

The Lord's Supper

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper
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Christians have been celebrating the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), known also as communion, together for about two thousand years, ever since Christ instructed His disciples to continue to do so until He returns. This is done by partaking in bread and juice, or wine, together in a local church setting. However, different churches understand and practice communion differently. The New Testament teaches the meaning and motivation for observing communion, with the key text being 1 Corinthians 11:23-34.

The Principle: The Reality of the Lord's Supper

1. 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 the command "*do this,*" it is not optional for the Christian. It is also a practice established by the authority of Christ, not the church.

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

Ordinance is an important word and helps to clarify the meaning of the communion. *An ordinance is an outward rite prescribed by Christ to be performed by His church.* As an ordinance, it does not bring special grace in and of itself. Some churches call the Lord's Supper a "sacrament," or something that is set apart as sacred and consider the ceremony and elements to be holy in and of themselves. The number of sacraments varied until 1562 when the Council of Trent limited the number to seven for the Catholic Church. However, only two observances, baptism and communion, are taught explicitly in the New Testament as commands of Jesus, and because they are symbolic and testimonial in nature, it is better to use the term ordinance rather than sacrament. It was ordained by Christ and is to be done in obedience to Christ, not to receive a supposed mystical blessing.

3. The Lord's Supper is symbolic in nature.

Communion 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 rising to newness of life with Christ as His substitute sacrifice for our sin takes effect on our behalf.

The elements of bread and wine are clearly symbolic. Our Savior simply took the unleavened bread and wine of the Passover dinner and incorporated them as the elements to be used in communion, to symbolize His body and blood.

This contradicts flawed views that have been traditionally held in the church. Transubstantiation, as found in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, teaches that as part of the ceremony, the bread and wine literally change into the body and blood of Jesus. Consubstantiation, as found in the teaching of the Lutheran Church, teaches that Christ's literal presence does not replace but is added to the bread and wine and likewise imparts grace. The teaching of reformed churches retains the real presence of Christ in the elements, but claim that special presence is spiritual, not physical.

When Jesus said, "*this is my body*," and "*this is my blood*" (1 Corinthians 11:24-25) we must consider the meaning of these words to the hearers. The disciples would have most clearly understood them as nothing more than a picture of a spiritual truth, as Jesus often used illustrations from daily life for the purpose of teaching. They would not have sat at the Last Supper and believed that Jesus' words "*this is My body*," (Matthew 26:26) meant the bread was literally His body. As He was still in His earthly body when He spoke, His disciples would have no more considered the bread physical extension of His flesh anymore than when Jesus said "*I am the door*" (John 10:9) they considered Him to be hardware or when He said, "*I am the true vine*" (John 15:1) they considered Him to be a plant.

The meaning of our Lord's words is this: "*This bread represents my body. This wine represents my blood.*" There is absolutely no indication that He meant or His disciples understood Him to mean any more than that. The Lord's Supper is symbolic and represents Christ's death for our remembrance, much as the memorials in the Old Testament caused Israel to remember God's work on their behalf (Joshua 22:9-16).

Indeed, Jesus' words were given in the context of Passover, which also was given as a memorial to remember God's work (Exodus 12:14). Christ is our Passover and has been sacrificed for our sin (1 Corinthians 5:7). There is but one sacrifice of sins for all time (Hebrews 10:12) we must recognize the finality of this sacrifice in the breaking of the bread. His body is not continually being broken for sin.

The Purpose: The Remembrance of Christ

1. The Lord's Supper is a memorial to remember Christ's death.

Many people erect memorials to remember their dead. Christians stop at the Lord's table to remember, not millions, but "The One" who suffered and died for each of us.

But, just as the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament had no inherent power, there is no inherent power or supernatural effect in the elements of communion.

The bread and wine are not holy in and of themselves. The act of eating and drinking the bread and wine is not holy in and of itself. In other words, special grace is not conferred upon us by our observance of 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. That is not the purpose of a memorial. Its

purpose is to *remember* Christ's death and the commitment that comes from our belief in Christ.

2. A memorial reminds us of something or somebody.

Remember in the Old Testament 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.

Communion is a memorial that reminds us of God's faithfulness when He fulfilled His covenant to us by providing Jesus as a substitute sacrifice for the payment of our sin debt.

1 Corinthians 11:24-26 explains it like this, *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 {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 exists between the sign of the old covenant and the sign of the new covenant. The Lord's Supper is a sign of the new covenant (Luke 22:20), just as the Sabbath day represented the old covenant (Exodus 31:12-17). The purpose of the Sabbath was to remember God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 20:8 Deuteronomy 5:15); the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to remember Christ's deliverance of us from sin. This, in part, explains why the Sabbath is unique to the Old Testament and the Lord's Supper is unique to the New Testament.

Also, as the Passover was a memorial to celebrate God's work through death (Exodus 12:14), we proclaim God's work through the death of His Son until He returns (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The Participation: The Requirement for Communion

1. The Lord's Supper is for all believers.

Our church holds to an *open communion* where all believers are welcome to participate in the communion service. This is in contrast to those who advocate a *closed communion* and believe the local church must assume responsibility by administering the ordinance only to members of their local fellowship. Some others hold to a *close communion* and require the ordinance to be administered by the local church and requires that participants be a member of their denomination, or in some cases, a baptized member of a Christian church.

