

The Lord's Supper

Somedays my wife and I are just happy all of our boys get clothed and fed by the time they get off to school. If we had to first sit together, at the same time, for a meal, in some organized way, we'd never make it out the door. But we still know, that eating with someone is special. If you're not so sure about that, just imagine you are sitting in McDonald's eating alone and a stranger comes up, plops his tray at your table, sits down and begins to eat. How would you feel? Awkward? Invaded? Angry? *You didn't invite him. Who does he think he is?* Eating is somehow an intimate act. Eating with people, at the same table, is a gesture of love and acceptance, welcome and friendship. This is the heart of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper Has a History: Sacrificial Meals

To understand the Lord's Supper, you've got to know its history. Meals have had significance since the garden. God gave Adam and Eve all the trees of the garden (except one). And He gave them a special tree, the tree of life which was in the midst of the garden. This tree celebrated and sealed the life God had given.

However, tempted by the serpent (the devil incognito), humanity partook of the one food God commanded them not to eat, and as a result, were removed from the garden, and lost access to the tree of life. But, God did not abandon His people. Rather, He entered into a new relationship with them, sometimes called the covenant of grace, making promises of one to come who would defeat the serpent and restore what was lost.

There is one particular meal at the beginning of Israel's corporate life, which reminded them of God's grace, the Passover meal. When God was about to bring Israel out of Egypt, he had them celebrate with a meal, which became a yearly celebration of their freedom from slavery. But the meaning of ritual meals comes out when we understand a little about covenants and covenant making ceremonies.

Covenants in the ancient world were made by way of ceremonies (think wedding ceremonies). Ancient covenants were sometimes made to join together two kingdoms, a lesser and a greater. Typically a sacrifice was made to seal the oaths, and a meal was shared in order to show and celebrate the new relationship. This covenant making ceremony shows up all over the place in the Old Testament. We see it in the Exodus. After God brings His people out of Egypt, He draws them to Himself at Sinai, and declares to them the stipulations of the covenant. The people respond, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex 24:7, the "marriage vows"). Sacrifices are made. And God calls Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and 70 elders up to the mountain, drawing them near, to eat and drink in His presence (the "wedding reception"). The covenant was proclaimed, ratified with a sacrifice, and celebrated in the feast.

Later in the ongoing life of Israel the sacrifices regularly repeated various aspects of this ceremony. The showbread represented the twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve tribes, twelve loaves. It represented Israel's offer of herself to God and was placed week by week in the holy place. Once a week, every Sabbath (Lv 24:8), the priests would replace the showbread and eat the previous weeks loaves, presumably together with the drink offerings that were also kept on the table of showbread (Ex 25:29). This was a weekly celebratory feast of bread and wine in the Father's presence, a regular reminder of their relationship with God.

It is important to note a tension in the Old Testament when we think about these meals. With one hand it seemed God drew Israel near, but with the other he held them off. In the Exodus story, only Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 elders went up the mountain and celebrated the covenant. Most of the Israelites had to stand off at the foot of the mountain, and not even touch it, or else be put to death with stones! And, only "Aaron and his sons" (i.e. the priests) could eat of the showbread. It was wrong for your average Israelite to eat of the showbread (see the story in 1 Sa 21 and cf. Mt 12:1–8). One particular sacrifice though, the peace offering, was eaten by the average Israelite, and so was a symbol and celebration of their renewed relationship to their God. But even here, this meal, it must be noted, was only eaten by *clean Israelites*. Not just anyone could enter God's presence, offer sacrifices on God's altar, and partake of God's food.

All of these meals (and more), begin to give us the necessary history for understanding the Lord's Supper and what it is all about.

The Lord's Supper has a Context: The Whole Service

In order to understand the Lord's Supper, we need not only understand it's history, but also it's context. The Lord's Supper is part of the whole service. We do not celebrate the Lord's Supper in a vacuum. Rather, like all covenant renewal ceremonies, the Lord's Supper comes at the end of a larger service, which gives the supper it's meaning. Again, wedding feasts, marriage suppers, or wedding "receptions," have the meaning that they do, because they come after a wedding. Have a meal any other time, and it's just dinner with friends.

