The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper

All Scriptures are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

The Lord's Supper is one of the most sacred ordinances given by Christ to His church. On the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus shared a final meal with His disciples. During that meal, He took bread and wine and gave them new meaning. The bread became a symbol of His body, which would be broken for the sins of the world. The cup became the sign of the new covenant in His blood, which was poured out for the remission of sins. From that evening onward, the church has been commanded to keep this ordinance in remembrance of Him.

Throughout Christian history, there has been much discussion about the timing and the manner of this observance. Some churches keep it every week, others once a month or quarterly, while others observe it annually. Some call it the Eucharist, others Communion, and still others the Lord's Supper or the Christian Passover. Because of these many variations, it is necessary to return to the Scriptures and to the testimony of the earliest Christians to understand what the Lord intended concerning this memorial.

This treatise will show that the Lord's Supper is a solemn memorial of Christ's death that should be observed with reverence and respect by baptized believers.

The Gospels reveal that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper on the evening of the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month Aviv, the same date when He was crucified. The writings of Paul confirm that it was instituted on the night of His betrayal and that this memorial proclaims the Lord's death until He comes. The testimony of early church leaders shows that the apostles, and the churches they founded, commemorated the Lord's death annually on that same date.

The Old Testament Passover

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper while observing a Passover seder with His disciples. Moses instituted the Passover in Egypt on the night when the Lord struck down the firstborn of Egypt and redeemed His people from bondage. In Exodus 12, God commanded each household of Israel to select an unblemished lamb on the tenth day of the Hebrew month Aviv, which was later called Nisan. They were to slaughter the lamb at sunset on the fourteenth day and apply its blood to the doorposts and lintel of each Israelite home. When the Lord passed through the land to strike the Egyptians, He would see the blood and pass over the houses of Israel, sparing them from judgment. They also had to roast and eat the flesh of the lamb that night with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and none of it was to remain until morning (Exod 12:1–10).

The Passover has deep spiritual meaning. The blood of the lamb symbolized deliverance from death. The meal pictured fellowship with God under His protection. The unleavened bread reminded them of their hasty departure from Egypt, and the bitter herbs illustrated the bitterness of Egyptian slavery. God commanded Israel to observe the Passover each year on the

fourteenth day of the first month as a perpetual memorial (Exod 12:14).

So, Passover became an annual celebration of God's great act of redemption in bringing His people out of Egypt, but it was also prophetic. It looked back to Israel's deliverance by the blood of the lamb, but it also foreshadowed a greater redemption to come through the Messiah, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The New Testament writers understood this clearly. Paul declared that "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). Peter likewise said that believers have been redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:19).

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He did so at the very feast which foreshadowed His sacrifice. The bread and the cup drew their meaning from the Passover, but Jesus transformed them into symbols of the new covenant. The Passover looked back to Israel's redemption from Egypt; the Lord's Supper looks back to our redemption from sin and death at the cross. The Passover was a type; the Lord's Supper is the fulfillment.

The Gospel Accounts

The Timing of the Meal

All four Gospels place the institution of the Lord's Supper on the night before the crucifixion. Matthew, Mark, and Luke identify it with the Passover setting. They report that the disciples prepared the Passover at Jesus' command and that, when evening came, He reclined at table with the twelve (Matt 26:17–20; Mark 14:12–17; and Luke 22:7–14).

John records that this supper took place before the official Passover meal, because the Jewish leaders refused to enter Pilate's hall on the morning of the crucifixion "so that they might not be defiled, but could eat the Passover" (John 18:28). The Synoptics emphasize the connection of the Last Supper with the Passover seder, while John highlights its distinction from the later, official Passover observed by the priests.

So, the Gospels indicate that Jesus ate the Last Supper with His disciples at night at the beginning of the fourteenth of Aviv. The lambs for the national Passover celebration would be slaughtered later that afternoon, and the people would eat them after sunset at the beginning of the fifteenth; Jesus knew that He would be delivered up to death before that time, so He held this final meal with His disciples at the beginning of the fourteenth, thus transforming the symbols of bread and wine into a new covenant ordinance. Therefore, the Lord's Supper is inseparably tied to the date of His death.

The Foot Washing (John 13:1–20)

John records that, at the beginning of the Last Supper, Jesus rose from the table, laid aside His garments, and washed the feet of His disciples (John 13:1–5). This act of humility astonished them. When Peter objected, the Lord answered, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (John 13:8). Afterward He explained, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also

should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:14–15).

