

# GRACE

Community Church New Plymouth

*Loving God, Loving God's People, Loving Gods World*

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

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in Foundations of the Christian Faith

The second of the two Protestant sacraments is the Lord's Supper, which Jesus instituted on the night before his crucifixion. That event is recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels (Mt. 26:17-30; Mk. 14:12-26; Lk. 22:7-23), but the best and fullest account is in 1 Corinthians in a passage in which Paul was attempting to correct certain abuses of the supper prevailing in the Corinthian church. This passage reads:

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 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 also the cup, 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. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor. 11:23-28).

The Lord's Supper is like baptism in possessing all the elements of a sacrament. But it is unlike baptism in that baptism is an initiatory sacrament (it testifies to a primary identification with Christ without which one is not a Christian at all) while the Lord's Supper is a continuing sacrament meant to be observed again and again (“as often as you drink it”) throughout the Christian life. This character of the Lord's Supper is seen in its past, present and future significance.

The *past* significance of the Lord's Supper is made clear by the word *remembrance*.

In the Lord's Supper we look back to the Lord's death. We remember his substitutionary atonement, first of all; it is this that the broken bread, representing the Lord's broken body, and the wine, representing his shed blood, most clearly signify. Atonement has to do with our being made right with God. Substitutionary means that this was achieved by the death of another in our place.

Why did Jesus die? The Bible teaches that all who have ever lived are sinners, having broken God's law, and that the penalty for sin is death. The Bible says, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:1-12). It says, “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4), and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). This death is not merely physical, though it is that. It is spiritual as well. Death is separation. Physical death is the separation of the soul and spirit from the body. Spiritual death is the separation of the soul and spirit from God. We deserve that separation as a consequence of our sin. But Jesus became our substitute by experiencing both physical and spiritual death in our place.

A vivid illustration of this principle is seen in the early chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve had sinned and were in terror of the consequences. God had warned them. He had said, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen. 2:16-17). At that point they probably did not have a very clear idea of what death was, but they knew it was serious. Consequently, when they sinned through disobedience and then later heard God walking toward them in the garden, they tried to hide.

But no one can hide from God. God found them, called them out of hiding and began to deal with their transgression. What should we expect to happen as a result of the confrontation? Here is God who told our first parents that in the day they sinned they would die. Here are Adam and Eve who have sinned. In that situation we should expect the immediate execution of the sentence. If God had put them to death in that moment, both physically and spiritually, banishing them from his presence forever, it would have been just.

But that is not what happened. Instead, we have God first rebuking the sin and then performing a sacrifice. As a result, Adam and Eve were clothed with the skins of the slain animals. It was the first death that anyone had ever witnessed. It was enacted by God. As Adam and Eve looked on they must have been horrified. Yet even as they recoiled from the sacrifice, they must have marveled as well. For what God was showing was that although they deserved to die it was possible for another, in this case two animals, to die in their place. The animals paid that price of their sin, and they were clothed in the skins of the animals as a reminder of that fact.

That is the meaning of substitution. It is the death of one on behalf of another. Yet we must also say, as the Bible teaches, that the death of animals could never take away the penalty of sin (Heb. 10:4). That event was only a symbol of how sin was to be taken away. The real sacrifice was performed by Jesus Christ, and we look back to it in the communion service.

We also look back to something that Jesus suggested when he spoke of the wine as the “blood of the covenant” (Mk. 14:24) and as “the new covenant which God has established, a new covenant of salvation with his redeemed people. A covenant is a solemn promise confirmed by an oath or sign. So when Christ spoke of the cup as commemoration a new covenant he was pointing to the promises of salvation that God made to us on the basis of Christ’s death. It comes to us by grace alone.

The Lord’s Supper has a *present* significance.

First, the sacrament is something in which we repeatedly take part, thereby remembering the death of the Lord again and again until he comes.

Second, it is an occasion for examining our lives in the light of our profession of faith in his death. Paul says, “Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (2 Cor. 11:28-29).

