

Understanding the Lord's Supper

Intro:

In virtually every tradition, Christians gather weekly, monthly, quarterly, or in some cases annually and hear the words, "Do this in remembrance of Me," or something like them. Then they eat a bit of bread and drink a sip of juice or wine.

However, in spite of the commonplace nature of the Supper, for many Christians this is all a mystery. What does it all mean? What are we doing when we gather around the Table?

Put these questions to any Christian and the answers will vary from the utterly vague to the theologically precise and all points in between.

For some, taking the Supper amounts to merely going through the motions without awareness or thoughtfulness. The warning text in 1 Corinthians 11, even if read, may make little impression. The words of institution are perhaps read, maybe heard, and then the Supper is over, a hymn is sung, and it's back to daily life.

For others, the Supper is a time of intense personal introspection associated with unrelenting guilt. Am I truly saved? Will I be taking the cup in unworthy manner? Have I truly repented of my sins, or was it merely a worldly sorrow?

Though the extremes and unbiblical notions of overwhelming guilt and thoughtless routine are common in many churches, there is another way of partaking of the Lord's Supper – a better way, a biblical way.

Thus it is my goal this morning to provide us with both a biblical understanding as well as a practical application of what is commonly called Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Table, or, as I will be referring to it, the Lord's Supper.

If David Dockery is correct in saying that the highest form and expression of corporate Christian worship is the Lord's Supper, then we would do well to pay attention to what the Bible teaches about it.

As we did with baptism last week, I want to teach through the Lord's Supper by answering a couple of simple questions about it.

1. What does it represent?

Passages like Matt. 26:18, Mark 14:14, and Luke 22:15 clearly show that Jesus Himself intentionally linked it with the Passover meal of the OT, where God's covenant community – Israel – was commanded by God to celebrate His delivering them out of bondage from Egypt.

- According to Exo. 12, the “congregation” of Israel was to select “a lamb without blemish”, one per household, which was to be slaughtered at twilight, and then eaten together in haste with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.
 - According to v.13, the blood of this slaughtered lamb was to be “a sign” between God and His people, for when the angel of judgment was to pass through the land of Egypt, he would “pass over” any household that had the lamb's blood applied to the lintel of their doorposts.

Thus the Passover meal was the celebration not only of Israel's redemption out of her slavery, but also her deliverance from God's judgment on her sins.

- That God, out of the sheer abundance of His electing grace in fulfillment to His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had provided a substitute for His people who would propitiate His just wrath on judgment day, typified on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year.
 - Exo. 12:26-27 – “And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for He passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.’ And the people bowed their heads and worshiped.”

This is precisely what John the Baptist understood when, upon seeing Jesus, cried out, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7b)

- In fact, as one reads the gospel of John, it is clear that his entire account is chronologically broken up into Jesus' three Passover encounters during His ministry in Palestine.

However, it is important to note that Jesus does not merely keep or repeat the Passover meal celebration with His disciples; He fulfills it and transforms it.

- This is clear in, for example, Luke 22:19-20 – “And [Jesus] took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to [His disciples], saying, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood”.”

In other words, the Passover celebrated the deliverance of God's people under the old covenant, whereas the Lord's Supper celebrates God's deliverance of His people under the new covenant.

- Israel was redeemed out of their bondage to physical slavery to the Egyptians; the new Israel has been redeemed out of her bondage to spiritual slavery to sin, the world, and the devil.
- Israel was temporally delivered from God's judgment of sin by the blood of an innocent and unblemished lamb; the new Israel has been eternally delivered from God's judgment of sin by the blood of Jesus Christ, the innocent, sinless, and perfect Lamb of God who *alone* can fully and finally forgive the sins of His people (cf. Heb. 10:1-18).

Just as Israel was instructed by her first deliverer (Moses) to “remember” what took place at the exodus by celebrating the Passover (Exo. 12:14; Deut. 16:3), so Jesus – Israel's true and ultimate Deliverer, instructs His disciples to continue to partake the bread and cup to remember the true exodus He has provided for His people at the cost of His life.

- Vickers: This sacrifice and redemption serves as a constant reminder to God's people that their life came from death. Salvation comes at the price of blood.

Simply put, the Lord's Table is a visible reminder to God's people of the gospel of Jesus Christ – the Good News that our sins have been forgiven because of His broken body and shed blood.

2. When and where should we celebrate it?

Though there is no explicit command as to how often we should celebrate it, I believe the Scriptures hint that we ought to have it weekly, if possible.

It seems that the early Christians celebrated the Lord's Table *every time* they gathered together as a church.

