

The Lord's Supper

Sacred Sacrament, Religious Rite, or Common Meal?

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February 2020

The concept of the Lord's Supper (also referred to as Communion or The Eucharist), has generated a great deal of discussion, confusion, and even division throughout church history. In my opinion, the confusion continues today. I often converse with church attendees or newcomers from a church background, and a common question is "Why doesn't The Village observe the Lord's Supper?" In this short essay, I intend to explain our position and practice on this important subject.

What did Jesus intend the Lord's Supper to be?

The best, most biblical, and intellectually honest way to answer this question is to examine the passages that describe the Last Supper. After all, Jesus never used the term "the Lord's Supper." Instead, his thoughts on the Lord's Supper are recorded during a time when he was celebrating the Passover Meal with his disciples. Since this was literally Jesus' last supper with his disciples prior to his crucifixion, we refer to this meal as the "Last Supper." First let's look at the relevant texts, and then I will seek to interpret what Jesus' comments meant (and by implication, what his comments could not mean).

Luke 22

⁷ Then the Day of Unleavened Bread came when the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸ Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." ⁹ "Where do you want us to prepare it?" they asked him. ¹⁰ "Listen," he said to them, "when you've entered the city, a man carrying a water jug will meet you. Follow him into the house he enters. ¹¹ Tell the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover with my disciples?'" ¹² Then he will show you a large, furnished room upstairs. Make the preparations there." ¹³ So they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

I begin this essay with Luke 22:7-13, because I have read some scholars who seemingly try to avoid controversy by claiming that Jesus was doing something new by inaugurating the "First Lord's Supper."¹ Clearly, Jesus was making preparations for and intending to celebrate Passover. In fact, the rest of the New Testament teaches that Jesus completed the Passover by becoming the ultimate sacrificial Lamb of God. If we are to correctly interpret the text, it is absolutely critical that we remember that Jesus is celebrating Passover (not inventing a new cultus or ritual disconnected from biblical history). The Passover

¹ The section header inserted in the Christian Standard Bible prior to Luke 22:14 reads "The First Lord's Supper." The NASB inserts a section header before vs. 14 that reads "The Lord's Supper." The NIV puts their section header prior to vs. 7 and it reads "The Last Supper." In my opinion, each of these are instances in which the section headers inserted by translators tend to distort and unnecessarily influence the natural reading of the text. Jesus never called what he was doing the "Lord's Supper" and he also never titled the meal the "Last Supper." Jesus did make it clear that he was celebrating the Passover Meal with his disciples (and he did make it clear that it was the last meal he would eat with the disciples prior to his death).

was an annual celebration that Paul tells us Jesus fulfilled in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.² If this is not enough to convince the reader that Jesus has the Passover on his mind, read Jesus' words below.

Luke 22

¹⁴When the hour came, he reclined at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵Then he said to them, "***I have fervently desired to eat this Passover*** with you before I suffer. ¹⁶For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸For I tell you, from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

We are now positioned to analyze Jesus' famous words in their original context, namely in the midst of a Passover feast.

Luke 22

¹⁹And he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them...

"(H)e took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them..." New Testament scholar Robert Banks helps provide cultural context for the breaking of bread. Banks writes, "The breaking and distribution of the bread was the normal way of commencing such a meal, just as the taking of a cup was the usual way to bring it to a conclusion."³ Another New Testament scholar, David Peterson concurs with Banks's assessment:

Taking bread, giving thanks to God, breaking and distributing it, was the normal method of saying grace and beginning a meal in Jewish culture. Similarly, a host would indicate the formal end of a meal together by taking a cup of wine, giving thanks to God and sharing it with all present. These were not new customs introduced by Jesus and they were certainly not cultic acts to be performed by "officially appointed exponents."⁴

Thus, Jesus' Passover celebration followed the patterns of normal eating rituals. The only slight anomaly was that, fitting with Passover symbolism, the bread was unleavened.

Jesus and Table Fellowship Controversy

Jesus regularly evoked controversy over his eating and meal practices. The primary reason for such controversy was the high regard that Jews (and Romans and Greeks for that matter) placed upon the unifying and welcoming significance of eating a meal together. Here again, Peterson helps us accurately picture both the cultural and biblical context within which Jesus' meal controversies occurred:

The Last Supper was the climax of a series of meals shared with his disciples and with the religious and moral outcasts of his day. The scribes and Pharisees protested vehemently about this practice (e.g. Mt. 9:10-13; Lk. 15:1-2), but ***Jesus continued to use table-fellowship as a means of expressing the forgiveness, acceptance and companionship that belong to the messianic salvation*** (e.g. Lk. 19:5-10). Such meals were

² Interestingly, Paul does not cite Christ's fulfillment of Passover in the context of Lord's Supper discussions, but instead he references Jesus being the Passover Lamb to support the call to eliminate the yeast (false teachers and/or immoral brother) that is corrupting the whole fellowship.

³ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: Revised Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 81.

