

# *Celebrating the Lord's Supper*

## What bread? What wine? When?

The night before that the Lord Jesus was crucified, He called his disciples together and instituted The Lord's Supper, a simple symbolic meal that would remind them and future generations of Himself – and the centrality of His sacrificial death. The first Christian communities gave the celebration of the Lord's Supper the same level of importance as teaching, fellowship and prayer – they “persevered” in these things (Acts 2:42). How should we Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper today? What does the Bible teach? To what extent are the Biblical examples normative? Does the way we celebrate it really matter?

### **The Passover feast as setting**

The Lord Jesus could have instituted this symbolic meal at any time during the year, and yet he chose the Passover Feast as its setting (Lk. 22:15-16). The disciples prepared for the Passover in an upper room, and “while they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat, this is my body’. Then he took the cup...” (Matt. 26:19-29). Take note that the first Lord's Supper took place during the annual Jewish Passover feast, while Jesus and his disciples reclined around a table, on a Thursday evening. Why did our Lord choose the Passover as the setting for this new symbolic meal?

Similarities: The Passover feast and the Lord's Supper have interesting similarities: For example, the first Passover meal was eaten by the Israelites on *the night before* they left Egypt. The first Lord's Supper was eaten in *the night before* Christ was sacrificed. The lamb's *blood* applied to the door frame gave protection from judgement. There is also reference to Christ's *blood* in the Lord's Supper “which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). In fact, Christ and His redemptive sacrifice stand at the historic centre of these two symbolic meals: The Passover viewed Christ's redemptive work as a future event, and the Lord's Supper now views it as a past completed event (1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 9:28).

Differences: But there are also some significant differences. For example, central to the Passover meal is the eating of roasted meat – a lamb without defect. There is no meat in the Lord's Supper, since Christ Himself is seen as the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). In Exodus 12, where the instructions for the Passover are given, there is no mention of cups and drink. But in the Lord's Supper a cup and drink are central. The Passover feast was to be celebrated once a year, for the Lord's Supper the word “whenever” is used (1 Cor. 11:25-26).

### **New and important**

The Lord's Supper is a distinctively Christian symbol. It is not an adaptation of a Jewish rite. It is a positive new symbolic act initiated by the Lord Jesus himself. The symbolism revolves around Christ and his sacrificial death. A study of the Old Testament will enrich our understanding and appreciation of Christ's sacrifice – but for guidelines as to *how* to practice the Lord's Supper, we must look exclusively to the New Testament: In the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) we are told *how* the Lord Jesus instituted this symbol. In the Acts we read about *how* the early church responded to Christ's request to “do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:27). And in the rest of the New Testament we find insights into the meaning and value of the Lord's sacrificial death at Calvary.

How important is this symbolic meal to the Lord Jesus? Think about the unique setting - the Lord did not include teaching about the Lord's Supper among the list of good topics he addressed in the Sermon of the Mount or during some other teaching moment. He chose a unique emotionally charged moment, the day when he entered culminating phase of His ministry on earth, when the dreadful reality of becoming a 'sin offering' was weighing heavy upon Him. It was on this moment that He had determined to instruct His disciples on how He wished them to remember Him.

And notice the repetition - after the Lord Jesus ascended, perhaps some years later, the apostle Paul received an additional personal revelation from the Lord Himself about the *why* and *how* of the Lord's Supper, a teaching he was expected to pass on to the churches: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you..." (1 Cor. 11:23-34). Christian congregations that give the Lord's Supper an important place in their community life have a good reason for doing so.

## **The use of symbols**

When Jesus instituted this symbolic supper, he took the bread and said: "This is my body". These words should not be taken literally. The Lord Jesus was not suggesting he had two bodies, His incarnate body and another body held in his hands. Then, taking the cup he added: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Lk. 22: 19-20). It would be more natural to understand these words figuratively, in the same way as when Jesus said "I am the light" and "I am the gate" (Jn. 8:12; 10:7). The bread and the cup are used in this meal in a symbolic way. They represent something.

## **The Bread**

We read that at the Passover Feast, "they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast" (Ex. 12:8). The absence of yeast in the bread was an important feature, in fact, during seven days every Jewish house should be free of yeast (Ex. 12:15, Mk. 14:1). Since the Lord's Supper was instituted during the Passover feast, is it certain that the bread used for the Lord's Supper was *unleavened bread* (Lk. 22:7). Does this mean that Christian congregations today should also use unleavened bread?