But the Lord's Supper is more than dinner with friends, it is a celebration of a relationship continually renewed by the Gospel. As God invites us into His presence, cleans us off with the assurance of His grace, makes us new through the preaching of the gospel, He then draws us near through the Lord's table, sealing and demonstrating and celebrating the renewed intimacy we have with the Father. The Reformers rightly insisted that word and sacrament, preaching, and the Lord's Supper, go hand in hand. That is because what the one proclaims, the other enjoys and celebrates.

People often ask: why not have the Lord's Supper in small groups or at home? This is especially tempting when members of the church are shut-ins and are unable to make it to the worship service on Sunday morning. And while I totally understand the temptation (like taking a piece of wedding cake to a favorite Aunt who is too old to make it to the wedding?), it is likely a distortion of what the Lord's Supper is all about.

If a twelve year old boy, smitten with a class mate, gives her a plastic ring gotten out of a gum-ball machine, that doesn't make them married. It doesn't even make them engaged. The exchange of rings has certain meanings in certain contexts. But it can only mean/do "official things," like joining in marriage, if it is officiated, i.e. made official, by an "officiant," someone who has the authority to officiate. Even if a classmate stands by and says, "By the authority invested in me, I now pronounce you man and wife," nothing happens, because no one has actually invested him or her with authority. It's the right words and the right action (exchanging of rings), but it lacks authority. Even the wedding reception (not an event governed by principles of authority per se) is a different event than, say, a Friday night pizza date, or Taco Tuesday with the guys. It's not that we can't celebrate together on a random Wednesday. But that celebration will never have quite the same meaning as a wedding reception, because it doesn't follow an actual wedding.

The Lord's Supper is a covenant meal. That is, it is a meal that celebrates the making of a covenant. You can celebrate God's covenant anytime. But that celebration will never have quite the same meaning as a covenant meal, apart from an actual covenant making or covenant renewing ceremony. Taking the Lord's Supper to shut-ins makes sense in a context where the Lord's Supper is seen in a semi-magical way, conveying grace like a pill conveys medicine. But, we would say, like the giving of rings outside the context of the wedding ceremony, or the sharing of a meal outside the context of a wedding reception, partaking of bread and wine outside the context of the worship service loses its meaning. It's not that the "magic" wears off. It's just that there is no magic. And outside the proper context, the meaning is no longer the same.

Now, that said, here is what you could do for a shut-in. Don't just take the Lord's supper to the shut-in, take the whole service. Go with brothers and sisters in Christ. Confess your sins. Preach the Word. Walk through the covenant renewal ceremony together. Why would you "bring" the Lord's Supper, but not any other part of the service? Keep the covenant-renewing and covenant-community contexts of the meal, and you avoid misrepresenting the supper as something it's not, and you feed the shut-in on both word and sacrament within the context of the body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper has a Message: Acceptance Through Christ

What we have seen already, is that the communal meals have a consistent message. Whenever you sit and eat with someone, you are giving them your time, your presence, your company, your acceptance. That is the nature of eating with someone. What does the Lord's Supper then *do* in the service? It demonstrates, conveys, and celebrates the acceptance that is ours in Jesus, through the sacrifice of His body and blood.

Because of sin, we are alienated from God, estranged from him, exiled from his presence. But Christ came and offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, once for all, to reconcile us to God and bring us to him. The Lord's Supper symbolically shows us the death of Christ (1 Co 11:26), that he *gave* his body and blood for us (Lk 22:19). And by partaking of that meal, it says: we participate in the benefits of his death. Paul says, in 1 Co 10:16, "The cup of blessing that 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?" And so participation at the Lord's Table symbolizes our participation in Christ our sacrifice and so our acceptance with the Father through him by faith.

As an aside, those verses are one of the clear indicators that nothing magical is happening to the bread and wine. Paul says we bless the cup of blessing, not the blood. And he says we break the bread, not the body. But under those signs and symbols, we participate in Christ by faith.

