LESSON 7
THE LORD'S SUPPER

What's for Supper?

In some parts of the English-speaking world, the term "supper" is an unusual word. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, "supper" is "a main meal eaten in the evening." Notably, "supper" (δεῖπνον, *deipnon*) is used to describe the last Passover meal that Jesus celebrated with His disciples before His death (see John 13:2, 4; 21:20). The apostle Paul used the same term in 1 Corinthians 11:20 to refer to the memorial meal that Jesus instituted at that last Passover. According to Paul, **"the *Lord's* supper"**—one defined by and belonging to "the Lord"—is to function as the Passover's fulfillment. This new supper no longer commemorates Israel's release from captivity in Egypt. Instead, it now commemorates the sinner's release from captivity to sin through Christ's death. Thus, *the Lord's supper* constitutes the second of the two ordinances Jesus instituted for the church—the first being *baptism* (see Lesson 4, "Water Baptism").

There are other terms that are found in the New Testament that refer to this ordinance as well. The term **"communion"** is one. The term translates the Greek word κοινωνία (*koinōnia*), which literally means "sharing." As will be seen below, this term emphasizes the spiritual *union* that exists within the celebration of this memorial meal—a union between believers and Christ and between believers themselves. Speaking of this union, the apostle Paul asks, "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16). Another set of terms that are used are **"the Lord's Cup"** and **"the Lord's Table"**—descriptions that highlight the two *elements* of the meal—the wine and the bread. In 1 Corinthians 10:21, Paul asserts that "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons." In other words, the Lord's Supper in no way can be syncretized with any element of the world.

Another designation used to refer to this memorial meal is **"the breaking of bread."** This terminology is broader than the other terms listed so far, since it included more than just the wine and the bread—it described the enjoyment of an entire meal. When this language is used in the New Testament (see Acts 20:42, 46; 20:7), it describes the general eating together of Christians with the celebration of "communion" likely added at the end. This distinction is important to note, for the failure to acknowledge it has led some Christians to believe that sharing "coffee and pastries" is the same as "the breaking of bread," and therefore, the same as "the Lord's Supper" itself. Such an association is faulty and greatly cheapens the sanctity of the ordinance. This distinction also extends to the use of the language of **"love feast"** in Jude 12. This idiom describes the rich, generous sharing of the early Christians, culminating in their sharing of meals together. According to tradition, "communion" or "the Lord's Supper" was added at the end of these meals. It was part of the feast, yet distinct. Just two believers could enjoy "the breaking of bread" any time of the week. But communion itself became reserved for the gathering of the church on the Lord's Day (see Acts 20:7). It was a formal practice.

A final word to consider is the term **Eucharist.** Although the term today is loaded with baggage and therefore potentially misleading, it is simple in its basic meaning: it means "thanksgiving" (εὐχαριστία, *eucharistia*). This Greek word came to be used for this ordinance because it was at Jesus' institution of this meal that He took both the bread and the cup and "gave thanks" to God as He distributed it to His disciples (Matt 26:26–27; Mark 14:22–23; Luke 22:17, 19; 1 Cor 11:24).

But the terminology associated with this "supper" is one thing. What does it all represent? A survey of the instructions and descriptions used around these terms yields seven important characteristics.

I. It Is Ordained by Jesus Christ

The Lord's Supper is not a human institution. The Lord's Supper—along with baptism—was *ordained by Jesus Christ*, the Builder and Head of the church (Matt 16:18; Eph 1:22–23; Col 1:18). He Himself instituted this rite as an on-going practice for the church. It is therefore considered His **"ordinance."**

The Gospel writer Luke captures the authoritative institution of this supper when he writes, "And when [Jesus] had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; **do this in remembrance of Me**.' And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood'" (Luke 22:19–22). Jesus' intent is clear. He is establishing an essential custom for His church. The command, **"do this in remembrance of Me,"** has the idea of "continually do this in order to bring Me to mind"—that is, continually "remind yourselves and others of the redemption which I have won by My death" (Alfred Plummer, *Luke*, 494–95).

The apostles—Jesus Christ's authorized spokesmen—recognized the binding nature of Jesus' institution of this custom and conveyed it to their audiences as well. They recognized that they themselves were not the creators of this tradition. Its origin goes back to Jesus Himself. See **1 Corinthians 11:23–25**. The early church recognized this as well. From its beginning days in Jerusalem to its spread throughout the Roman Empire, local churches assembled to celebrate this institution established by their Lord (see **Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7**).

Therefore, because the tradition is established by the Lord Himself, participation in it is not an option for the believer. As John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue state, "Every believer should observe it routinely, and prolonged failure to do so constitutes a sin" (*Biblical Doctrine*, 788).