⁴ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 125.

an anticipation of the kingdom of God. At the Last Supper, Jesus was clarifying the theological significance of eating and drinking together as the community of the Messiah. He did this by means of the words of interpretation, challenging disciples to remember the basis of their relationship in his redemptive death and the certainty of their hope of feasting together in his kingdom.⁵

In light of the cultural and biblical context, I am arguing that Jesus did three primary things during his last supper with his disciples:

1. Jesus revealed he would fulfill Passover by becoming the ultimate Lamb of God (1 Cor. 5:6-8; 1 Peter 1:18-19).
2. Jesus showed that his death is what makes believers into a united and welcoming community.
3. Jesus infused the everyday experience of eating with reminders of his unifying and welcoming sacrifice for us and all who would accept his grace. It is perpetual process of eating and remembering his grace that Jesus intended to be carried forth by future generations of believers.

Point 3 requires more information and more context, so we need to return to our key passages.

What does “is” mean?

Luke 22

¹⁹ “(Jesus) said, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

What did Jesus mean when, while holding a piece of bread, he said “This is my body”? Roman Catholics and others who believe in transubstantiation maintain that Jesus should be taken literally—the piece of bread literally became his body. The language seems to support this conclusion (the argument usually goes “What else does ‘is’ possibly mean?”). However, rudimentary logic and common sense rule out this interpretation for the following reasons:

1. Jesus’ body was right there in front of the disciples. If someone would have asked them, “Where is Jesus?”, they no doubt would have pointed at his literal, physical body.
2. If Jesus literally became a loaf of bread for a moment, then the constantly inquisitive disciples would have surely commented on this unusual event.
3. If Jesus literally meant that future loaves of bread would become his body (with the corresponding salvific qualities), then the constantly inquisitive disciples would have surely commented on this never-before-seen idea and ritual.
4. The easiest way to make sense of the scene laid out before us is to recognize that Jesus was communicating symbolically. He was using metaphor to illustrate all that his broken body would accomplish for the future body of the church.
5. The fact that Jesus says the bread is to be broken in “remembrance” of him strongly points us away from a literalistic interpretation.

What does “this” mean?

What did Jesus mean when, while initiating the beginning of the Passover meal via breaking bread, he called disciples to “Do this in remembrance of me”? There are a limited number of options for what “this” could mean in the context:

⁵ Peterson, 125-6 (all emphases mine).

1. "This" could mean celebrate the Passover in remembrance of me. In which case, the Lord's Supper would only be celebrated annually consistent with Passover. The problem with this interpretation is that the rest of the New Testament communicates that Jesus fulfilled Passover, and Christians are called to turn away from obsolete Jewish festivals (see Galatians and especially Hebrews).
2. "This" could mean that we are to create a new "Passover-like" ritual in order to remember Jesus. Those who hold this view are legion, and they claim that the Lord's Supper (which is usually referred to as "communion") is one of the few religious rites which believers are called to practice (baptism being the other). The problem with this view, as we have already seen, is that Jesus was not initiating new religious rituals. On the contrary, Jesus was fulfilling pre-existing and prophetic Old Testament rituals. Here again I find Peterson's insights worth quoting at length:

The recital of the words of institution might be necessary to highlight the significance of a meal together, but eating and drinking together in Christ's name would be the heart of the event. With such 'concrete external actions' the reality of life under the new covenant would be expressed, and the benefits of Christ's sacrifice would be enjoyed by faith, in the fellowship of the redeemed. *Only in this very modified sense could it be said that Jesus instituted a 'cultic' meal for his disciples.* However, there is nothing in the Last Supper narratives to suggest that such table-fellowship would be tied to sacred times and sacred places or be bound by the ministrations of any priesthood.⁶

3. "This" could mean that Jesus wants his disciples to remember his death for them as often as they eat food. I propose that this is the most logical reading of the text, and it is the interpretation that is most consistent with how the rest of the New Testament treats rituals, festivals, and religious rites.⁷ Such an interpretation does not rule out sharing a common meal with others, or taking special time in the midst of table-fellowship to thank God for the death of Christ and the gift of one another.

I maintain that interpretation #3 proves its superiority simply by continuing to read the text.

Luke 22

²⁰In the same way he also took the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

As I have already demonstrated in quoting Robert Banks above, passing the cup of wine around the table was the common way that common meals were ended in Jewish culture. Prior verses in Luke 22 emphasize this point:

Luke 22

¹⁴When the hour came, he reclined at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵Then he said to them, "I have fervently desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves."⁸

⁶ Peterson, 126 (emphasis mine).

⁷ The NT is very leery of rituals and religious rites, and constantly calls upon Christ's disciples to turn away from such activities. Hebrews makes the best case for this view by repeatedly hammering the themes that old rituals are mere shadows, Jesus has fulfilled the OT types and rituals, and simple fellowship with Jesus is better than the old way.

⁸ Emphasis mine.

As a result, after analyzing the texts associated with Jesus' last supper with his disciples, I conclude that Jesus did not intend to create a sacred sacrament via which his salvific powers would be commuted to those who eat the sacred bread and drink the sacred wine. Ironically, this sacramental interpretation logically leads one to take the power of salvation away from Christ's actual death, and infuse it into some magically transformed sacred bread that must be eaten repeatedly. Tragically, this is not just a theoretical conclusion, but an experienced reality for countless people through the centuries.