We believe that communion is for all believers because all believers are instructed to participate in the ordinance. Indeed, it is called “the cup of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27), which extends beyond our fellowship alone to all who are the Lord’s people.

Furthermore, the limitations that are given for participation in the Lord’s Supper are given for the person themselves (1 Corinthians 11:28). While each person is told to examine himself, the church is not given that same instruction to examine the individuals.

It is important to note that each person is to take it seriously as advised in 1 Corinthians 11:27-30. The church was not given the role of determining if a person is examining himself rightly. This would be a very difficult task to say the least. Because we view the elements as symbolic in their nature, we feel no need to protect them from being abused. The problem exists within the heart of the partaker.

There is no age limitation to this ordinance. If children are believers in Christ, they ought to partake with the rest of the church. Of course, they must be able to understand the meaning of the Lord’s Supper in order to honor the Lord in its observance.

2. We should examine ourselves.

Before we partake of the Lord’s Supper we should examine our hearts and lives (1 Corinthians 11:28). This is not meant to condemn us. It simply means we must be sure there is nothing between our soul and the Savior. Communion is an opportunity to make everything right with God and renew our commitment to live for Him. This also means we should make sure we do not harbor resentment or other ill feelings toward a fellow Christian. Those who are forgiven are characterized as being forgiving (Matthew 6:12). This brings to us a great opportunity to grow in holiness.

3. We should partake in a worthy manner.

None of us is worthy to stand before God. None of us deserve what God did for us through His Son. That is the great message of God’s grace and mercy. But, we can make sure we take communion in a worthy manner, rather than 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 a person does not take communion seriously they treat the Lord Himself with indifference. Therefore He calls for an examination of our motives to keep us from God’s corrective discipline, which might include sickness or even death.

The Place: The Role of the Church

1. Communion is for a gathering of believers in Christ.

It appears that communion is not a celebration to be observed privately, but publicly. It is an ordinance for redeemed sinners, for believers, for men and women who are born again by the power and grace of God through the death of His Son. The Lord Jesus gathered His disciples together for the Supper and the church of Corinth collectively was instructed to eat the bread and drink the cup. Note 1 Corinthians 11:26 speaks of the eating, drinking and proclaiming in a plural sense while 11:27 speaks of the examining in a singular sense. The gathering of people (plural) partake together and each individual (singular) must examine himself.

2. Communion is for the church, not necessarily in a church.

The early church did not have church buildings. In fact, they met in homes, even for the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42-47). The church is not the special place for communion; it can be done among any gathering of believers in Christ.

The frequency for the celebration of the Lord's Supper is often set by the times the church gathers in the church building. Thus some advocate a weekly communion. The Word of God does not determine for us how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper, other than to say "*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup*" (1 Corinthians 11:26), indicating flexibility in terms of frequency. While the early church appears to have celebrated the Lord's Supper on a daily basis in connection with meals (Acts 2:46), this description is not commanded in the Bible. Suffice it to say that some of the most meaningful times of remembering Christ are apart from church buildings.

3. Communion is to be led by the church.

In many churches, the qualifications for leading a communion celebration are substantial. Most view the communion time as ceremonial and beyond the average Christian to perform. Yet there are few biblical requirements for the one leading a communion service.

The leader should be fulfilling the ministry of their local church. Since Christ established the church, baptizing all believers into His body, the church, and since communion was given to the church, it should be celebrated in the context of the church. This means that the leader should be recognized as carrying out the ministry oversight of the elders of the local church. Also, the leader should fulfill the exhortations of 1 Corinthians 11:26-30, namely to partake in a worthy manner, examining himself. This should be true of all that participate in the Lord's Supper.

The Profit: The Response to Christ

1. Communion encourages us.

Our public observance of this ordinance is of great practical value to our lives, allowing us to:

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

By partaking of communion as an act of obedience, we show the Savior that we trust Him and are grateful for salvation. At the same time, we testify before men that our faith is in the living Christ, and that we expect Him to come again.

2. Communion encompasses us.

Observance of communion is multi-dimensional. When we come to the table of the Lord it is appropriate to look in three directions.

a. We look behind to past work 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.

b. We look ahead to future work 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 shall remain a focal point of our worship until the Lord returns. At that time He will be with us and there will be no need for reminders. A forward glance reminds us of the promise of His return and the joy of living with Him in His kingdom.

c. We look inside to the present work of Christ's Spirit.

Paul said we should partake of the Supper after a personal evaluation. We should ask ourselves questions like, Am I right with God? Have I done anything to disrupt 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 communion 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 communion can be a powerful tool to help us mature toward a righteous life.

Conclusion

Just like man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27), so the man was not made for the Lord's Supper but the Lord's Supper was made for man. It was not given as a ritual to follow mindlessly or to infuse us with special grace from God. 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.

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