II. It Is a Means of Divine Grace

Throughout church history, four main views have formed regarding the function of the Lord's Supper:

1) ***Transubstantiation*** – the view of Roman Catholicism. Its most prominent advocate was Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274). According to proponents, the elements of the Supper—the bread and the wine—are not symbolic; the priest has the power to transform or "transubstantiate" them into Christ's literal flesh and His literal blood during the ritual which they call *mass*. Thus, the Lord's Supper is the actual offering of a *sacrifice*—a necessary *re-sacrifice* of Christ by the re-breaking of His body and the re-spilling of His blood for the forgiveness and preservation of those who partake of it. As the literal Christ, the elements themselves become objects of worship.

   Obviously, this view of the Lord's Supper presents a serious threat to the all-sufficient nature of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (see **Rom 3:23–26; Heb 7:26–27; 9:11–12, 27–28; 10:11–14**). It rejects the metaphorical language Jesus used when He instituted the Supper, and it fails to take into account that when Jesus distributed the elements the first time to His disciples in the Upper Room, He did not present to them His literal body and blood—something that the Jews were forbidden by God's Law to consume anyway. It was for these and other reasons that the Reformers recognized that there could no partnership with Rome over this view of the Lord's Supper. The German Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) called mass "the greatest and most horrible abomination." The French Reformer John Calvin (1509–1546) called it "a diabolical invention and blasphemy."

2) ***Consubstantiation –*** the view of Lutherans and some Anglicans. Its most prominent historical advocate was Martin Luther (1483–1546). While strenuously rejecting the view of transubstantiation, Luther attempted to maintain a literal reading of Jesus' words in the Upper Room when He offered His disciples His "body" and "blood," but interpreted this language differently than Roman Catholics. He argued that the bread and wine do not *become* the body and blood of Jesus, but that Jesus comes to be "in, with, and under" the elements when they are offered. Proponents thus argue that Christ's presence is distinct from the elements themselves, but that Christ co-exists with them in a real way, analogous to His divine and human natures co-existing in one Person. This view avoided the most damning problems of the Roman Catholic view but still mistakes the language of Jesus' instruction.

3) **Spiritual Presence** – the view of some Anglicans, Reformed Churches, Presbyterians, and Reformed Baptists. Its most prominent historical advocate was John Calvin (1509–1546). The spiritual-presence view rejects the view that the elements—the bread and the wine—are merely symbols. Instead, in a very real way, the elements represent the *spiritual presence* of Jesus Christ with those who participate in the Supper. Participation in the Supper thus becomes a means to receive extraordinary grace—to unite and commune with Jesus Christ and experience the fruit of His redemption in an exceptional way.

4) Memorial – the view of many Baptists and independent evangelical churches. Its most prominent historical advocate was the Swiss Reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531). The memorial view understands the elements of the Lord's Supper—the bread and the wine—to be symbols instituted by the Lord that point to His atoning sacrifice on the cross. Like the Passover of the Old Testament with its symbols, the elements of the Lord's Supper serve in a meaningful way *to remind* believers of the redemption that was obtained on their behalf. At the same time, this understanding does not preclude the recognition that the Lord's Supper functions as a means of grace. Like other instruments designed by the Lord for the good of His people (baptism, preaching, prayer, singing, giving, church discipline, service, evangelism, and fellowship), the Lord's Supper is another such means by which God bestows His blessing upon those who participate in it. After all, Paul calls "the cup" the "cup of *blessing*" (1 Cor 10:16).

Advocating the *memorial* view (#4 above), while recognizing the Lord's Supper as one of God's specially designed means of grace, the Grace Community Church doctrinal statement summarizes the function of the Lord's Supper as follows:

> We teach that the Lord's Supper is the commemoration and proclamation of His death until He comes, and should be always preceded by solemn self-examination (1 Cor 11:28–32). We also teach that, whereas the elements of communion are only representative of the flesh and blood of Christ, participation in the Lord's Supper is nevertheless an actual communion with the risen Christ, who indwells every believer, and so is present, fellowshipping with His people (1 Cor 10:16).

III. It Focuses on Christ's Atonement

The precursor to the Lord's Supper was the Passover meal, which was prescribed as a *memorial* for the exodus from Egypt (Exod 12:1–14, esp. v. 14; note also the references to "remember" in Exod 13:3, 9; Deut 16:3). Jesus commemorated the *last* Passover meal with His disciples and *transformed it* into a *new memorial*—one that "remembers" a much greater redemption: the redemption from spiritual bondage to sin (see Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24, 25 – "Do this in remembrance of Me"). But to "remember" is no simple, rote, or momentary recollection of historical details. To "remember" in the sense that Jesus commanded implies deliberate, careful, and deep *contemplation.*

Thus, each participation in the Lord's Supper should serve as a resounding "I believe" statement for the believer. As a result of this *remembrance,* the believer—as he partakes of the elements—should confess with certainty: "I believe that two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ suffered and died for my sin, once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might free me from sin's tyranny, absorb the wrath of God against me, reconcile me with God, and grant me eternal life."

