

Part 2

The Meetings of the Assembly

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Part 1 of this series pointed out that the meetings of the first-century saints were called *ekklēsia* and discussed where and when they met. But besides the regular meetings of the *ekklēsia* that we will discuss in future installments, early Christians also ate the Lord's Supper together. This was so common and central to their lives that, before discussing the order of the meetings in general, I want in this article to teach how the Lord's Supper was eaten and who ate it.

You nibble a bit of bread or matzo and then drink a thimbleful of wine in a solemn church service wholly separated from a real meal. This is the Lord's Supper in millions of churches worldwide. In Catholic churches the people will eat a wafer, and whether they also receive wine varies with each parish. Yet, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He did so in the context of a full meal, the portions were not miniscule, and it was in a relaxed, home setting. For reasons we will see, the meal, the portions, and the setting all added to the edification the saints received from the Lord's Supper. If we want to follow the example of the early saints in their meetings of the *ekklēsia*, we should also follow their example in the Lord's Supper, and because the Lord's Supper was so central to their community life, I want to cover it here in this second installment.

Common Practices and Understandings

Catholics see the Lord's Supper as the Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist that they believe to be an actual sacrifice of Christ with the bread (or wafer) and wine having actually become His body and blood in what is called transubstantiation. To a Catholic, the Mass is a sacrament, a means of divine grace. This is a concept that has been, with some variation, passed on to many Protestant denominations.

Lutherans are inconsistent as to whether they use the word Mass, but they do believe the Lord's Supper is a sacrament that imparts grace, with Christ in, with, and under the forms of bread and wine. They call this consubstantiation.

Anglicans and Methodists also see the Lord's Supper as a sacrament that imparts grace, but just how Christ's presence is in the bread and wine, they seem to prefer to leave as a holy mystery.

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To other Protestants, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament that bestows grace to the partaker. Although they disagree with the Catholic and Lutheran positions, they still see Christ as spiritually present in the bread and wine. John Calvin went so far as to say,

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.

Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, Chapter 17, section 10

To Baptists and many Evangelicals, the Lord's Supper is not a sacrament that imparts grace. It is an ordinance, something ordered by Christ. The bread and wine merely symbolize Jesus' body and blood.

What does the Bible say?

The Lord's Supper in the Bible

In a house: In Luke 22:1, we read that the "the feast of unleavened bread, which is called the Passover, was approaching." Jesus wanted His disciples to prepare the Passover meal, and they asked Him where (verses 8-9). Jesus replied, "Behold, when you have entered into the city, a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you. Follow him into the house which he enters. Tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' He will show you a large, furnished upper room. Make preparations there" (verses 10-12). The word "house" in these verses is *oikia*. It means "a house," "a dwelling," "the family of the house." As we read on, we will see that this is where Jesus ate a meal with His disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper. He did not do this in the temple or in a synagogue, but in a house.

In the evening: Speaking of coming into the house, Mark 14:17 says, "When it was evening he came with the twelve." Matthew 26:20 says, "Now when evening had come, he was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples." Paul, in giving instructions for the Lord's Supper,

says, "For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread" (1 Corinthians 11:23).

A full meal: Matthew 26:26 says, "As they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it, and broke it. He gave to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.'" Mark 14:22 is similar: "As they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had blessed, he broke it, and gave to them, and said, 'Take, eat. This is my body.'" Clearly, eating the Lord's Supper was supposed to take place in the context of eating a meal in a house, not in taking Lilliputian portions of bread and wine in a church building apart from a meal.

Of course, there is the objection that many base on their misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 11. The argument is that Paul criticized the Corinthians for eating the bread and wine during a meal. He told them, the argument goes, that by doing this, they were not eating the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), and ordered them to eat at home. But this is far from what Paul said.

In 1 Corinthians 11:18, Paul criticizes the Corinthians for having schisms in their *ekklēsia*. In verse 19, he says that sects or heresies (*hairesis*) are needful among them to show who is approved. In other words, the heresies attract those who are spiritually unsound, and those who are sound-minded are revealed by contrast.

Verse 20 can be taken as a statement, "When therefore you assemble yourselves together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat," or as a question, "In your coming together then in the same place, is it not to eat the Lord's supper?" (*Apostolic Bible Polyglot*). So, Paul is either saying, You think you're eating the Lord's Supper, but you're not. Or, he is asking, Don't you realize when you get together that you're supposed to be eating the Lord's Supper? (implying that they are not really succeeding). Why?

The problem was not in their getting together for a meal. The problem was in what they were doing at that meal. In verses 21 and 22, Paul explains: "For in your eating each one takes his own supper first. One is hungry, and another is drunken. What, don't you have houses to eat and to drink in? Or do you despise God's assembly, and put them to shame who don't have? What shall I tell you? Shall I praise you? In this I don't praise you." Paul was critical of the Corinthians because people started eating on their own before everyone else had arrived, some were going hungry because others weren't sharing the food, and

some were getting drunk. It wasn't the concept of eating the Lord's Supper as a full meal that was wrong. It was the selfish and inconsiderate way the Corinthians were attempting to do this. This was happening because of the division among them. They were not behaving in love as a unified body with concern for one another. It had become every man for himself.

