

The Lord's Supper (A. Farstad)

1. Examine Exodus 12 and 1 Corinthians 11. What are the similarities between the Hebrew service of Passover and the Lord's Supper?

It was at the Jewish Passover Seder (Service) that the Lord's Supper was instituted. In Exodus 12, God commanded the perpetual keeping of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. Even though later Judaism added extra-biblical traditions and practices, the essential elements of the service were still kept in the time of the New Testament (and are still observed today). The following is a list of the adaptations from the Passover that is found in the Lord's Supper:

1. Both services are "permanent" memorials:

"And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever" (Exod 12:24).

"This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Cor 11:25b, 26).

2. Both services involve bread:

"In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening" (Exod 12:18).

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body'" (Matt 26:26, and parallels).

Our Lord took one of the main elements of the Passover meal and invested it with a new meaning, namely, a direct call to remembrance of Himself. (1)

3. Both involve blood:

"And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two door posts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it" (Exod 12:7).

"For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:28).

In one the blood is literal, in the other, the red Passover wine (2) is used to stand for blood. Both are tokens of redemption. It may be significant that the blood on the sides and top of the door would form a cross, the instrument of torture on which Christ died.

4. Both involve communal fellowship:

There was to be one lamb per household, and if one household was too small it was to meet with the neighbors.

"So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:46).

Here is also a noteworthy *difference* between Passover and Lord's Supper: in the former, a lamb was needed; in the latter, an all-sufficient Lamb for all time (and eternity) obviates any physical lamb. With the Lamb of God in the midst, none other was needed. (*Historically*, the disciples no doubt had a lamb on the night of "the Last Supper," but the fact that it is not mentioned is significant.)

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5. Both commemorate redemption:

"And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.' So the people bowed their heads and worshipped" (Exod 12:26, 27).

The *Haggadah*, or ritual account of the meaning of the Seder, was similar to Christian explanations and devotions based on the meaning of Christ's death. Examples are in 1 Corinthians 5: "Christ our Passover" (v 7) and the "unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (v 8).

2. What observations do you make of the first Lord's Supper? "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.' And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Mark 14:22-26)

Taking this account in Mark 14 and its parallel in Matthew 26 as historical and complementary rather than contradictory, we can glean the following facts:

1. The contexts make clear that this was an evening meal (Matt 26:20; Mark 14:17).
2. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it to His disciples, and told them to take and eat it; it was His body.
3. Next He took a cup, gave thanks, gave it to them, told them to drink (Matthew), and they did so (Mark). Evidently a common cup was used at this time.
4. He explained the cup as being His blood of the covenant which was to be shed for many. Matthew adds the reason: for forgiveness of sins.
5. Jesus made a solemn prediction or vow (Mark notes that He said "assuredly" (amen). He vowed never to drink from the fruit of the vine till the coming of the kingdom. This may be why He refused the wine on the Cross. Matthew notes the personal desire of the Savior to drink it with His disciples.
6. They sang hymns (literally, "having hymned") and then went to Olivet. The King James translation, "a hymn," is too weak. Many scholars believe that the four psalms called the great Hallel (115-118) are referred to.(3) Swete notes that some believe that Psalm 137 is meant. (4) Kelly comments on the blessedness of the scene, (5) evidently referring to the poignancy of Jesus singing the ancient Psalms of David right before His betrayal.

3. What is the New Testament Teaching and Practice of the Lord's Supper?

An English-born preacher (6) taught this writer years ago that to be a valid ordinance of the Christian church, an observance had to be three things:

1. *Instituted by Christ Himself.* (Three of the four Gospels record His instituting this rite.)
2. *Practiced in the Acts of the Apostles.* (There are several references to the Supper in Acts.)
3. *Explained in the Epistles of the NT.* (The fullest account is in 1 Corinthians 11, though there are other briefer references.)

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Only two ordinances meet these three criteria: baptism (7) and the Lord's Supper.

Although I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the meetings of the early Christians (8) and read countless tomes and articles on early Christianity, I never found anything to shake my acceptance of this three-fold test.

If one believes in the "development" theory of the Church, namely, that ecclesiastical officials can add to, delete, or change Christ's teachings—this little test will seem naive in the extreme. But I expect most Bible Christians (9) will appreciate its simple truth.

In the earliest days of the Church, when believers were all together in Jerusalem, the disciples apparently broke bread every day (although some of these events may have been ordinary meals).

By the time the Church had progressed in its spread across the Roman Empire to many Gentile areas, the frequency of celebration would seem to have become weekly: "the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:6).