IV. It Unifies the Members of the Church

The Lord's Supper is to function as a *unifying act*—the apex of the church's *spiritual fellowship.* In the previous session, we defined the nature of this fellowship (see Lesson 6, "Spiritual Fellowship"). That fellowship finds its culmination in the corporate sharing of the Lord's Supper. When done right, no other singular event expresses the oneness of the local church better than the shared participation in the Lord's Supper of its members (see Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7; 1 Cor 10:16–17). It is only right that this commemoration was part of what Jude called "the love feast" (see Jude 12).

Conversely, it was precisely here—at the Lord's Table—where the carnality of the members of the Corinthian church reached its pinnacle. They were divided. They considered their own needs above each other's. They refused to share. All this and more led to significant abuse and degradation when they gathered to commemorate the Lord's death. Such selfishness earned Paul's harsh rebuke (see 1 Cor 11:17–22).

V. It Is Incompatible with the World

The Lord's Supper is intended to highlight *the distinction* between the church and the world, declaring that the two are *incompatible*. As has been emphasized previously (see Lesson 6, "Spiritual Fellowship"), there can be no genuine fellowship between believers and unbelievers (see 2 Cor 6:14–15). Consequently, the Lord's Supper must be reserved only for believers and must not be intermingled with practices and elements of the world. This also had happened at Corinth, and again, it earned from Paul a serious rebuke, expressed particularly in his rhetorical question: "Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?" (1 Cor 10:21–22).

To the outsider, the church's practice of the Supper should appear *bizarre*. That's a good thing. It has no common ground with the world. Participation in it is reserved only for the *redeemed.* And we should never apologize for that.

VI. It Requires Careful Self-Examination

The Lord's Supper is also intended to promote regular self-assessment. Together with the deliberate, careful, and intense contemplation of the Lord's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross for his sin, the believer must also take the time to examine *himself* and ask, "Am I harboring sin for which the body of Christ was broken and the blood of Christ was shed?" See 1 Corinthians 11:27–32.

As the believer prepares for the commemoration of the Lord's Supper, and even as the elements are passed to him, he is vividly reminded of his ongoing need to confess his sins and take hold of the forgiveness provided for him in Christ Jesus (1 John 1:8–9). If there are sins that have not been confessed, if there are broken relationships that have not been reconciled, participation in the Supper should be delayed so as not to demean the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:27–32). Action should immediately be taken then to do what had failed to be done prior to the Supper.

On the other hand, abstaining from the Lord's Supper should never be on-going. Abstinence is never a license to harbor sin or leave broken relationships unreconciled. After all, repeated non-participation proclaims a message as well. It declares to oneself, to others, and to the Lord that the atonement achieved by Him on the cross *is not needed* in one's present struggle with sin, or that it *is not sufficient* to cleanse from the present sin. In the latter case, abstinence from the Supper functions as a kind of *penance*—a way of offering personal payment for one's sin. Such an attitude is a diabolical twisting of Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:27–32.

VII. It Anticipates Christ's Return

Our celebration of the Lord's Supper reminds us of one final but extremely important detail: we celebrate it *without* the physical presence of its Host. The chief spot at "the table" is currently empty. But it will not be so forever!

The message of the Supper that is emphasized in each of the Gospel narratives is that He is leaving for a time. But despite His absence, the celebration of the Supper is to continue as a direct expression of faith in His physical return. See Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:15–18; and John 14:2–3, 12. The apostle Paul emphasized this as well, stating in unequivocal language, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Cor 11:28). In this sense, the Supper connects us by faith both to Christ's first advent and to His second. It serves as our ultimate "Maranatha" ("Come, Lord Jesus!") declaration!

For Discussion

1. Identify one or two significant adjustments you need to make with respect to your approach to the Lord's Supper.
2. Why should participation in the Lord's Supper be open only to believers? Why is the Lord's Supper not to be partaken of individually (at home, for example)?
3. Why is it incompatible for true believers to participate in the Roman Catholic rite called "mass?"
4. As a believer, when is it appropriate to let the plate and the cup pass by without partaking? Why is an extended pattern of non-participation in the Lord's Supper sinful for the believer?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize:** 1 Corinthians 11:26
2. **Read (intermediate):** "The Lord's Table," pages 786–789 in *Biblical Doctrine*, by John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue.
3. **Read (advanced):** *The Church in God's Program*, by Robert Saucy, pages 213–234.
4. **Watch/Listen to:** "Seven Aspects of the Lord's Table," by John MacArthur, accessible at: https://www.gty.org/sermons/90-370/seven-aspects-of-the-lords-table.
5. **Sing:** "The Communion Hymn" (#343 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.
Next meeting: November 11, 7pm – "God's Design for Dads—The Love of a Dad" (Chris Hamilton)