathers,” Vol. 1).

for us to eat the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day — and also why any voluntary neglect of the gathering of the church every Lord's Day to eat the Lord's Supper is a sin against God. Paul says:

- 1 Corinthians 11:27 (cf. vv. 28-32) — Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner [while unrepentantly sowing discord in the church], shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

What this must mean, then, is that any voluntary neglect of the Lord's Day assembly is, by default, a culpable neglect of the body and the blood of the Lord (cf. Num. 9:13). But then we remember that this sobering warning is simply the corollary (the necessary consequence) of how wonderfully powerful and beautiful this sacramental meal is.

Conclusion

Our sharing in this meal is the sign and seal of our sharing in all the “true” and eternal blessings that come to us through Jesus' sacrificial death—of our sharing even in Jesus Himself as our true food and drink. Here in this meal that Jesus provides for us and that we eat in His presence is the sign and seal of our covenant bonds of fellowship with Him — and therefore also with one another. Here we see how fundamental—and even how essential—is our regular observance of this sacramental meal to our full participation in the blessings of the New Covenant. It's only when we eat this meal that we hear by faith Jesus' own constantly renewed word to us: “Take, eat; this is My body... Drink... all of you; for this is My blood.”