Perhaps in reaction to the high-church notion that communion can help save one's soul, Protestants have generally cut down on the weekly (or daily communion) to a monthly, or even a quarterly communion (a few just yearly). Many ultra-dispensationalists, as we have seen, totally reject the Supper for this age, along with most Quakers and the Salvation Army.

Several devout church leaders, such as John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Mueller, and Charles H. Spurgeon, (10) have encouraged weekly communion, and several groups in Christendom who hold biblical views on the ordinance follow the practice of the early Church in this.

The practice of the New Testament Church shows that the Christians gathered around the table of the Lord to worship the Lord by reading the Scriptures, praying, singing hymns, sharing, preaching, and taking part in the elements of Christ's passion. First Corinthians 16:1-2 also shows that at least on occasion a collection was taken.

All of these features were clearly carried on in the early centuries of the Church, as the literature gives evidence. However, as Christianity became bigger, richer, and especially when it received the favor of the emperor (fourth century (11) and following), the primitive worship with active participation by a priesthood of believers gradually evolved into a formal liturgy with a strict division of clergy versus laity.

One fears that what was gained in beautiful architecture, music, and vestments, was largely lost in the areas of spiritual reality and biblical truth.

4. How would you define these terms: **The Breaking of Bread, The Communion, The Lord's Table, The Eucharist, and The Lord's Supper?**

All subjects are known and understood by their terminology. The vocabulary of Christendom is varied as to what the Lord's Supper is called. Again, a rite that is meant to unite, has been used—including verbally—to divide Christians. Most of the following terms are quite acceptable to biblical Christians. (12)

The Breaking of Bread

The earliest and most primitive expression refers to the fact that the Lord's Supper is a *meal*, though not one at which one is to expect to be filled (1 Corinthians 11:34 says to eat at home if you are hungry!). In several passages in Acts it is not certain if the Lord's Supper, the "love feast" (*agape*), or an ordinary meal among Christians is meant.

The Communion

This word represents the Greek for "having things in common, or "sharing" (*koinonia*). The expression "receive communion" tends to obscure the fact that believers share or commune both with other members and with Christ the Head; they do not "receive" a miraculous element from a priestly "celebrant"!

The Lord's Table

This phrase reminds us of Psalm 23, of the ancient Near East's well-known code of hospitality, and of being part of God's family. It is the *Lord's Table*, not our table, and it should be open to the Lord's people (and none other). Exact reception policies of different churches vary, but we believe that local church discipline should keep out those living in known sin (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5) or holding heretical doctrines (e.g., 3 John 9-11).

The Eucharist

This is the anglicized form of the Greek word for thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). Many Bible Christians avoid this term because it is usually associated with so-called "high church" bodies. However, if we use it in its original meaning as a giving of thanks for the finished work of Christ, it can add something to our Christian vocabulary.

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Most evangelicals like this term best of all, though it is worth noting that it only occurs once in the New Testament, and then in a negative use. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their rather carnal observance of the feast of remembrance as *not* being the *Lord's Supper* (1 Cor 11:20), but their own!

5. What does the Lord's Supper mean and how should it be observed? There is considerable variety of faith and practice in Christendom, not only as to terminology, but also as to *what* the Lord's Supper really means, and *how* the rite should be conducted.

The Meaning of the Supper

Jesus said, "This do in remembrance of Me," and Paul wrote, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Cor 11:26). In light of these words, this much should be clear to all Bible Christians: The Lord's Supper is a rite of remembrance of our Lord, and, in light of the elements representing His body and blood, a memorial of His work on the Cross. The fact that the elements are separated (13) shows forth His death, a death that was violent and accompanied by bloodshed. Those who say that Christ could have been killed by a means other than crucifixion ignore OT prophecies, the sacrificial system of Leviticus, and all Christian teaching.

The evolution from the simple breaking of bread in Acts to an ornate ritual is one of the tragedies of Christendom. What was meant to remind us of *the finished* work of Christ became a "continuous Calvary," the "unbloody sacrifice of the mass.

The Roman Catholic dogma of *transubstantiation*—that when the priest says the words, "This is My body," the wafer actually turns into "the body, soul, and divinity" of our Lord—was not made an official teaching of the Church of Rome until the year that King John of England signed the Magna Charta (1215). Of course, many *believed* in the doctrine long before that, but there were no penalties for not believing it until it was made official.

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Luther's doctrine is called *consubstantiation*, the teaching that Christ is literally present *with* (con-) the substance of the bread and wine. Calvin taught the spiritual presence of Christ when the Supper is observed.

Zwingli taught that the service was a simple memorial to Christ in His death. Most evangelicals would agree with Calvin or Zwingli (or sometimes both).

