

COMMUNION

THE HOLY MEAL JESUS GAVE US

INTRODUCTION

Imagine for a moment what life would be like without the many little things we do that give life extra meaning and value. No birthday parties, no weddings, no holidays, no receptions, no anniversaries, no handshakes, no honorific greetings. Nothing to demonstrate and understand “specialness”. N.T. Wright asked, “Why do we do all this? Different traditions grow up in different countries, but there seems to be a universal desire to make things special. It’s built into us. It’s just the way we are. It goes back to some of the oldest stories about the human race; about people who know in their bones that they are made for each other, made to celebrate good things of life, and made to do all this to the glory of their maker.”

You and I were designed for the sacred. Humanity was created in the **sacred** image of God (Genesis 1:26). Human life is sacred (Genesis 9:6). Human sexuality is sacred (Genesis 1:27). The marriage union is sacred (Genesis 2:24). We treat our birthright inheritance from our fathers and mothers as sacred (Genesis 25:33-34). It is built into us to give important things extra value by making them special; that’s what it means to be “sacred” (set apart as holy). And when something becomes sacred, it is assigned extra value and given deeper meaning than it would otherwise have.

Think about a firecracker. By itself, there is no meaning. But attach it to something sacred, like the birth of a nation (American 4th of July) or the beginning of a new-year (Chinese New Year), and it becomes something more than a firecracker; it becomes a symbol.

Symbols represent things that mere words can’t easily communicate; identity, commonality, hope, inspiration, and truths too big for mere words. Of course words have to be used, but once something becomes a symbol, it absorbs meaning in ways that go far beyond words.

What we are going to try to do in this lesson is to use words to explain the meaning of the most important and central act of worship in the Christian faith, but we do not forget that the full meaning of the Lord’s Supper can only be perceived through faith by the instruction of the Holy Spirit.

NOW LET US PRAY

Real quickly it will help if we address the various names by which the Lord’s Supper is referred;

“Bread-breaking”: early Christians came together to ‘break bread’, and this was done in remembrance of Christ.

“The sharing”: the English translation of a Greek word *koinonia*. Another translation of this word would be “communion”, which means that we are communing, or sharing, in the death and risen life of Jesus Christ. Some, therefore, call this “holy communion”.

“Thank you meal”: because Jesus gave thanks to God. The Greek word for “thank you” is “*eucharisto*”, and this is translated into Latin as “*Eucharist*”, which is where the Catholics got their name for it from.

“The Lord’s Supper”: this simply reflects the event and time in which Jesus Himself shared this meal with the disciples.”

“Mass”: this name came into existence much later from Rome when at the end of the meal the priest would say ‘go- you are sent out’. Thus the term “mass” is derived from a Latin phrase that means ‘sending out with this commission.’”

Of course, by now all of these words carry additional meaning – baggage – that changes their meaning. This is the nature of symbols – they are rarely ever stagnant but readily take on and absorb new meaning.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLISM IN THE SACRAMENTS

In one sense it helps when trying to understand “sacredness” to understand “symbolism”; Symbols sum up, in one little action or word, a whole way of life that evokes powerful thoughts and emotions in those who hold them dear. With symbolism you may say that “doing it”, “says it”. One little action conveys all the emotions, thoughts, hopes, and dreams of an entire way of life!

Symbols unite and divide people; they unify people who share the sacredness of the symbol and divide those who do not.

Symbols also rapidly absorb meaning. This is why the sacredness of the symbol must be closely guarded lest they begin to take on additional and unintended meanings. Once a symbol takes on meaning it is very difficult to divest that symbol of its newly acquired meaning. The sacredness of a symbol must be closely guarded.

Perhaps the hardest thing to grasp about sacraments – the name we give to religious symbols – is that sacraments invite us to look at time in a different way. They call on us, through faith, to see the intersection of the past with the future in the now, and recognize something greater and higher in that intersection. In these sacraments we see what “was” in light of what “will be” right “now”.

This is really quite unique that the human soul is so designed by our Creator that we are capable of investing extra special meaning into objects that can stir our passions, create dreams, and secure our hopes! We really are designed for the sacred. And in Christ we discover the ultimate fulfillment of our sacred design!

THE INSTITUTION OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

Matthew 26:17–30 (NIV) On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

¹⁸ He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’ ” ¹⁹ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

²⁰ When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹ And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” ²² They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” ²³ Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.” ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.” ²⁵ Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.”

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took **bread**, and when he had **given thanks**, he **broke it** and **gave it to his disciples**, saying, “**Take and eat; this is my body.**”

²⁷ Then he took a **cup**, and when he had **given thanks**, he **gave it to them**, saying, “**Drink from it, all of you.**” ²⁸ This is **my blood of the covenant**, which is **poured out for many** for the **forgiveness of sins.** ²⁹ I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

³⁰ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

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## OVERVIEW OF THE PASSOVER AND UNLEAVENED BREAD FEAST

One of the most important occasions for sacred meals was Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread, which together formed a seven-day festival in the Jewish calendar.