### Leavened or unleavened bread

The New Testament has two Greek words for bread: *azumos* used specifically for unleavened bread (1 Cor. 5:8) and *artos* the general term for bread (2 Cor. 9:10). When describing the first Lord's Supper, Matthew writes "While they were eating, Jesus took bread [*artos*], gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body'" (Matt. 26:26). In fact, every time the Lord's Supper is narrated (also by Mark, Luke and Paul) this general term for bread is used. If the absence of yeast in the bread were an important element of the symbol, like in the Passover, we would expect the use of the word *azumos* – thus making it clear that bread without yeast is required. The Lord's Supper is also referred to as the "Breaking of Bread" (Acts 2:24; 20:7) and here also, *artos*, the general term for bread is used. We conclude that by consistently choosing to use the general word for bread, the Holy Scripture intends to give liberty in the type of bread to be used. Each Christian congregation is at liberty to use either leavened or unleavened bread.

### Should we use 'one loaf'?

Some ask, is the fact that the Lord Jesus took 'one' bread significant? Does the symbolism lose anything if we were to use 5 or 10 loafs, or have one small bread for each participant? After giving thanks for the bread, the Lord Jesus "broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (Lk. 22:19). Here the bread

represents the *physical body* of the Lord Jesus that was 'broken' for us on that cross at Calvary. Later we find the apostle Paul using the bread of the Lord's Supper to *also* represent the *spiritual body* of the Lord Jesus, the *one loaf* representing the unity of all true believers: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is *one loaf*, we, who are many, are *one body*, for we all partake of the *one loaf*" (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

The fact that in every celebration of the Lord's Supper the bread is purposefully *broken*, suggest, I think, that the bread is primarily a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ's *physical body* – since there is no desire to symbolize a breaking of unity among believers. And yet, in a secondary way, we see in the 'one loaf' a picture of the oneness of Christ's *spiritual body*, the oneness of all true believers worldwide (including those we disagree with) – also a thought that warrants our regular attention. We conclude here that the 'oneness' of the loaf is not of prime symbolic importance when celebrating then Lord's Supper. But since the 'oneness' of the loaf is given a secondary symbolic significance in Scripture, a congregation would do well to prefer the use on one loaf. In choosing to give every participant his own bread, the thought behind the 'breaking' and 'sharing' is obscured. In choosing to use multiple loafs, the thought behind the 'worldwide unity' is obscured. If, given the size of the group, multiple loafs become necessary, the reality of our 'oneness' with all believers may still be brought to the attention of the congregation verbally.

## The Wine

When the Lord God gave Moses instructions about the Passover meal, no mention is made of cups and drinks. Yet in time, the Jews incorporated four different symbolic cups with wine into the Passover feast. Historians tell us that these cups are based on the 4 promises of God to the children of Israel recorded in Exodus 6:6-7, "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them [*the Cup of Judgement or Deliverance*], and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment [*the Cup of Redemption*]. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God [*the cup of Sanctification*]. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians [*the Cup of Praise or Restoration*]'".

The Lord Jesus must have used one of these four cups when He instituted the Lord's Supper. Grape juice was in those days difficult to keep since the fermenting process would begin within days. Furthermore, we know that wine (with a lower alcohol content than is common today) was then a very common drink. We can be fairly certain, therefore, that the liquid used for the Lord's Supper was grape wine with alcohol. The early church most certainly also used this readily available wine (1 Cor. 11:21). Does this mean that Christian congregations today should also use wine?

### With or without alcohol

The New Testament has two Greek words for wine: *oinos* is the general term which implies fermentation (Eph. 5:18) and *gleukos* which denotes 'new wine' or musk (Acts 2:13). Luke tells us that John the Baptist did not drink any *oinos*, that is 'wine' (Lk. 1:15). John tells us that at a wedding, the Lord Jesus turned water into *oinos*, that is 'wine' (Jn. 2:9). It would be very natural for Matthew, Mark and Luke to use a word for wine when describing the Lord's Supper – but they didn't. They purposefully avoided both Greek words for wine and instead used the expression: "fruit of the vine" (Matt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18). As noted above, the apostle Paul receives instructions about the Lord's Supper direct by revelation. Here again the Greek words for wine are avoided in favour of the word 'cup'. We conclude that, by

consistently choosing to avoid the common words for 'wine' and using instead the expression "fruit of the vine" to explain what was in the 'cup', the Holy Scripture intends to give some liberty in the type of "fruit of the vine" used. Each Christian congregation is at liberty to use either a grape based wine (with alcohol) or alcohol free wine, or grape juice.

### Should we use 'one cup'?

Some ask, is the fact that the Lord Jesus took 'one' cup significant? Does the symbolism lose anything if we were to use 2 or 8 cups, or have a small cup for every participant? After eating from the bread, the Lord Jesus then "took *the cup*, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it" (Mk. 14:23). Paul later explains, "Is not *the cup* of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). The Lord used 'one cup' when He instituted the Supper and, from Paul's comments, it appears that the early churches also used 'one cup'. But nowhere do we find any symbolic or theological significance attached to the oneness of the cup – as we do for the oneness of the bread (1 Cor. 10:17). If a congregation is greater than a certain size, it may well be practical to have more than one cup. By giving every participant his or her own small cup, the act of 'sharing together' will be less. But the use of multiple cups does not violate any explicitly stated Biblical symbolism.