At the heart of the present significance of the Lord’s Supper is our communion or fellowship with Christ, hence the term “communion service.” In coming to this service the believer comes to meet with Christ and have fellowship with him at his invitation. The examination takes place because it would be hypocrisy for us to pretend that we are in communion with the Holy One while actually cherishing known sin in our hearts.

The manner in which Jesus is present in the communion service is a matter that has divided the Christian church. There are three theories.

The first is that Jesus is not present at all, at least no more than he is present all the time and in everything. To those who hold that view, the Lord’s Supper takes on an exclusively memorial character. It is only a remembrance of Christ’s death.

The second view is that of the Roman Catholic Church. In it the body and blood of Christ are supposed to be literally present under the appearance of the bread and wine. Before the mass the elements are merely bread and wine. But in the mass, through the ministrations of the priest, they are changed so that, although worshipers perceive only the bread and wine, they nevertheless actually eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus. That process is called transubstantiation.

The third view, the view of John Calvin particularly but also of other Reformers, is that Christ is present in the communion service, but spiritually rather than physically. Calvin called this “the real presence” to indicate that a spiritual presence is every bit as real as a physical one.

What are we to think of these theories? To begin with, we must say that there can be no quarrel with the memorial theory, since it is certainly true as far as it goes. The only question is whether more than remembrance is involved. The real division is between the view of the majority of the Reformers and the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Those who favor a literal, physical presence (and Luther was one, though he did not accept the theory of transubstantiation) argue from a literal interpretation of Christ's words, "This is my body" (Mk. 14:22). But that hardly decides the matter, because such expressions occur frequently in the Bible with obviously figurative or representational meanings. For example:

"The seven good cows are seven years. . ."  
"You are the head of gold"  
"The field is the world"  
"The Rock was Christ"  
"The seven lampstands are the seven churches"  
"I am the door of the sheep"  
"I am the true vine"

That Jesus was using figurative language and not performing a miracle of transubstantiation should be evident from the fact that his body was right there with the disciples as he spoke. Today his resurrected body is in heaven.

A reason for taking the presence of Christ in the sacrament to be spiritual is that this is the sense in which every other promise of the presence of Christ with us in this age must be taken. Bannerman writes,

Such promises as these—"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"; "Where two or three are met together in my name, there am I in the midst of you"; "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me"; and such like—plainly give us ground to affirm that Christ, through his Spirit is *present* in his ordinances to the faith of the believer, imparting spiritual blessing and grace. But there is nothing that would lead us to make a difference or distinction between the presence of Christ in the Supper and the presence of Christ in his other ordinances, in so far as the manner of that presence is concerned. The efficacy of the Savior's presence may be different in the way of imparting more or less of saving grace, according to the nature of the ordinance, and the degree of the believer's faith. But the manner of that presence is the same, being realized through the Spirit of Christ, and to the faith of the believer.

Some well-known verses in John 6 also speak of faith in Christ and of a spiritual feeding on him, though they do not speak literally of the Lord's Supper, since that sacrament had not yet been instituted. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (Jn. 6:53-55).

If we want synonyms for "eat" and "drink," we find them in John 6 in such concepts as believe (vv. 29, 35, 47), come (v. 35), see (v.40), hear and learn of (v. 45). All indicate a response to Jesus. The terms eat and drink stress that this feeding by faith is to be as real as literal eating.

The third significance of the Lord's Supper is *future*. Paul said, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord suggested the same when he told the disciples who were eating the last meal with him, "Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God (Mk. 14:25).

We speak of the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the service as we know it now, and we seek to respond to him and serve him. We readily admit that there are times when this is difficult and the Lord does not seem to be present. Whether because of sin, fatigue or simply lack of faith, Jesus often seems to

be far away. Though we continue on in Christian life and in service, we long for that day when we will see him face to face and be like him (1 Jn. 3:2). The communion service is a reminder of that day. It is a foreshadowing of the great marriage supper of the Lamb. It is an encouragement to faith and an impulse to a higher level of holiness.

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