- Amazingly, in Acts 2, where we see the first church formed, the believers gathered “day by day” for teaching, praying, table fellowship, and “breaking bread” (2:42, 46), something that clearly points to their celebrating together the Lord's Table.
- In Acts 20:7, Luke tells us that when Paul was visiting the church in Troas, that he gathered with them on the first day of the week (i.e. Sunday, the Lord's Day) “to break bread.”
 - The grammar here is strong. Though he gathered with them to “talk” (i.e. preach), Luke says that the primary purpose that Paul gathered with them was “for the purpose” of celebrating the Lord's Table with them.¹

Moreover, they only celebrated when the church had “gathered together.”

- Paul uses the verb “to gather together” five times in 1 Cor. 11 where he deals exclusively with the Lord's Table in Corinth, and twice when he deals with their corporate worship problems in chapter 14.
 - In other words, the Table is meant to be shared among the *entire* body when it has gathered *corporately* to worship the risen Lord on the first day of the week.

¹ If this is the case, this verse argues against what is called in theological circles “closed communion”, that is, limiting the Lord's Table only to those who are members of that particular church. Paul was a member of the church in Syrian Antioch, and yet was invited to partake with the church here in Troas.

From these passages a clear pattern emerges of a *weekly* celebration of Communion in the NT.

- I am not arguing here that weekly celebration of the Table is a direct biblical command, and that failing to do so constitutes sin.
- I am arguing that this is the pattern in the NT and therefore would be the best practice.
 - “In our man-centered age where so many services are shamefully devoid of any meaningful reference to the cross, could we not benefit from a move to a regular use of the Christ-ordained means for reminding us of the cross? In an increasingly “visual” age, might we not benefit from regular use of the visible, tangible portrayal given to us by Christ? In a day when we are so captivated by the allures of this age and seemingly interested in *Our Best Life Now*, do we not need regularly the Christ-ordained means of reminding us of His promised wedding feast when He returns for us? Might not “the Bride” (cf. Rev. 21:9; 22:17) be more pure if regularly reminded of the coming wedding?”²

3. Who is it for?

In theological terms, this new covenant meal is only for new covenant members.

In layman’s terms, the Lord’s Table is only for born-again believers in Jesus.

- In other words, if you have never been birthed into God’s kingdom and family by God’s Spirit, then this family meal is not for you.

What is the evidence or fruit that one has received this “new birth”?

- 1 John 5:1-5 – those who have been “born again”:
 1. Believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God
 2. Love Jesus *and* His people

² Ray Van Este, “The Lord’s Supper in the Context of the Local Church”, in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ till He Comes*, ed. Thomas S. Schreiner and Matthew Crawford (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 372.

3. Love *and* obey God's commandments

As we saw last week, those who evidence this new birth, this Spirit-wrought and regenerative inward washing, by repentance and belief in the gospel are to be subsequently baptized publicly into membership in a local church.

- Someone ought not to come to the Table unless they are recognized by the church as a believer.
 - The “passport”, then, to admission to the Lord’s Table is meaningful membership in a local church.
 - ➔ Baptists believe the clear teaching of the NT is that one’s public profession of faith is expressed in believer’s baptism.

However, when one’s lifestyle is not consistent with their profession of faith as declared in their baptism/immersion (see Rom. 6:1-14), they must be excluded from the Lord’s Table.

- In 1 Cor. 5, Paul clearly teaches that the church is to excommunicate those who are defiantly unrepentant by refusing them to participate (lit. “fellowship”) in the Lord’s Table.
 - Thus, church members who are under church discipline for their refusal to repent from their sinful ways are not to partake of the Table *until* they have evidenced repentance in their lives (see 2 Cor. 2:5-11).

What then does it mean to partake of the Table “**in an unworthy manner**”?

- 1 Cor. 11:27 – “Whoever 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.”

Theologians are almost unanimous in their agreement that this refers to:

1. Unbelievers who have “snuck in” to the Corinthian church as members.
 - This was a perennial problem in the early church, and still exists today.

2. Members who are living in unrepentant sin (such as the man in ch.5)

The solution to this is simple: in the context of the mention of those who have suffered the Lord's judgment in the form of weakness, sickness, and death (11:30), the way to avoid judgment in 11:31 is to judge oneself rightly.

