



# Church of Christ

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## The Lord's Supper

In reference to the Lord's Supper there are a couple of terms that are consistently used which but represent different aspects. The Lord's Supper is a term that is often used to describe what happened as Jesus and His disciples reclined around the table in the upper room to partake of the Passover on the night that Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. Matthew recorded that in the midst of the meal "Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins...'" (Matthew 26:26). The term "Lord's Supper" is also the term that Paul used when he wrote to the church in Corinth (1Corinthians 11:20).

Communion is a term that represents another facet of the Lord's Supper. On the day that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, after eating the bread and drinking the fruit of the vine, He said to His disciples, "I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:29). The kingdom to which He referred is the church. It gives the idea that when we partake of the Lord's Supper Jesus is in our midst partaking with us.

Paul used the idea of communion in the first Corinthian letter to represent the union that is created by the partaking of the Lord's Supper. He wrote, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1Corinthians 10:16). The word communion denotes the idea of fellowship or sharing, to give the understanding that when we partake of the Lord's Supper we are actually in fellowship with the Lord; sharing in the sacrifice of His body and blood as He gave Himself to die on the cross. We, in partaking of this communion, become united with Jesus Christ.

The idea of communion is also extended to include all Christians. Paul continued to write to the church in Corinth, "For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread." (1Corinthians 10:17). When we are partaking of the Lord's Supper, not only are we in communion with the Lord, but we are also in communion with all Christians who are partaking of that communion. To further stress the importance of this concept of communion, consider what Jesus said in the gospel according to John. Speaking to the multitude of disciples who followed Him wherever He went, He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." (John 6:53-56). Having this understanding of the terms and events that define the important role that the Lord's Supper plays should make us realize that the Lord's Supper should be considered as a solemn event in the life of every Christian.

There are other important matters to consider in regard to the partaking of the Lord's Supper. There is also some interesting Old Testament symbolism and historical information to consider in ascertaining the background and form of the Lord's Supper. This, I believe, is the basis upon which Jesus drew in originating the Lord's Supper. The gleanings from this information form the best evidence we have for what to think about as we are partaking, how often we should partake and many other implications of our participation in this great event.

It is not possible to separate the Lord's Supper from the Biblical celebration of Passover. As mentioned, it was during the feast of the Passover, on the night Jesus was betrayed, that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. Jesus not only borrowed the physical elements (unleavened bread and fruit of the vine) of the Passover feast, He also borrowed on the symbolic significance of those elements.

Jesus took the unleavened bread of the feast, broke it and said, "Take, Eat; this is My body." To the children of Israel the unleavened bread symbolized God's deliverance from Egyptian captivity (Exodus 12:17-20; 13:3-10). He took the fruit of the vine (grape juice), and said, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." The blood of the Passover was the blood of a lamb without spot or blemish. The children of Israel spread the blood on the lintel and doorposts of their houses as a sign so that the Lord should pass over them; but in every household in Egypt that did not have the blood the Lord struck that house killing the firstborn of man and beast (Exodus 12). Jesus gave His body and shed His blood as a sacrifice for us. He is our Passover. The apostle Paul applied this in a New Testament context. He wrote, "Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." (1Corinthians 5:7-8). In this context, leaven (or yeast) represents sin or sinful persons who can have a bad influence in the church. In this context, therefore, the unleavened bread represents purity and truth.

Even though Jesus made a clear connection between the Passover and the Lord's Supper, it should be stressed that we, as New Testament Christians, cannot partake of the Passover. The Passover was strictly a Jewish celebration; foreigners were excluded (Exodus 12:43-49). The Lord's Supper does not commemorate the deliverance from Israel, but rather the sacrifice of Christ. The Lord's Supper does not glorify the Old Testament, but rather it represents the new covenant in Christ. In instituting the Lord's Supper, Jesus was not re-instituting the Passover. On the other hand, the symbolism cannot be ignored. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is our Passover. He was sacrificed for us. His blood cleanses us by washing away our sins. In His physical existence His body was sinless in unleavened purity. The blood of the lamb of the Passover represented the Israelite's deliverance from Egypt; but the blood of Christ represents our deliverance from sin. Luke, writing about the night that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, recorded these words of Jesus about the Passover, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." (Luke 22:15-16). The Lord's Supper is the New Testament fulfillment of the Passover.

There is much disagreement about how often Christians should partake of the Lord's Supper. For whatever we do, in a religious context, we need to have authority. In studying the Bible we find that there are varying levels of authority. For example, we know that we are on solid ground when we have a direct command – Simple: we hear, understand and obey. There are, however, a number of things that are Biblical requirements, for which we do not have direct commands. For example, we have a direct command to partake of the Lord's Supper, but we do not have a direct command to tell us how often we should partake. In the absence of a direct command we do our best to be as Biblically accurate as possible. Based on my best understanding of the Biblical evidence, I am convinced that God intends for His church to partake of the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week. Even though we do not have a direct command we do have evidence to help us determine how often we should partake.

One way to determine the frequency is to examine the purpose and importance of the Lord's Supper. As we have already seen, in partaking of the Lord's Supper we are participating in communion with Christ and with our fellow Christians. Communion is just one of the purposes accomplished by the Lord's Supper; another purpose is remembrance. In the Corinthian letter Paul quoted Jesus saying, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. 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." (1Corinthians 11:24-26). We should understand that when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we do so in order to remember the sacrifice made for us by Christ. In remembering the sacrifice made for us we are also reminded of the commitment we have made to Christ. This is something that should be done often.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?" (1Corinthians 10:18-22). Again, the point is made, that partaking of the Lord's Supper is to be a constant reminder to us that we belong to Christ. When we partake of the Lord's Supper on a weekly

basis, we are, in essence, rededicating ourselves to Christ every time we partake. By partaking of the Lord's Supper on the first day of each week, we are affirming that our commitment to Christ comes first.

The strongest authority specifically related to partaking on the first day of each week comes from New Testament examples. We know that the early Christians met on the first day of each week. Luke wrote, "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." (Acts 20:7). A close examination of this passage and its context reveals that Paul had waited seven days in Troas for the purpose of meeting with the brethren. He waited the seven days because the disciples routinely met on the first day of the week. They met for the specific purpose of "breaking bread." It should not be understood that these Christians were coming together to share a common meal, but rather that the breaking of bread refers to the Lord's Supper. Luke also wrote that in the days following the day of Pentecost, after the Jews obeyed the gospel to become Christians by being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of their sins, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42). Here again we see the breaking of bread not as a common meal but as something to which the early Christians devoted themselves. It is concluded, therefore, that the early Christians met together, on the first day of each week to partake of the Lord Supper. Since they were already coming together on the first day of the week to partake of the Lord's Supper, they also used that time to preach and teach the gospel (Acts 20:7-12), give of their means (1Corinthians 16:1-2), encourage and exhort one another (Hebrews 10:22-25), and to praise and worship God. These are the same reasons we come together as the church of Christ today.

The Lord's Supper should be a great assurance to all Christians who partake of it. We should never forget the importance of it. We never neglect it; for neglecting this weekly reminder of the Lord's Supper damages our commitment to Christ and His church. Partaking of the Lord's Supper on a regular, weekly, basis, as the early Christians did, brings us closer in our relationship with Christ and also with our Christian brethren, as we come together in a common union.

As the Passover had no significance to non-Jews, so the Lord's Supper has no real significance to those who are outside of Christ. Those who are in Christ are those who have been baptized into Christ – into His death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27). This is the commitment that Christians have made to Christ; and this is the true significance of the Lord's Supper that reminds us of how great a price was paid by Christ for our forgiveness.

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