The foot washing is more than a lesson in humility. It is an ordinance given by Christ, performed on the same night and in the same context as the bread and the cup. It symbolizes the cleansing and mutual service that is an integral part of Christianity. Since it preceded the giving of the bread and wine, the order of the Lord's Supper established by Christ begins with the foot washing, followed by the partaking of the elements.

The Bread and the Cup (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20)

During the meal Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). He then took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Matthew 26:28 says: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

By these words, Jesus identified Himself as the true Passover sacrifice. The bread pictured His body, which was about to be broken on the cross. The cup pictured His blood, which ratified the new covenant and secured forgiveness of sins. His command, "Do this in remembrance of me," gave the church a permanent ordinance to remember and proclaim His death until His return.

He also added an important promise: "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt 26:29). The Lord's Supper, therefore, looks back to His sacrifice and forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

Theological Depth (John 6:48–58)

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48). He also said that unless one eats His flesh and drinks His blood, he has no life in him, but whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood has eternal life, and He will raise him up on the last day (John 6:53–54). Many were offended at this teaching, but it revealed the necessity of union with Christ through His sacrifice.

The ordinance of the Lord's Supper gives visible form to this truth. To eat the bread and drink the cup does not mean to consume literal flesh and blood, but to participate in His atoning death and to receive again the life that flows from Him. The Lord's Supper embodies the believer's fellowship with Christ, which is the source of eternal life.

Paul's Teaching

Institution Received from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23–26)

The apostle Paul provides the earliest written account of the observance of the Lord's Supper. He reminded the Corinthians, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread…" (1 Cor 11:23). Paul's authority came not from human tradition but from a revelation of the Lord Himself. His words closely echo

those recorded in the Gospels, confirming that the practice was established directly by Christ and faithfully transmitted by the apostles.

Paul emphasized the fact that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper "on the night when He was betrayed." This phrase anchors the ordinance to the evening of the fourteenth of Aviv, the very night of Christ's arrest and the eve of His crucifixion. By repeating these details, Paul shows that the timing is not incidental but central to the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

He also explains the purpose of the Lord's Supper: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The Lord's Supper is a continuing proclamation of Christ's sacrificial death. It is a memorial of the cross, not His birth or resurrection. It is an ordinance of remembrance, obedience, and proclamation, directing the church to remember this central fact of redemption.

Self-Examination and Worthy Participation (1 Cor 11:27–32)

Paul issued a solemn warning about observing the Lord's Supper. "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). To partake unworthily is to treat what is most holy in a casual or disrespectful manner. The Corinthians had been guilty of this by turning the Lord's Supper into a common meal, neglecting love for one another, and failing to discern the sacredness of the body of Christ.

Therefore, Paul commanded, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). Self-examination is not meant to drive believers away from the table, but to ensure that they come in reverence, humility, and repentance. To fail in this is to invite the discipline of the Lord, which Paul said was already evident among the Corinthians: "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor 11:30). The Lord's Supper is a means of blessing when received in faith, but also of judgment when profaned.

Proper Participants: Baptized Believers Only

The Lord's Supper is not open to everyone, but is reserved for those who are in covenant with Christ. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He did so in the presence of His disciples alone. These men had already been baptized by John, and they had left all to follow Jesus. From the very beginning, the Lord's Supper was only given to baptized disciples, not to the crowds or unbelievers.

Paul explained the Lord's Supper as a vicarious participation in Christ Himself: "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? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16–17).

To share in the Lord's Supper is to share in the covenant fellowship of Christ's body. Only those already joined to His body through baptism can rightly partake: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13 NASB). Baptism is a covenant entrance; the Lord's Supper is a covenant renewal.

This is confirmed by the words of its institution. Both Jesus and Paul declared that the cup “is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). The covenant was ratified by His sacrifice, and those who enter that covenant, through baptism, are invited to renew it at the Lord’s Supper. It is not a means of entering the covenant, but of reaffirming it because the Lord’s Supper assumes prior membership in the covenant.

The early church faithfully preserved this rule. The *Didache*, one of the earliest Christian manuals, commands: “Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord” (*Didache* 9:5). Justin Martyr also wrote: “This food we call Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things we teach are true, and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth” (*First Apology*, 66). From the beginning, the church restricted the Lord’s Supper to baptized Christians, consistent with the institution of Christ and the command of Paul.

Thus, Scripture and church history testify that the table of the Lord is not for the world, or an unbaptized believer, but only for those who have entered the covenant by baptism and who continue in it faithfully.