## **The Timing**

When then Lord Jesus instituted this symbolic meal, Luke tells us that Jesus added "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:27). This suggests that the Lord expected his disciples to repeat this symbolic meal. Mathew and Mark do not mention this. In 1 Corinthians 11 we find twice the expression "do this in remembrance of me" (11:24-25), and twice the relative adverb *hosakis*, translated "as often as" or "whenever" (11:25-26). The only other occurrence of this word is found in Revelation 11:6, where the Lord's two witnesses will have power to do some miracles "as often as they want". From here we can safely conclude that the Lord's intent was that this symbolic supper should be repeated periodically, but, unlike the Jewish feasts, the Lord chose not to give rules about 'how often'.

### Weekly? On a Sunday? In the evening?

The Lord Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Breaking of Bread for the first time on a Thursday in the evening – the night before He was betrayed. Responding to the Lord's instructions to "do this in memory of me" and do this "whenever", the first generation of believers gathered frequently to celebrate this symbolic meal together, perhaps even daily (Acts 2:46).

On his way to Jerusalem, Paul stayed seven days in Troas. "On the first day of the week [*Paul's last day at Troas*], when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them... until dawn; then he left" (Acts 20:6-11 NRSV). By this time, at least in Troas, it seems to have become a practice to celebrate the Lord's Supper on "on the first day after the Sabbath", that is, on a Sunday. Many see here a *hint* towards a weekly celebration. The fact that Paul continued preaching throughout the night, suggest that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the evening. Should this pattern suggested by this occasion at Troas (every Sunday, in the evening) be taken as normative for all congregations worldwide today? Probably not.

A Biblical example should not be lightly dismissed but neither should it be made a norm. Examples can be suggestive. But there may be good local reasons to adapt things somewhat. For example, in most Western countries, for centuries it has been more practical to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Sunday morning. In many Arab lands, it is more practical to celebrate it in the evening. There may be a good reason to sometimes celebrate the Lord's

Supper on a day that is not Sunday, such as on a Thursday or Friday evening before Easter, on the first day of the year - as a beautiful way to begin the year together. Some special circumstance may necessitate the cancellation of a celebration of the Lord's Supper, such as personal travel arrangements or a collective special event. In doing so, it is good to remember that no Biblical norm is being broken. Scripture is not being violated.

If a congregation today views the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a mechanical ritual they need to perform because it's in the Bible, they will be inclined to lessen its emphasis. If a congregation discovers, as did many Christians in the early church, the joy, strength and renewed passion of setting time apart to celebrate this symbolic meal while making Christ the centre of its attention, I think it will settle quite happily for something close to a weekly pattern. In Acts 2:42 we learn that the early Christians "devoted themselves", "persevered" or "continued steadfastly" in the Breaking of Bread, giving it as much emphasis in the church as teaching, fellowship and prayer.

## **Technicalities in perspective**

In some parts of this planet, bread and grapes are not available. Could alternatives be used? Such dear Christians are usually recommended to find two elements which come as close as possible to bread and fruit of the vine. Sometimes numerical growth, the presence of believers with a weakness for alcohol or a contagious disease may require some practical changes in the local arrangements. How do you respond to such changes? We all have our preferred ways of doing things. That is fine. It is normal. But be careful not to use Scripture to make solid your views, customs and preferences. Given the freedoms Christ offers in Scripture, it would do us all well to focus our attention away from ourselves towards the needs of the weaker believer and the needs of the congregation as a whole. In making changes and adjustments, the following Biblical principle will help the congregation move *together*: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up" (Rom. 15:1-2). Are you among the strong? If so, the Lord expects from you greater flexibility.

## **Conclusion**

The Lord's Supper could have been designed as a 'once only' event, like baptism. But knowing how we are, Christ chose a symbol that should be repeated regularly. If you have been a Christian for a number of years, you know how easy it is for Christ to lose that central place in our hearts. We can enjoy the blessings and slowly forget the One who blesses. We can get absorbed in work, studies and family life. Our passion for Christ can even be replaced with love for doctrine or enthusiasm for some ministry. The Lord's Supper is a time set apart where Christ is central in our hearts and minds. In this time of relative stillness, the Spirit of God desires to rekindle love, gratitude and passion in the hearts of redeemed men and women. We choose to stop, to re-focus, to remember, to thank, to worship. Do you? How are you responding to the Lord's invitation to "do this in memory of me"?

Clearly every local church must make practical arrangements in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Decisions must be made on type of bread, on wine, grape juice and number of cups, on timing and frequency. The big picture should not be lost in the details of the arrangements. Where practical and possible we should seek to stay as close as possible to Biblical symbolism, but "true worshipers", "those that worship the Father in spirit and in truth" are the "kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (Jn. 4:23). Does He find one in you?

Philip Nunn  
Eindhoven, NL  
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