In addition, I also conclude that Jesus did not intend to create a symbolic religious rite which is required to stay in good standing as a Christian and which a church must perpetually prioritize in its life together. Peterson concurs:

From the narratives of the Last Supper preserved by Luke and Paul, it seems clear that Jesus intended his disciples to recall and celebrate the benefits of his saving work in the context of a community meal. No direction is given about the frequency of such meals and Christians throughout the centuries have varied in their response to this liberty.⁹

How did the early church practice the Lord's Supper?

The first thing that jumps out to one researching this question is how comparatively little the New Testament has to say on the Lord's Supper. Acts 2:42-46 describes the very early church perpetually "breaking bread" together in one another's homes. It is important to clarify a few things about this practice:

1. "Breaking bread" was common language for sharing a meal together. So, the text could be read to simply say, "the church ate together very often."
2. The situation the early church faced in Acts 2 was somewhat unprecedented. Thousands of Jewish pilgrims from other lands had been in town to celebrate Pentecost, and then thousands within this group of pilgrims had suddenly accepted Christ. They then wanted to remain, be instructed in the Scriptures, and then presumably most would return home. This created a housing and food crisis for the early church. As a result, these meal gatherings had both spiritual and survival motivations!
3. Table-fellowshipping already carried powerful connotations of unity and welcome within ancient cultures. Thus, gathering for the common meals was a great outreach opportunity for believers to invite their non-believing friends to participate in. During these shared meals, a leader would use the common meal elements (bread and wine) to describe how someone could be truly united with God and welcomed into God's family through faith in Christ.
4. Acts is a narrative that describes what happened. Sometimes what is described is healthy and to be emulated. Sometimes what is described is neutral. Sometimes what is described is unhealthy. We are helped immensely when the epistles comment upon narrative events. For instance, the early church clearly practiced common meals or "love feasts" during which welcoming table fellowship was infused with the message of God's grace through Christ. However, we must determine if this practice was intended to be transcultural—applicable to and required of all churches in all times and in all places or cultures.

⁹ Peterson, 130 (emphasis mine).

Why is the Lord's Supper mentioned so rarely in the NT epistles?

I find it very interesting that, not only is the Lord's Supper hardly even mentioned in the NT epistles, but when it is mentioned it is associated with corrections and warnings. 2 Peter 2:13 and Jude 12 warn against false teachers coming in and taking advantage of churches when they are gathered for their common meals. 1 Corinthians 11 has the most extensive treatment of the Lord's Supper in the NT epistles. The scope of this paper does not allow a thorough exegesis of the passage. However, suffice it to say that Paul is correcting how the Corinthians were treating each other. The Corinthian church was full of factions, and these factions (along with the underlying self-absorption that fueled them) surfaced loud and clear at their common meals. Some arrived early and ate all the food, got drunk on all the wine, and then expected to have a good fellowship meeting with their other brothers and sisters in Christ!

The lack of commentary on and admonition to observe the Lord's Supper in the NT epistles leaves one with key questions:

1. ***How central was the Lord's Supper to the early church's life together?*** If it was as central as evangelism, "one-anothering", every member ministry, disciple-making, prayer, and teaching the Scriptures, would we not expect more commentary? It is notable that no church is affirmed for "doing the Lord's Supper often or well." This could be an argument from silence, but the NT writers went out of their way to affirm all sorts of other key elements in the churches they led.
2. ***Does the original unifying and welcoming power of the common meal (Lord's Supper) still translate to our culture?*** Unfortunately, most unchurched or de-churched people seem to associate the above-mentioned magical thinking to the Lord's Supper. Thus, centering our church's life together around the Lord's Supper would seem to actually hinder evangelism (rather than help as it clearly did in the early church).
3. ***Would we not better serve the Lord and reach people by championing the timeless principles embodied in the Lord's Supper?*** Fighting for and functionally living out unity is just not really tied to table-fellowship in our culture. This may be sad, but I think it is true. Interestingly, providing and sharing meals can still be a powerful way to welcome someone into your life or family. However, this does not and need not be officially scheduled in the church calendar. In fact, it is often best to welcome the unchurched by sharing meals and drinks in a casual, "non-churchy" atmosphere.

My Current Conclusions

1. We should prioritize unity and welcoming others around the table with believers in ways that fit our culture and fit with the intent of Scripture.
2. The more "classic" approach to reflecting over Christ via the bread and wine, should typically be reserved for believers-only settings. This is due to the societal misconceptions and hindrances tied to teachings on and practices of the Lord's Supper.
3. We are under no obligation to practice the "classic" approach to reflecting over Christ via bread and wine.
4. Jesus actually wants us to remember what he has done for us as often as we eat (or even more often). Thus, in my view, both the sacred sacrament and religious rite approach to the Lord's Supper actually limit the scope and impact of Jesus' intentions!