Christ Our Passover (1 Cor 5:7–8)

Finally, Paul explicitly connected the death of Jesus with the Passover: “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7–8). Paul clearly identifies Christ as the true fulfillment of the Passover lamb. The death of the Passover lamb in Egypt on the fourteenth of Aviv prophetically foreshadowed the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the very same day, fifteen centuries later.

Paul’s exhortation to “celebrate the festival” is a call to observe the Christian Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread with an enhanced understanding of what the Old Testament pictured. The unleavened bread represents purity of life and sincerity of heart, free from the leaven of malice and evil, so the Lord’s Supper is both a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice and a call to holiness.

The Quartodeciman Controversy

The Apostolic Witness

The practice of observing the Lord’s Supper annually on the evening of the fourteenth of Aviv did not end with the apostles. Early church history shows that the apostolic churches in Asia Minor continued to keep "the feast of the Savior’s Passover" on the exact date of Christ’s death (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.23.1). This observance came to be called the Quartodeciman practice, from the Latin word meaning “fourteenth.”

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the apostle John, held firmly to this custom. Irenaeus records that when Polycarp visited Rome around the middle of the second century, he discussed the matter with Bishop Anicetus. They disagreed about whether the church should

observe the fourteenth of Aviv or the following Sunday. Irenaeus explains that Polycarp always observed the Lord's Supper on the fourteenth, just as he had learned from John and from other apostles (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist*. 5.24.16–17).

A generation later, Polycrates of Ephesus defended the same practice in a letter to Victor, bishop of Rome. He declared, "We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia great lights have fallen asleep… among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles… and moreover John… who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord… And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr… All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith" (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 5.24.2–6). Polycrates thus claimed direct apostolic authority for the Quartodeciman practice.

These testimonies show that the observance of the fourteenth was not a late innovation but a continuation of what Philip, John, and their disciples had received from the Lord. The annual commemoration of Christ's death on the fourteenth of Aviv was the settled tradition of the churches founded by the apostles in Asia Minor.

The Dispute with Rome

In the West, however, another practice arose. Churches in Rome and elsewhere began to celebrate the resurrection of Christ on Sunday, and they tied the observance of the Lord's Supper to that day rather than to the fourteenth of the month. By the late second century, this divergence had grown into a sharp controversy. Victor of Rome sought to impose the Sunday observance on all churches, even threatening to excommunicate the Quartodecimans.

But many bishops opposed Victor's severity. Irenaeus urged peace, reminding him that earlier bishops of Rome had maintained fellowship with Quartodeciman leaders even while differing in practice. Nevertheless, the controversy continued for more than a century, until the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 finally decreed that churches should celebrate the resurrection on Sunday, effectively suppressing the Quartodeciman observance of the Lord's death on Passover.

The very existence of this controversy proves the antiquity and persistence of the fourteenth-day practice. If it had been a recent invention, it could not have claimed the authority of Philip and John, nor could it have been defended so vigorously by the churches of Asia Minor, so the Quartodeciman tradition is an important witness to the original apostolic practice of the annual observance on the fourteenth of Aviv.

Theological Implications

The Quartodeciman controversy highlights the central question of the Lord's Supper: Should it be observed according to Scripture and apostolic tradition or according to later ecclesiastical custom? The Quartodecimans argued for faithfulness to the Gospel accounts and the example of the apostles. The Roman church argued for uniformity and the commemoration of the resurrection.

The issue was not merely one of calendar but of theology. By shifting the focus from the death of Christ on the fourteenth to His resurrection on Sunday, the Roman practice altered the

meaning of the ordinance. The Lord's Supper, instituted as a memorial of His death, was transformed into a festival of His resurrection. In so doing, it lost its biblical anchor in the Passover and assumed a character foreign to its institution.

For this reason, the testimony of the Quartodecimans remains crucial. They remind the church that the Lord's Supper is about the cross, not the empty tomb. It is about the broken body and the shed blood, not the stone rolled away. The resurrection is central to the faith, but it is not the focus of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was given to proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes.

Theological Summary

Nature of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ's death. Jesus told His disciples to: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Each time the church does this, it proclaims His death until He comes (1 Cor 11:26). The Lord's Supper centers the faith of God's people on the cross, reminding them that their redemption was accomplished through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

The Lord's Supper is also covenantal. Jesus declared that: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). The Lord's Supper is not merely symbolic, but an act of covenant renewal. Those who have entered the covenant by baptism reaffirm their participation in it by sharing in the bread and the cup. It is a solemn testimony that they belong to Christ and that His blood has secured their forgiveness.