- This seems to entail recognizing sin and repenting of it.
 - As Gordon Fee notes, "One does not have to get rid of the sin in one's life to partake, but surely the proclamation of the Lord's death in the elements and the call to examine oneself are an occasion to take stock of one's life and repent of all known sin."
 - ➔ Judging oneself in this way delivers one from the Lord's judgment (11:31-32).
 - ➔ Hamilton: "In our flippant culture we are not reflective enough. Self-examination, however, is not an end to itself. It should be spurred by our awareness of the behaviour of Christ, which in turn should lead to repentance and celebration of the sufficiency of Christ's death. Self-examination should be prompted by our understanding of Christ's love, and it should then be swallowed up in our awareness of God's mercy to those who believe."

This conviction amazingly comes as one "remembers" the Lord's broken body and shed blood.

- The gospel has more power to convict and humble the sinner than any other force in the world.
 - It is not enough to remember our unworthiness to partake of the Table. We must by faith remember Christ's worthiness and that our participation in His saving benefits are ours not through our merit but through our faith in Him. The Lord's Supper is a testimony from God of His love for us, not our religious devotion to Him. The value of the supper is not in what we are doing, but in what Christ has done.

➔ For every look to self, take ten looks to Christ! (M'Cheyne)

Review:

1. What does it represent?
 - The gospel (redemption, propitiation, forgiveness of sins, acceptance)
2. When and where should we celebrate it?
 - Regularly in the local church
3. Who is it for?
 - Believers only, which is recognized by the local church in membership

Conclusion:

This feast is the ultimate reminder of who the Lord is, what He has done, and what He promises to do.

The four ways we are urged to look as we celebrate the Table:

1. Backwards (the gospel)
 - Christ has instituted that His believing community – the local church – identify itself not only by saying the gospel together, but in seeing the gospel together.
2. Around (community)
 - 1 Cor. 10-11 make it clear that this is not a private, isolated meal, but rather a family meal; a covenant meal amongst the covenant community that as one body partakes of the one Body.
 - One of the greatest sins that the Table seems to rectify is division in the community that arises from pride, unforgiveness, and bitterness is the intentional remembrance of the One who humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross, that His foes might become not only His friends, but His family.

3. Within (introspection)

- As Christians we are not merely commanded to 'say' the gospel; we are also summoned to 'see' the gospel. Our new life depends on Jesus' life being torn away from Him. We must remind ourselves that His body was scourged, that He was impaled on a cross with nails, and that He poured out His blood – His very life – that we should live. There must be a horror, a massive evil that resides in us, if such a death is required for our life. The observance of the Supper provokes us to consider why such a sacrifice was necessary, and we begin to realize that there is something terribly wrong with human beings – that there is something terribly wrong with us. Our live depends on the torn flesh and bloody sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. We always eat and drink the life of what dies, and so as we eat and drink we are reminded that we derive our very life from the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.³

4. Forwards (His second coming)

- Cf. 1 Cor. 11:26b; Rev. 19:7; Mark 14:25

When we take the bread and the cup, we relive (not re-enact) and take part in what God has done, is doing, and is yet to do for us.⁴

John 6 – we must feast by faith.

- INVITATION!!!
- WARNING
 - Dear unbeliever, or professing Christian living in unrepentant sin, do you realize that when the bread and cup pass before you, you are publicly declaring that you refuse to let go of your sin. That you would rather die in your sin than repent of it and taste of the Lord's gracious salvation. In declining the elements you are proclaiming before the risen Christ that you refuse to trust in His finished work for sinners like you.

³ Thomas Schreiner, in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, 1.

⁴ Vickers, 322.

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Dockery – without a doubt, the Lord’s Supper was observed with considerable frequency in the early church in order that believers might partake and be nourished and strengthened in the life of God.

Spurgeon – My witness is, and I speak the mind of many of God’s people now present, that coming as some of us do, weekly to the Lord’s Table, we do not find the breaking of bread to have lost its significance – it is always fresh to us. I’ve often remarked on the Lord’s Day evening whatever the subject may have been, whether Sinai has thundered over our heads or the plaintive notes of Calvary have pierced our hearts, it always seems equally appropriate to come to the breaking of bread. Shame on the church that she would put off to once a month and mar the first day of the week by depriving it of its glory in the meeting together for fellowship and breaking of bread, and showing forth the death of Christ till He comes. Those who know the sweetness of each Lord’s Day celebrating His Supper will not be content, I am sure, to put it off to less frequent seasons.

Packer – What we need more than anything else at the Lord’s Table is a fresh grasp of the glorious truth that we sinners are offered mercy through faith in Christ who forgives and restores, out of which faith comes all the praise that we offer and all the service that we render. For this everlasting gospel of salvation for sinners is what the Lord’s Supper is all about. At the Holy Table, above all, let there be praise.

Van Neste – Christ drank the cup of God’s wrath, leaving us only “the cup of blessing” (1 Cor. 10:16).