When God delivered Israel from their Egyptian bondage, He told them to change their calendar so that the month of their deliverance became the first month of the year (Ex. 12:2), symbolizing Israel's "new beginnings". They were told to sacrifice a lamb and mark the doorposts and lintels with the blood of the lamb (Ex. 12:7), symbolizing that they were covered by God's designated sacrifice so that when the LORD came to Egypt for judgment He would pass over each house marked with blood (Ex. 12:13). The Passover and Unleavened Bread feast was held every year in Israel to commemorate their deliverance from the House of Bondage (Egypt) by God's mighty outstretched arm (Ex. 12:17). At the end of this festival, Israel held the "feast of Unleavened Bread" to commemorate the day they left Egypt in haste, eating only the unleavened "bread of affliction".

These symbols were observed every year by looking back at what God had done, and looking forward to what was coming; it was the fullness the "past", meeting up with the hope of the "future", in the new beginnings of the "present".

Every year these symbols spoke volumes to the Jews who had ears to hear and hearts to receive.

### THE LORD'S SUPPER

Just as the first Passover looks forward not only to deliverance but to settlement in the land, so also the Lord's Supper looks forward to life in the consummated kingdom. It looks back to our deliverance at the cross, and looks forward to our entrance into the Kingdom!

Jesus embodies everything the feasts of the Passover and Unleavened Bread represented; He stands before the disciples, even though they do not yet understand, as the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). By the blood of His cross the wrath of God is satisfied (Colossians 1:19-23). In Him we are set free from sin's bondage (Romans 6:6, 14). In Him we are delivered from oppression into the promised Kingdom (Colossians 1:13). In Him we have our new beginnings (Galatians 6:15). He is the King of the everlasting Kingdom of Heaven (Daniel 7:14).

Then Jesus selects for us the sacraments of the Lord's Supper – the unleavened bread (not the Passover Lamb) and the wine – and gives thanks to God, symbolizing the joyfulness represented in these symbols, and breaks the bread and pours the wine Himself, symbolizing that He willingly give His body as the bread of life and willing pours out the blood of His covenant for the Church.

This is ***the central*** act of worship because in this one meal *all* believers are continually united in holy fellowship by declaring the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ with joyfully eager expectation of His coming Kingdom.

In this meal, God's interactions with creation ***past*** are tied together with God's interactions with creation ***future***. Please consider this for a moment; we are declaring Jesus slain from before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), mankind's sinful rebellion (Genesis 3:6), and all of redemptive history from the moment Adam and Eve hid from the presence of the LORD in the Garden (Genesis 3:8) all the way up to the incarnation of Christ when the Word became flesh, dwelt among us, was crucified, rose again on the third day, revealed Himself to the witnesses, and ascended into Heaven. But we are also declaring that our Risen King is returning to redeem His people – which we are – and restore us to the glorious intention of God's original creation.

By eating the bread and sharing the cup we are partaking in both the bread of **Life** and the blood of **sacrifice**.

This meal declares that there is One God, One Lord, One Spirit, One Church (Eph 4:1-6).

I believe there is significance in Jesus selecting the unleavened bread, rather than the Passover Lamb, to become the center of His feast because, while He offers Himself to be sacrificed for our sins one time (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 10:10), not many times, He always offers Himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35) for our continual life-giving nourishment by which those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6)!

It is both my experience and scriptural conviction that Jesus is spiritually (not personally) with us when we observe His feast and that the souls of those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” are filled from the presence of the Lord. I believe the body and blood of Christ is the blessing offered in Matthew 5:6.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

But we have said that symbols rapidly absorb meaning.

For this reason we cannot ignore the history of the Lord’s Supper because that history exerts a great deal of influence upon how we view and understand these symbols and their meaning.

“In the apostolic period the eucharist was celebrated daily in connection with a simple meal of brotherly love (agape), in which the Christians, in communion with their common Redeemer, forgot all distinctions of rank, wealth, and culture, and felt themselves to be members of one family of God.”

Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). History of the Christian church (Vol. 1, p. 473). New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

The focus was on a union of fellowship between believer’s and their Redeemer; the world faded away and the Kingdom of Heaven grew more pronounced.

By the 1,600’s, the communion service had become highly formalized;

“The communion service was to be held four times in the year,—at Easter, Whitsunday, autumn, and Christmas. It was preceded by preparatory devotions, and made a season of special solemnity. The mass was prohibited at first only in the city, afterwards also in the country.”

Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). History of the Christian church (Vol. 8, p. 61). New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

What had been about common unity between believer’s and their redeemer became a serious point of tremendous contention over which some people were killed. The major points of contention existed over whether or not the sacraments were “material” or “spiritual” representations of Christ.