The Lord's Supper is also hopeful. Christ promised, "I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt 26:29). Each observance looks forward to the establishment of the kingdom and the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). So, the Lord's Supper unites memory, covenant, and hope.

Timing of the Lord's Supper

The biblical testimony is consistent: the Lord's Supper was instituted "on the night when He was betrayed" (1 Cor 11:23), in other words, the evening of the fourteenth of Aviv. It was on that same date that the true Passover Lamb was slain (1 Cor 5:7). To separate the ordinance from this date is to sever it from its historical and theological foundation.

For this reason, the Quartodeciman Christians insisted on observing the Lord's Supper annually on the fourteenth, claiming apostolic authority for their practice. Polycrates of Ephesus declared that Philip, John, and Polycarp all kept the day in exact accordance with the Gospel. Their testimony shows that the annual observance was not a matter of human preference but of apostolic command.

By contrast, no Scripture authorizes a weekly, monthly, or quarterly observance. Paul never instructs the churches to keep the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, nor do the Gospels suggest any other frequency. The annual observance on Aviv 14 is the only practice

that unites the biblical witness with the testimony of the earliest churches.

Distinction from the Passover

The Lord's Supper is fundamentally different than the Passover. First, only Christians can observe the Lord's Supper, while only circumcised Israelites and their families can eat the Passover. Second, Christians gathered as a congregation to celebrate the Lord's Supper, while Israelite families would gather in individual homes for the Passover. Christians can celebrate the Lord's Supper anywhere that a congregation exists, but Israelites can only celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. Paul explicitly commanded Christians not to eat a meal when they assembled for the Lord's Supper, while the Passover requires the eating of a meal, which includes the Passover lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. Finally, Christ instituted the Lord's Supper on the fourteenth of Aviv, while the Israelites ate the Passover seder on the evening of the fifteenth.

The Passover was a type; the Lord's Supper is the fulfillment. The Passover looked back to Israel's deliverance from Egypt; the Lord's Supper proclaims the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore, it is appropriate that they should be observed on different nights.

Proper Participants

As established earlier, the Lord's Supper is for baptized believers only. Baptism unites a person with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–4), clothing him with Christ (Gal 3:27) and incorporating him into His body (1 Cor 12:13). The Lord's Supper renews that covenant. Participation in the Lord's Supper without baptism is an attempt to claim the privileges of the covenant without entering the covenant. For this reason, both Scripture and the testimony of the early church restrict participation to those who have been baptized in the name of Christ.

Summary

So, the Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ's death that was instituted on the night of His betrayal and observed annually on the evening of Aviv 14. It is distinct from the Passover, but connected to it through Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb. It is reserved for baptized believers, who proclaim His death, renew their covenant commitment, and anticipate His return. Scripture and early church history bear witness to this practice, confirming that the Lord's Supper must be kept in reverence, faith, and obedience until the Lord comes.

Conclusion

The Lord's Supper stands at the heart of Christian worship. Instituted by Christ on the night of His betrayal, it is the ordinance by which the church remembers His death, renews its covenant with Him, and proclaims His sacrifice until He comes again. It is a solemn act of faith and obedience, not a common meal nor a human tradition.

The testimony of Scripture is clear. The Lord's Supper was instituted on the evening of the fourteenth of Aviv, the very date on which the true Passover Lamb was slain. The Gospels

record its institution; Paul affirms that it proclaims the Lord's death until His return; and he warns that it must be received in a worthy manner by those who are in covenant with Christ. The symbols of the bread and the cup point to His broken body and His shed blood as the foundation of the new covenant.

The testimony of history confirms this fact. The Quartodeciman Christians of Asia Minor, appealing to the example of Philip, John, and Polycarp, held fast to the annual observance of the Lord's Supper on the fourteenth day. They declared that they had received this practice from the apostles themselves. While later councils suppressed their observance in favor of Easter, the Quartodeciman tradition shows the unbroken continuity of annual observance from the days of Christ to the second century.

Therefore, the conclusion is inescapable. The Lord's Supper is to be kept annually on the evening of Aviv 14, by baptized believers, in remembrance of the death of Christ. It is a covenant renewal, a proclamation of the cross, and an anticipation of the kingdom. To alter its timing or include those outside of the new covenant is to deviate from the pattern given by the Lord and confirmed by His apostles.

True Christians should return to the simplicity and the purity of this ordinance. They should gather each year at the appointed time, wash one another's feet in humility, partake of the bread and the cup in reverence, and proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes. By doing so, they will honor the command of Christ, preserve the apostolic tradition, and keep the cross of Christ at the center of faith and practice.

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