

# Celebrating the Lord's Supper at Cornerstone Church

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The Lord's Supper is a central element in the worship of the Christian church. Indeed, it is one of the things that our Lord commanded us to do in His name. Yet for many Christians, the Lord's Supper is also confusing. What exactly is it? Why do we do it? What does it mean? Who should partake of it? How do we celebrate it? Recognizing the confusion that often exists, what follows is a guide for what we at Cornerstone do at the Lord's Supper and why.

## **What is it?**

The Lord's Supper is a meal given to the church by Jesus on the night before He died for our sins. Jesus took the Passover Feast—the celebration given to Israel by God in the Old Testament—and transformed it. The Passover commemorated how God had rescued them from the plague of death by the blood of a spotless lamb. Passover was most importantly a meal: whole households of Israel ate and celebrated together how God was releasing them from slavery to Egypt.

At Jesus' Last Supper, Jesus took common elements of a Passover meal—bread and wine—and gave them new meanings. Jesus told His disciples to consider the bread as His body, which was given for them. He took a cup of wine and told them to consider it as His blood, which was poured out for them for the forgiveness of sins. Then he commanded them to do this “in remembrance of me.”

What happened on the cross explains the meaning of Christ's words. Jesus gave up His body and poured out His blood so that he might redeem us from our sins. Just like the Passover lamb, Jesus' sacrifice saves us from death and releases us as slaves to be His people.

The Lord's Supper is therefore a reenactment of the Last Supper and a “memorial” of Jesus for our redemption. We obey Jesus' command by taking bread and the cup in remembrance of him.

## **Why do we do it?**

Simply, we do this meal because Jesus commanded it. But more than that, the Lord's Supper is not primarily a work *we* do but a work *God* does for us, a “gift” (grace). God does not just expect bare obedience but actually attaches promises to the Lord's Supper. One way to understand this is to see that the Lord's Supper is the climax of all the meals that God gave to His people in the Old Covenant.

God's original gift to humanity was a luscious garden and a Tree of Life whose fruit was a sign of God's gracious fellowship with Adam and Eve. God attached the promise of life to that fruit such that banishment from the garden and its fruit meant death (Gen 3:22–23). Likewise, Passover was a “feast” as well as a “sign” and “memorial” (Ex 13:8) of God's redemption; those who partook of it were spared from the plague of death. The Apostle Paul likens the Lord's Supper to Passover: “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed; therefore let us keep the feast!” (1 Cor 5:8)

Similarly, the miraculous manna from heaven and water from the rock sustained Israel in the barren wilderness, and Paul compares this to the Lord's Supper – as “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:1–4). The Lord's Supper, like the Old Testament manna, is food of spiritual sustenance for our journey to the Promised Land. The New Testament also compares the sacrifices which were eaten by the whole Israelite family (“the peace offering,” Lev 3:1–17) to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:18). In both, God communicates His forgiveness and the participants “commune” with God: “The cup of blessing

which we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16).

The Lord's Supper also reminds us of other important "covenant sealing" meals in the Old Testament. On Mt. Sinai, the elders of Israel sealed the covenant with God by eating: "God did not raise His hand against the chief elders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank" (Ex 24:11). In the Tabernacle and Temple, the Old Covenant sanctuaries, there was "Bread of the Presence" (Ex 25:30), also called "Memorial Bread" (Lev 24:7–8), that signified God's presence with His people.

Most of all, when the Old Testament prophets spoke of the coming blessing of God, they often pictured it as a meal of bread and wine (Isa 1:19; Amos 9:13; Joel 2:24–26; Eze 34:13; Isa 25:6–9). The New Testament tells us the same: the final victory of Christ leads to "the marriage supper of the Lamb" at which all the saints will eat (Rev 19:6–9). Jesus tells us that the Lord's Supper is a *foretaste* of the consummation of His kingdom (Mt 26:29; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:18).

We do the Lord's Supper to celebrate what he did for us (past), how he is continually sustaining us spiritually (present), and by faith to trust that he will bring us to the final feast of heaven (future).

### **What does it mean?**

The Lord's Supper is also called "Communion," a word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 10:16–18. Through partaking of the Supper in faith, we "commune" both with *God*—"participating in Christ"—and with *fellow Christians*—"a participation in the body of Christ." Paul even says that our unity as the church is derived from the unity of the bread: "we who are many are one body because we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Lord's Supper is a meal of *faith*: to have spiritual fellowship with God and His people.

### **Who should partake of the Supper?**

Since the Lord's Supper is a "sign of the covenant," it is for those who are in covenant with God. Historically, the Christian church throughout all ages has allowed only those who have received the initiatory sign of the covenant (baptism) and those who remain in good, faithful standing with the church. In other words, it is for people who have come *into* the church and who have not been disciplined *by* the church for unrepentant sin. It is a meal with Jesus for those who are in relationship with Jesus, those who are trusting in Him and seeking to follow Him. (For questions of baptized children and 'communicant' membership, see our "Cornerstone Statement on Communicant Membership").

To avoid misunderstanding, our church's confessional standards also point out that it is not solely for "mature" Christians. It is certainly not for sinless people. "This sacrament is appointed for the relief even of weak and doubting Christians" (LC 172). It is a means of *grace*, not a performance of works.

### **How should we celebrate the Supper?**

We should celebrate the Supper by *celebrating* it in faith. It is not a somber meal designed to make you reflect on your sins, but rather on the grace that is greater than sin. In the Old Testament, God had *commanded* all the special covenant meals to be celebrated *with joy* (Deut 12:7)!

Paul also reminds the Corinthian Christians that they must not take the Supper for granted. That is why Christians should "examine themselves" so that they are not participating in the Supper in a degrading way (in the context of 1 Corinthians 11, people were getting drunk and shaming poor members of the

church). They should “discern” that this is a special meal and also recognize the other members of the body, so that they are in fellowship with everybody. Even as the Lord’s Supper is a source of God’s grace, it can also be a means of judgment for those who are using it in order to profane Christ and His church. Even so, Paul’s main contention is to correct abuses so that everyone can participate with joy in the fellowship of the Lord.

### **Appendix: Bread & Wine**

Why a Loaf? At the Last Supper, Jesus most likely used “unleavened” bread as was prescribed for Passover. This would not have been *crackers* (even modern-day “matzah”), but a kind of flat/pita bread (the ancient world didn’t have separate ‘yeast’ but used sourdough starters). Even so, the early church very quickly began using leavened bread since Jesus fulfilled the Passover ritual. Even in the Old Testament there is precedent for this: though leaven was not used at Passover, it *was* used at Pentecost and offered before God (Lev 23:17). Since the Christian church is established fully at Pentecost, this has led many Christians to celebrate it with a normal, leavened loaf.

Fruit of the Vine? That Jesus used alcoholic wine at the Last Supper should be beyond doubt. There wasn’t the possibility of non-alcoholic wine, since without refrigeration grape juice begins to ferment almost immediately. Cornerstone has used grape juice out of respect of those who struggle with alcohol. However, it should be clear that we have no problem with alcohol used rightly as God’s gift (Ps 104:15) and would encourage Christians to rejoice in God’s gift by learning to practice moderation.