

A Short Essay on the Lord's Supper
By Pastor Jonah Barnes

There is nothing that stirs up the church as quickly as differences in the Lord's Day worship. Music, liturgy, preaching, and the Sacraments have become means by which Christians often separate themselves from other Christians.

One of those elements of worship is the Lord's Supper, or Communion. Given the multitude of books, arguments, and divisions among Christians about the Lord's Supper, we would assume that the New Testament must have a lot to say about it (like how the Old Testament details covenant meals in the book of Leviticus). However, the one covenantal meal of the New Testament—the Lord's Supper—has been given to us in simplicity. I think, often times, it is the simplicity of the meal that drives us to create additional misguided theology to accompany it.

In the early church the approach was fairly straightforward. For the first 1500 years of the church history every baptized member partook of the Lord's Supper (children and adults)[1] until the Roman Catholic Church declared that what we chew between our teeth is the "literal flesh of Christ." Then children were not allowed to have it anymore because, it was thought, they might drop the bread on the ground. Laity also ceased taking it because they were afraid to consume the Lord, and eventually the priest was the only one in the congregation that received the Lord's Supper!

Christ's teachings and Paul's are not as complicated as we often assume. When it comes to Communion, they are particularly straightforward and simple. Take and eat. Take and drink. So, let's look at what the New Testament teaches concerning the Lord's Supper on **mode, recipients, frequency, and meaning.**

The Mode of Communion

In the Lord's Supper, Jesus institutes a very simple ritual in contrast to the complex covenant meals and sacrifices we find throughout the rest of the Bible (think Leviticus).

At the Passover meal with His disciples, Jesus gave us a new covenant meal. He replaced the old covenant meal that involved the flesh of the sacrificial lamb and wine, with the meal of the new covenant in His flesh and blood.

What is simple about this is that Jesus institutes *bread* as His flesh. We all know what bread is. Bread is not crackers. Bread is not wafers. Bread is bread and we are to use bread in Communion because this is what the Lord instituted. In like manner, Jesus lifted up a cup of wine and commanded the disciples to drink it. *Wine* is wine. Many churches have changed from that element to accommodate society. Some churches no longer use wine as Christ instituted—they use grape juice. The use of grape juice for Communion was introduced during the Temperance movement in the early 19th century by a man named Welch (go figure). There is a word for grape juice in Scripture, and this is not the word used in any festival meal in Israel (Number 6:3).

Yet, wine is the symbol of the Kingdom of God (Isaiah 25:6-9), and Christ tells us that in the Lord's Supper we are to use wine (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20, and the Belgic Confession Article 35). Jesus also gave us the order in which we are to receive the elements. Give thanks over the bread and eat. Then give thanks over the wine and drink. It is appropriate to have a small sermon, or explanation to the congregation as to the meaning and implication of the Lord's Supper.

Jesus asks us to use two simple things, bread and wine, and many churches do not. One of the reasons is that there is real grace in the Lord's Supper, and Satan is afraid of that grace. Therefore, the Devil has persuaded people not to do what Jesus said to do (more on this later).

Our disposition when receiving Communion is also important. Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper at a *celebratory* feast, Passover. Passover was a memorial feast remembering the time when God's angel of death passed over His people because of the blood of a sacrificial lamb. This feast was a joyous annual event in which Israel celebrated life and redemption. It was at this celebratory meal that Jesus instituted our new covenant meal and He then ended the feast by singing praise to God (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26)! It was a *joyous* event. Our time at the Lord's Table is certainly a time for Christians to remember their sins and repent of them, but it is more so a time of celebration for the life and redemption we have received because of the death of the Lamb of God. After all, Jesus went to the cross with joy in His heart (Hebrews 12:2). We are to receive these two simple elements, bread and wine, with joy.

There is also the question of having a preparatory service before receiving the Lord's Supper, however there is nothing in the New Testament that would lead a church to have a preparatory service every week. If a church begins to practice Communion as instituted in the New Testament, the members of the church will be reminded to prepare themselves day by day as they ready themselves to worship the Lord.

Recipients of Communion

The requirement for the admission to covenant meals in the Old Testament was being a member of the covenant. This began with the sign of circumcision. Any male who was circumcised, and any female belonging to that covenant household, was welcomed and encouraged to come to all the Covenantal Feasts instituted by God, including Passover.

In the same way, the sign of the new covenant is baptism, which has fulfilled circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). This sacrament is applied to adults and children, just as the old covenant sign.

The requirement for admission to the Lord's Table in the New Testament is baptism. It places the sign and name of the Triune God upon the forehead of every covenant member, adults and their children. Therefore, the Lord's Table, our Communion Feast, is opened to all covenant members.