Although the Lord's Supper should be eaten as a meal, we shouldn't forget that it is, indeed, the Lord's Supper. How can we be mindful of the body and blood of the Lord when what is uppermost in our minds is satisfying our hunger at the expense of slighting our brothers and sisters, when we are getting drunk on the wine, and when we are treating other members of the Body of Christ in a shameful way? When we do these things, we are not discerning the Body of Christ (in the loaf of bread we have in common and in our brethren with whom we have communion), and we are bringing judgment on ourselves.

Paul then orders, not that they stop eating the Lord's Supper as a full meal, but that they wait for one another so they can all eat together. And, if anyone is so hungry that he cannot wait, he had better eat at home (the implication being, *alone* in his own house).

Rather than presenting evidence against having the Lord's Supper as a full meal, 1 Corinthians 11 supports having a meal. The term "Lord's Supper" comes from 1 Corinthians 11:20. The Greek is *kuriakon deipnon*. *Kuriakon* means "Lord's." *Deipnon* means the main meal that was eaten in the evening. English speakers are notoriously inconsistent about what we call this meal—supper, dinner, or tea—so a strict translation of *kuriakon deipnon* into English would have to simply be "Lord's evening meal." But since we are used to saying Lord's Supper, we'll stick with that.

On the night that He was betrayed, Jesus and His disciples did not eat an evening meal of only a square inch of matzo and a thimbleful of wine. They ate a full meal of generous portions of food, including unleavened bread and wine that Jesus had specially blessed as the symbols of his body and blood. In 1 Corinthians 11:21, Paul uses the term "table of the Lord" (*trapezēs kuriou*). This has nothing to do with a table holding bread and wine in the "sanctuary" or "chancel" of a church. It means "table" in the common meaning of a meal.

The bread and the wine were symbols, and Jesus gave us an order and a remembrance, not a sacrament: Before I begin this section, I want to refer you to a full discussion of the proper elements for the Lord's

Supper in the article "What Kind of Bread and Fruit of the Vine Are We to Use?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/lordssupperelements1.html>). When Jesus had taken the unleavened bread and broken it, He gave thanks and said, "Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24; see also, Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; and Luke 22:19). There are two things to note here. 1. Jesus' body was present with His disciples. They could see and touch Him. Also, His body was not yet broken. Thus, the bread could not really be His broken body. It was only a symbol of His broken body. 2. Jesus did not say, Do this to receive the grace imparted by this sacrament. He said, "Do this in memory of me." Eating the Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ, not a sacrament.

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 11:25, "In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in memory of me'" (see also Matthew 26:27-28; Mark 14:23-24; and Luke 22:20). Interestingly, while many say that the wine in the Mass becomes the blood of Christ, I have never heard anyone say that the cup becomes the New Covenant. Yet, Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant." Obviously, we must understand that Jesus was giving us symbols by which to remember Him, His death, and His beginning the New Covenant by paying the penalty for our sins under the law.

"As often": Jesus never said to eat the Lord's Supper once a year or once each quarter or monthly or weekly. He merely said, "as often as" (1 Corinthians 11:25). He left up to us, up to each local *ekklēsia*, how often we are to eat the Lord's Supper.

Breaking Bread, Communion, and Love Feasts

In the accounts of the Lord's Supper that we've read, we saw that Christ broke the one loaf. The Greek word we usually translate as "bread" is *artos*, and it refers to a "loaf," although a loaf of unleavened bread doesn't look like a loaf of store-bought bread or any of the common types of leavened bread that we normally eat. It is a flat cracker—all one piece. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul writes, "The cup of blessing which we bless, isn't it a sharing of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, isn't it a sharing of the body of Christ?" In this verse, Paul used two more terms that have become synonyms for the Lord's Supper. The word for "sharing" is *koinōnia*. Even untranslated, *koinōnia* is sometimes used to refer to the Lord's Supper. It means partnership, fellowship, sharing, distribution, and communion. The last word, communion, is often used for the Lord's Supper because it

expresses the common loaf, the common cup and our unity in sharing in the body and blood of Christ.

Early on, breaking bread also seems to have become a reference to eating the Lord's Supper. Of course, it could also be used to refer to an ordinary meal, and it seems to be used both ways in the New Testament. Because it is so closely associated with teaching, fellowship (*koinōnia* or "communion"), and prayer, Acts 2:42 is likely using "breaking of bread" to refer to the Lord's Supper: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and prayer." Acts 2:46 may also be a reference to the Lord's Supper (as a meal with other food) being kept at home in contrast to evangelizing in the temple: "Day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart." Acts 20:7 may also be a reference to the Lord's Supper (of course, if the early Christians had been breaking bread daily, then Luke's note that it was the first day of the week has no particular significance beyond helping us keep track of the days as Paul traveled to Jerusalem).