The fact that the communion is generally observed on Sundays, the day Christ rose, reminds us of His bodily resurrection.

The fact that it is only "till He comes" reminds us to look forward to His coming again for His Church.

The Modes of Observance

Some Christians receive the elements sitting, some standing, and some kneeling. It is interesting that at the first Lord's Supper the disciples were *reclining*, the favored position for an important meal such as the Passover, at which festival the communion was instituted.

Disputes over whether the bread has to be without leaven (like *matzohs*) or can be ordinary bread, and over whether the "fruit of the vine" (biblical wording) must be fermented like Jewish passover wine, or can be unfermented due to the strong objection of many Christians to any alcohol, have merely divided churches needlessly.

Since Christianity was meant to be a universal faith, no demands are made in the New Testament that every congregation must have the exact same elements as the first disciples. In chapel, church, or cathedral, on the South Sea Islands, in concentration camps, even *on the moon*, (14) the communion elements have been received with thanks, even if not always exactly the *kosher* elements of the first Christian breaking of bread.

I believe that Christ is satisfied if the *heart* is right.

Conclusion

Even though the doctrine and practice of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper has often tended to divide rather than to unite major blocs of Christians of differing viewpoints, its importance and great significance should not be ignored or diminished. Also, it has been a very *uniting* force on a local level, and sometimes in denominational and inter-denominational gatherings as well.

While a student at Seminary many years ago, I wrote a hymn that tried to tie together some of the varying traditions of believing Christianity by devoting one stanza each to five different terms for this ancient rite. I called it simply "Communion Hymn." (15)

Communion Hymn

1 We obey You, Jesus, Master,
In this rite which You first led;
We obey You with this chalice
And as now we *Break the Bread*.

2 We implore You now, Christ Jesus,
Through Your Holy Spirit, keep
Our weak wand'ring hearts from straying
From this blest *Communion* deep.

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3 We do praise You, Holy Savior,
For these simple symbols clear,
Which recall to us Your suffering
As *Your Table* we draw near.

4 We adore You, blessed Jesus,
In this hour by Heaven kissed:
Singing, praying, meditating,
We express our *Eucharist*.

5 Give us, Lord, a parting blessing,
As we rise to go our ways,
Looking for that great *Lord's Supper*
We shall share in Kingdom days!

References:

1. J. J. Petuchowski points out that for the leader of the Seder to make a special memorial, such as to the famous Rabbi Hillel, was not unique, though the parallel between Hillel in Judaism and Jesus in Christianity is not great. See "Do This in Remembrance of Me," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (October, 1957), 293-98.
2. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. by Norman Perrin (3rd ed.; London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), 53. Red wine was traditional, even binding (cf. blood).
3. Cf. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1913), 337.
4. *Ibid.*, 338.
5. William Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Bible Truth Depot, n.d.), 491.
6. The preacher was Edwin Fesche, now of Baltimore, who preached the sermon that led this editor to believe the Gospel.
7. See JOTGES, Spring 1990, for a discussion of this doctrine.
8. Arthur L. Farstad, "Historical and Exegetical Consideration of New Testament Church Meetings," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972. pp. 397.
9. A Roman Catholic priest on a nationwide TV" program referred to our type of believers as "Bible Christians." It is a good term for those whose whole faith and practice are built on God's Word.
10. Muller and Spurgeon both practiced weekly communion, the former at Bethesda Chapel, Bristol (Brethren), and the latter at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London (Baptist).
11. Constantine made Christianity a legal religion (religio licita); only later did it become the official religion of the empire.
12. The term "mass" (Latin missa, French messe) is used chiefly by Roman Catholics and very "high-church groups. The term is derived from the words of the priest telling those not yet fully members (catechumens) to leave: "Ite, missa est." It is related to our word dismiss. The word mass is also used for musical compositions based on the words of the Roman liturgy (though J. S. Bach, a devout Lutheran, composed "The Mass in B Minor as a goodwill gesture, and Leonard Bernstein, who was Jewish, produced his own version of the mass).
13. Some Orthodox bodies actually soak bread in wine and spoon-feed it to infants, thus marring the symbolism.
14. One of the American astronauts took a communion wafer with him to eat on the moon.
15. We have sung it from time to time at our congregation in Dallas, both to the original melody written by our first pianist, Rodger D. Turley, and also with a second tune by Frances A. Mosher (see "A Song of Grace" in this issue for a brief but creative article by her). If anyone would like a copy of the music in order to introduce this hymn to your church feel free to write to the editor at the address.

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2. What observations do you make of the first Lord's Supper? "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.' And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Mark 14:22-26)

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