The Church had moved away from a faith-centered, spirit-led, biblically-based conception of Christianity towards a form-centered, man-led, tradition-based conception of Christianity. The result was division and contention.

Our goal is to divest the sacraments of their historical meaning (conflicts/strife) and invest them with as much Biblical meaning as we can.

## BIBLICAL SCRIPTURES

Our instruction is going to come from four sections of scripture on the Lord's Supper:

1. Matt. 26:26;
2. 1 Cor. 5:7-8
3. 1 Cor. 10:16, 17;
4. 1 Cor. 11:23

**Matthew 26:26-29** (NIV) While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." <sup>27</sup> Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you." <sup>28</sup> This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

1. His body is joyously given only to His disciples.
  - a. The body I given for food and nourishment.
2. His blood is joyously given only to His disciples.
  - a. The blood is given for covenantal forgiveness of sins
3. Jesus signals this is the meal that He will take with His disciples anew in the Father's Kingdom.
  - a. Spiritually, observed with us in whose hearts the Kingdom now dwells (Luke 17:21)
  - b. Eschatologically, to be observed at the marriage feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9)

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:16-17** (NIV) Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

1. "Participate" is a Greek word you may recognize now, "koinoneo" (κοινωνέω); remember it means "to share in" something.

This is really powerful: Scripture says in Hebrews 2:14 that Jesus shared in our mortal flesh and blood so that we could share in His spiritual body through His death and resurrection. **Jesus became like us so that we could become like Him!**

Anyone who observes the Lord's Supper from a distance, as not spiritually "sharing" or "communing" in the body and blood of Christ has completely missed the communion of Communion and, in my opinion, is eating the body and blood of Christ in an unworthy manner (i.e. "by rote", see Isaiah 29:13).

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5:6-8** (NIV) Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? <sup>7</sup> Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1. Because we participate and commune in the body of Christ – which is unleavened – we ourselves are called to be unleavened
2. The old Leavened nature of “malice” and “wickedness”
3. The new Unleavened nature of “sincerity” and “truth”

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:17–34** (NIV) In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. <sup>18</sup> In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup> No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. <sup>20</sup> So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, <sup>21</sup> for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. <sup>22</sup> Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

1. Because God is One, unity among His body is essential
2. They were losing the focus of the Lord's Supper
  - a. Making it into a regular meal
  - b. Not waiting for the whole body
  - c. Worse yet, they were not sharing all things together as some members had nothing to eat while others had plenty

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1. “Do this in remembrance of me” does not just mean “remembering” Jesus and His death/resurrection, but rather, it includes remembrance and extends beyond it into the realization that Jesus is present with us
  - a. His one-time death is made experientially real with us
  - b. The unique past of God's work meets the unique future of God's work in our unique present moment

<sup>27</sup> So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. <sup>29</sup> For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. <sup>30</sup> That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have

fallen asleep.<sup>31</sup> But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

1. If we hypocritically take these symbols in malice, greed, selfishness, disunity, or wickedness, we are taking them in an unworthy manner (not in sincerity)
2. If we divest these symbols of their true meaning, we are taking them in an unworthy manner (not in truth)
3. God disciplines us if we do not do this rightly
  - a. Sickness and death can occur
  - b. Purpose is so that “we will not be finally condemned with the world”

<sup>33</sup> So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.<sup>34</sup> Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

1. We must all do this together
2. We should all do this together in unity
3. We must never partake of these sacraments with ulterior motives (i.e. physical hunger, to look righteous, or out of ignorant tradition)

## AT THE LORD’S TABLE

The historical and scriptural analysis of the Lord’s Supper that I have been working on since 2015 has led me to one paradoxical conclusion: the “form” or “ceremony” of the Lord’s table is both irrelevant and vitally important.

It is irrelevant because a thorough and balanced study of this subject shows that the “form” or “ceremony” involved in the Lord’s Supper has been dramatically different from place to place and time to time; beloved and respected pastors, theologians, and reformers have all observed these sacraments in dramatically different ways – often times coming into sharp disagreement with one another over the “form” of its observance.

But it is vitally important that the “form” or “ceremony” we use *properly invests these symbols with sacredness*.

When the “form” or “ceremony” employed in the Lord’s Supper detracts or divests these sacraments of their sacred character and truth, it becomes sin and causes the whole body to eat and drink these sacraments in an unworthy manner.

We remember that one of the character traits of the generation that falls away is that they become “unholy” – i.e. they lose their sacredness. We mustn’t allow ourselves to be stripped of our sense of the sacred because we have lost the meaning of what these symbols properly represent.

Following this lesson we will have a brief time for Q/A, and then I am going to spend some time giving instruction on how to set up and celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a way that invests these sacraments with a proper sense of sacredness and keeps the character and spirit they represent.