And so, the Lord's Supper is saying something. It says to us that we are welcome. It says to us that we are accepted. It says to us that our sins are removed, and intimacy with our Father is restored. This is the same message that is proclaimed in the gospel, but it is conveyed and received differently through the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper we enter into this acceptance because we sit at the *Lord's* Table. The bread and wine of the meal are not *simply* a visual illustration of the body and blood of Jesus (though they are that). Partaking of the Lord's Supper could not be replaced with a gif of bread and wine on your smartphone. It is in the partaking of this consecrated bread and wine¹ that we sit at the Lord's Table and therefore *enter into, enjoy, and, in the feasting, celebrate* gospel reconciliation. By partaking we are nourished by the acceptance we have with the Father. Our hunger for welcome is satisfied. We are filled with the Father's love. By sitting and eating at the Father's table he declares his acceptance of us in Christ and so we are built up by His grace, even as the bread and wine build up and strengthen our bodies.

¹ Consecrated here simply means *made holy*. Something made holy is something set apart for a particular purpose, and in Biblical contexts, typically set apart for a religious purpose (though not always, see 1 Ti 4:4–5).

The Lord's Supper has a Guest List: Baptized Covenant Members

Who gets to have this assurance of grace offered in the supper? Only those who have received the Father's grace and are covered by the blood of Jesus. This is something that happens through faith. As Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household." But there is more to it than that, because one might give intellectual ascent to the truths of Christianity, but remain outside the body, refusing to be baptized into the faith and so refusing to join the covenant community, the church. This "covenant" meal is a meal for the "covenant" community, the people who have been uniquely set aside and marked by God as His own through baptism.

We see this in the Old Covenant, where only circumcised members of Israel could participate in the passover meal.

If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you. (Ex 12:48–49)

And so, as in Israel only circumcised members of the covenant family were admitted into the holy place² to partake of the sacrifices, so in the Church only baptized members of the covenant family are admitted to the Lord's Table to partake of the covenant meal and receive the assurance of the Father's grace. As in the Old Testament the priests were responsible for guarding the holy place and its food to make sure no uncircumcised person tried to defile or desecrate (de-sacralize, i.e. make unholy) those holy things of God,³ so in the New Testament, it is the pastor and elder's job to "fence the table." This is why membership is required of those who partake of the Lord's Supper. Members are those who have submitted themselves to the authority of elders and been interviewed to know that their profession of faith is consistent with the truth of the gospel.⁴

Of course, even as we talk about the "guest list" (an extended discussion made more necessary by modern individualism than anything else), we should understand that, compared to the Old Covenant, the way has been opened wide. Under the Old Covenant, only ceremonially clean *Israelites* could partake of the covenant meals. Because of the work of Christ the way to the Father has been thrown open. Jew and Greek, clean and unclean are welcomed into the Father's presence. But note, the way is open *through Christ*. All are welcome *through faith in Him* because of the power of His cleansing blood.

² Meaning the tabernacle or temple as a whole, not "The Holy Place," into which only the priests could enter.

³ 2 Ch 23:19

⁴ See appendix at the end for further discussion of membership.

The Lord's Supper has a Tone: Celebration

It is common to think of the Lord's supper as a somber meal, a time to reflect on our sin, to feel as bad as absolutely possible. Now, don't get me wrong, we need to know our sin, feel a godly grief over it, and turn to Jesus (2 Co 7:10ff). But, the Lord's Supper is actually not that moment. As we talked about a moment ago, the whole worship service is the context for the Lord's Supper. At an earlier point in the service we are called to confess our sins, we confess our sins, and then receive God's assurance of grace. By the time we get to the Lord's table, we have been cleaned off through the gospel, made new by the word, and are now being drawn near for intimate table fellowship with our Father. This is a time, not for mourning, but for celebration.

There is no meal in the Old Testament eaten in mourning, sadness, or even quiet reflection. When you mourn you fast. When you feast you rejoice. Meals are always celebrations. The Lord's supper is a celebration. How else did things go so wrong in Corinth? Some were getting drunk at the Lord's table (1 Co 10:21)! How did that happen? Because some took the celebration too far. Now, we shouldn't go *there*. But we shouldn't go to the other extreme and neglect to celebrate the feast the Father has set before us. Consider how God describes celebrating in His presence in Deuteronomy. Each of the Israelites was to take a pilgrimage to the temple,

and spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household (Dt 14:26).