The Lord's Supper meal was a moving but not morbid occasion as the disciples ate the bread and drank the wine remembering that Jesus willingly submitted His body to be broken for them, willingly went to His death, allowing His blood to be shed so they could live with God for eternity; and it was also a joyous time as they remembered the freedom Jesus bought for them, His resurrection, His ascension to heaven, and the promise of His return.

Speaking of "certain men who crept in secretly" (Jude 4), Jude writes, "These are hidden rocky reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you, shepherds who without fear feed themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn leaves without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots" (Jude 12). The "love feasts" or *agapē* are most likely the Lord's Supper, and the term helps us understand that these were times for the brethren to fellowship, to share, and to show their love for one another. They would not have recognized standing or sitting in pews facing the front of a room in a church building with a morsel of bread and a few drops of wine as having anything to do with their feasts.

How Should We Eat the Lord's Supper Today?

Well, of course, we've seen the answer to this question in much of what I've said above, but I'll try to provide a little more detail.

Because of its importance and the fact that the early saints appear to have eaten the Lord's Supper as frequently as daily, I like to have a Lord's Supper meal as frequently as is practically possible in today's society. For us, that turns out to be once a week, but in your *ekklēsia*, you will need to settle this for yourselves. There is no right answer as far as frequency or a particular day, but I do believe it should be in the evening.

The bread and wine should be in the context of a full, evening meal. This does not mean that the meal has to be a formal banquet or anything like it. It can be a covered dish or potluck dinner in which everyone brings something different. Or, you might serve spaghetti or hot dogs or fried chicken or Philly cheesesteak or egg and chips or murtabak or Kung Pao chicken or meat pies. In other words, what you serve is up to you.

Someone should say a blessing for the entire meal and a special blessing for the bread and wine. There is no set way to do this, and it can even vary from house to house. In our house, I ask a blessing on the meal and then on the bread. We eat a little of the bread. Then, I ask a blessing on the wine, and we drink some wine. Then we simply continue with the meal. This giving of thanks (*eucharisteō*), as we have already seen Jesus did, is why the Lord's Supper is sometimes called the Eucharist.

Having the Lord's Supper as a meal, rather than something that more resembles taking some prescription medicines, helps us to see it as a love feast and to understand that all who are eating with us are members of our spiritual family. We may also look at it as a picture of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

I must point out that the Lord's Supper was eaten in private homes; it was not open to the public. There is no indication in the Bible that anyone other than baptized believers ate the bread and drank the wine. The first act of obedience is to be baptized. Unbaptized children, and perhaps other unbaptized members of the household, will naturally be present and may freely eat the meal, but not the unleavened bread and wine (if an unbaptized person started innocently taking the bread or wine, I would make no fuss about it—these are symbols and not sacred items—but it would be good if they were instructed about this prior to the meal). Remember that, unlike the Old Covenant, under which merely being born into the nation of Israel and, if a male, being circumcised, made one a member of the covenant, the

New Covenant consists of those who are spiritually born from above. They should make their profession known in baptism, and then they may eat the Lord's Supper.

Besides its being private, having the Lord's Supper in a home in an informal, family setting helps us to see Christ in our everyday lives and dwelling in our homes. Remember that there is to be one loaf and one cup, signifying our unity and communion with Christ, our dying with Him, and our oneness with each other.

The portions of bread and wine should not be limited to bits and drops. Christ has provided for our salvation abundantly, and tiny portions would seem to picture the opposite. This fact, plus having one loaf and one cup, naturally limits the number of the people at a meal. There were no mega-assemblies in the first century. While we might get creative with the cup and start using a jug, the size of the unleavened bread will be limited to about the size of a big cookie sheet. If you are blessed with having too many people, it is time to form an additional assembly.

It should go without saying, of course, that no one is to become drunk. A typical communion glass in church is too little for most people, although someone who has had a problem with alcohol or who has a medical condition that limits alcohol may want to take only a minimal amount. Several wine glasses is way too much! I personally limit myself to one wine glass. Everyone should know his or her limit, and anyone who allows him- or herself to become intoxicated should be lovingly spoken to.

The Lord's Supper is a time for freely enjoying food and fellowship with one another. It is not a teaching assembly (though, certainly, if children or others ask questions about what is going on, they should be answered). It is difficult to teach or listen to someone teach while eating and fellowshiping. Paul may have tried teaching during the Lord's Supper once, but, as Eutychus could tell you, it had near disastrous results!

Because the Lord's Supper is a meal and not a time for teaching, the prohibition on women speaking in the assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12) does not apply.

If you Google "unleavened bread recipes" on the internet, you will find many (I suggest you try them out ahead of time). Here is a simple one:

1 cup whole wheat flour
½ cup water
2 Tablespoons olive oil

Add the water and oil to the flour and mix. Then knead on a floured board for 5 minutes. Roll out thin on the floured board, then transfer to a greased cookie sheet.

Bake in a 350° oven for 20 minutes.

This loaf will not resemble common, leavened bread, but a large, flat cracker.