Frequency of Communion

The frequency of Communion is often debated in church history because of many misunderstandings about Communion. For example, the Roman Catholic Church, which has a false view of the Lord's Supper (Heidelberg Q&A 80), says that a Roman Catholic only needs to receive the elements once a year. This is because they believe that the bread is literally the flesh of Christ, and the wine is literally the blood of Christ and when the elements are "consecrated" Christ experiences the crucifixion all over again. Reformed Christianity disagrees. Scripture must determine the place and time of the Sacrament.

The New Testament teaches and assumes that the Lord's Supper is received weekly. In the infant stages of the church, all the disciples "broke bread" daily as they met (Acts 2:46). They were "breaking bread" and sharing meals from house to house as often as they met. This breaking bread is a reference to the sacrament of Communion. By the end of the book of Acts we see that the "breaking of bread" occurred on the first day of every week, the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7). This is what became normative for the church.

Weekly Communion is also implied in 1 Corinthians 10-11 by Paul. In these two chapters Paul is saying that when the church comes together they are to have the Lord's Supper. Paul expects this to be done every week, and this is why he is arguing to do it with caution. The Corinthians were a carnal and contentious body of Christians. It got to the point where people in the church would come and eat the Sacrament before others arrived. In essence they were keeping the body and blood of Christ *away* from covenant members and Paul says that these people were not discerning the body (1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 27-29). The problem that Paul is addressing is that week by week, there were covenant members of the church who were being selfishly *excluded* from the meal that Christ gave to the church.

Meaning

There has been a significant amount of writing on this topic and what the Reformed church pursues is a view that firmly plants itself in the Scriptures, avoiding the extremes of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anabaptists. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus and that He is crucified again when the elements are "consecrated." This, in their doctrine, is the only way that the Lord's Table can have any spiritual effect on the believer. The Reformed church rejects this.

The Anabaptist view of the Lord's Table, is that there is no work of grace or act of God going on whatsoever. It is only a mere symbol pointing back to call us to remember the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. While it is true that the Lord's Table is a memorial, the Reformed church believes it is also more than this.

The Reformed position is that the sacrament of the Lord's Table is a means of grace instituted by Jesus Christ for the building up of His church in unity and faith. It is a covenant Table that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, binds covenant members to one another and to Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17, 21). In opposition to the Roman Catholic view, we believe that Christ is spiritually present (not physically present) with us by the Holy Spirit. He physically is located in heaven at the right hand of God the Father, but by the Holy Spirit we have communion with Him (1 Corinthians 10:16). Through the meal we actually grow up into Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper is also a *covenant meal* between God and His church. When we partake of the Table, by the body and blood of Jesus, we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). God is the one watching us as we gather to worship Him on the Lord's Day. He is the one to whom we proclaim the death of Christ, which is the ground of our salvation. By doing this, we are performing covenant renewal, pleading with God to remember His promises. Week by week, Christians enter into God's presence and offer up to Him our praise and our works (Call to Worship), we confess our sins and receive God's pardon (Confession and Assurance), we receive our marching orders from our King (confession of faith, prayers, sermon), we renew the covenant God has made between Himself and His church (the Lord's Supper) and we depart into the world with God's blessing to accomplish His will (Benediction). Every week is a renewal of the life of a Christian through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Just as we eat earthly food that gives us physical life, so too does the sacramental bread and wine give us Kingdom Life. This grace in the Sacrament comes from the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.

This brings me to the point that the Devil hates, which is why the Lord's Supper has been altered through the centuries in the church. The Lord's Supper proclaims Christ's death to the

Father and it communicates Christ's death to us. By the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, the Supper enables us to die more and more to sin and to live more and more for Christ. This is what Satan fears. The Devil fears an army of Christians already dead to sin who are learning every week what it means to die more and more to sin and bondage. In other words: people who are already dead cannot be stopped (Colossians 3:3). Satan does not want Christians who, with joy in their hearts, are willing to suffer for the Name of Christ. The Devil does not want willing martyrs that would transform the nations.

God has told us in His Word how to participate in the Lord's simple Supper, which is the only routine ritual the church has been given. So if we begin to obey Him more consistently, He will most certainly be pleased. After all, if Satan does fear the Supper, then it is all the more reason to begin doing it better.

“This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates Himself to us with all His benefits. At that table He makes us enjoy Himself as much as the merits of His suffering and death, as He nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of His flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of His blood...

...Therefore we reject as desecrations of the sacraments all the muddled ideas and damnable inventions that men have added and mixed in with them. And we say that we should be content with the procedure that Christ and the Apostles have taught us and speak of these things as they have spoken of them.” Belgic Confession Article 35

[1] Please see, “The History of Paedocommunion: From the Early Church Until 1500” by Tommy Lee.

http://www.reformed.org/social/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/sacramentology/tl_paed_o.html