To eat and drink and rejoice in the Father's presence, this is the purpose of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper has a Future: The Wedding Feast of the Lamb

The Lord's Supper looks back to the intimacy we experienced with the Father in the garden, and back to those foreshadows of intimacy in the sacrificial system under the Mosaic law. But it also looks forward to the wedding feast of the Lamb. The Bible teaches that one day, Jesus will return, the world will be judged and made new, and God's people will celebrate the victory of Jesus and our being finally and fully united to Jesus in a wedding feast.

God's people are already united to Jesus, of course. But while we are united to Christ, there is a greater union to come. The truth is, we await our wedding day and the consummation, when we will be in the presence of our bridegroom and enjoy full and unhindered, face-to-face communion with him forever (Rv 21).

In a sense, then, the Lord's Supper acts as an engagement dinner that anticipates the wedding feast. But one day, we will sit in Jesus' presence, together with all of God's people, and we will

eat and drink in celebration of the work of Christ and our being joined to Him fully and finally and forever.

Appendix on Membership

Baptism and membership are both important for participation in the Lord's Supper. While we can't include everything here, a few things may be helpful.

First, the church is not inward, invisible, and spiritual *only*, but also outward, visible, and physical. There are certain outward, visible, physical actions that we are called to, immediately upon profession of faith. We are called to receive baptism.⁵ Baptism is God's sign to us, his wedding ring. It is the sign of our entrance into the church (among other things). But, anyone who is part of *The Church* must be a part of a church. Under normal circumstances, you cannot be a citizen of the united states and not also be a citizen of a particular state. Similarly, you cannot be a member of *The Church* without also being a member of a particular church. Membership is just a way of acknowledging that I am a part of *this* body.⁶

The way we do membership today is made necessary by our modern situation of churches on every corner and the ability to church hop. In Yesteryear, if you lived in *that town*, you were a part of *that church*, whether the church in Jerusalem, or the church in Antioch, or the church in Corinth. If you were a Christian, you were a member of that church. If you got into a disagreement, you couldn't just go down the street to the next church. Membership was obvious. It's not so intuitive and obvious anymore, so we go through certain steps to recognize it. But we are getting at the same reality.

Membership is important for a number of reasons. It allows you to commit to a particular church and submit to particular elders (church leadership).

First, it marks your commitment to a church and so *The Church*. If your daughter grows up and says, yeah, I've dated this guy for five years and we're just going to consider ourselves married, move in together and start having babies, what would you say? Probably: *Don't do that! You need to make a commitment. You need to seal that commitment with vows. If you are really committed, demonstrate that through marriage. It doesn't have to be a big drawn out ceremony. Go to the justice of the peace for all I care. But please, make it official! Otherwise, you are playing marriage. You aren't actually married.* In the same way, most people are playing

⁵ Ac 16:31—"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household"—is followed by Ac 16:33—"and he was baptized at once, he and all his family."

⁶ Note in the book of Acts that when people responded to the gospel they were "added to their number" (see, for example, Ac 2:41, 47).

church member. They date the church, but refuse to vow their love for her. They refuse to commit.

Second, membership allows your profession of faith to be tested as you submit to particular church leadership. We have already said that the Lord's Supper demonstrates your acceptance with the Father. We must only give assurance, inasmuch as we are able, to those who genuinely belong to Christ. But how do we know who belongs to Christ? How do I know who is a Christian? Because *they* say so? Is everyone who believes they are a Christian really a Christian? Part of the reason for the local community, particularly the under-shepherds whom Christ has appointed,⁷ is to help people know whether their profession of faith is genuine or is self-deception.⁸ Then the shepherds feed Christ's sheep, those whose profession is genuine.

To what body have you committed and to what leadership have you submitted? If you can't answer those questions then you have not committed to the body of Christ and have not submitted to Christ's shepherding in your life through his under-shepherds. The Lord's table is one means by which under-shepherds give assurance to Christ's sheep whom they affirm have believed and been baptized into the body and so live as members of a body as an expression of that commitment.

⁷ Heb 13:17; 1 Pt 5:1–4

⁸ 1 Co 3:18; Ga 6:3; Heb 3:13