

# The Last Supper

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Why do we take communion? What does it mean? Does it make any difference whether we take it or not? The Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians describes for us the power of communion to shape our lives.

## 1 Corinthians 11:18-26

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup>No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. <sup>20</sup>When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, <sup>21</sup>for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. <sup>22</sup>Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

<sup>23</sup>For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup>and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup>In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup>For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

If we believe God loves us unconditionally, it should deeply affect how we live everyday. How do we get our beliefs from our heads to our hearts so that they profoundly affect the way we live? The Lord's Supper was given to us by Jesus as a way to get God's love into our hearts. The Lord's Supper connects things that otherwise would be fragmented in our lives.

The Lord's Supper connects the present to the past. Paul reminds us that communion connects us with night in the Upper Room at which Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples. It not only connects us with that night in the Upper Room. Because it is the Passover meal, it connects us with the night the Israelites were freed from slavery to the Egyptians. The Passover meal began when the youngest child looked at the table of food and noticed that it was different from the usual menu. He asked, "Why is this night different from other nights." The head of the house would answer the question by saying,

“On this night we remember the Exodus.” Moses had asked the Egyptian Pharaoh to let God’s people go to the land they had been promised by God. Pharaoh refused to let them go. Therefore God sent a series of ten plagues upon the Egyptians to convince Pharaoh to let the people go. The last of the plagues culminated in the sending of the death angel to kill the firstborn sons in all of Egypt. It was a glimpse of what the final judgment day would be like. At the end of history God will bring the sword of justice and make everything right. With the tenth plague, he demonstrated on a small scale what the final judgment will be like. He limited the scope of the death angel only to first born sons in Egypt. His judgment fell on a specific group of persons in a specific geographical area. At the end of time his judgment will be on all persons throughout the earth. This judgment was to come on all firstborn sons in Egypt including the Israelites. God makes it clear that all of us stand under judgment. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” “The wages of sin is death.” All of us deserve the judgment of death. But God offered a way for any firstborn son to be saved from the death angel. Any household, Israelite or Egyptian, that would take a lamb, kill it and then put the blood of the lamb on the door post would be passed over by the death angel. His grace was offered to all. The life of a lamb would be substituted for the life of the firstborn son. The majority of the Egyptians refused the offer of grace. Death comes to their homes. Pharaoh tells the Israelites to leave. God instituted the feast of the Passover to be celebrated every year as a way of remembering that it was by God’s power and grace they were spared from death and liberated to go to the Promised Land.

The night Jesus gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room was Passover night. Jesus was presiding over the meal. As he explained the meaning of the meal, he changed everything. He did not talk about the night of the Exodus. Instead he talked about himself and what he was getting ready to do. Jesus took the unleavened bread. Normally the host

would say, "This bread is unleavened to remind us that our ancestors left Egypt in such haste they did not have time for the bread to rise." Jesus took the unleavened bread and said, "This is my body broken for you." He took the cup which the host would say was to remind them of the lamb that was slain and whose blood was placed upon the door posts. Jesus took the cup and said, "This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood."

It is interesting to note that there is no mention of eating lamb at the last supper. Why? Because the sacrifice of an animal could not really provide for the forgiveness of sin. Animal sacrifices were a way of foreshadowing what God was going to do upon the cross. Jesus said, "This is the night unlike all others. I am the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It is my body and my blood that saves the world from death. Tonight sin and death will be completely dealt with. When you take this bread and this cup from now on remember me. There is a connection between you and me tonight. Your sins will die with me upon a cross so that you can be forgiven and spared the judgment of death. When you trust me as your Savior you are given the gift of life."

Communion connects us to the heart of God. When we take the cup and the bread, Jesus connects us with himself. When Jesus took the bread and said "this is my body" what does that mean? When Jesus took the cup and said "this is my blood" what does that mean? The Catholic Church teaches that when the priest consecrates the bread and wine, it literally becomes the flesh and blood of Jesus. According to the Catholic Church if you want to go to heaven you have to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus.

The protestant churches insist that the bread and juice are symbolic of the body and blood of Jesus. It does not really become his flesh and blood.

Now there are problems reconciling all of the scriptures about communion with either the Catholic or protestant view. The Catholics believe that Jesus was speaking literally to

his disciples when he said “this is my body” and “this is my blood.” But how could that be? Jesus still had his actual body and his blood intact at the moment. He must have been speaking symbolically. “This bread and wine represent my body.” Another problem for the Catholic view that salvation comes through communion is that the scriptures say several places that in order to be saved what you need to do is repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Salvation is about trusting him, not about taking a cup and a piece of bread.

But other scriptures also present some problems for the protestant view that communion is merely symbolic. In John 6:53, Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Many of the people listening to Jesus were offended by this statement and left him. Those who stayed asked Jesus what he meant by eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus replied: “The flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” When Jesus talks about his flesh and blood, he seems to be anticipating the Lord’s Supper. Then he says that it is believing his words that brings life. I think Jesus is saying that he intends for communion to be more than just symbolic. As we eat the bread and drink the cup we are taking Jesus into our lives in a very real and profound way. It is more than mere symbolism.

Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of me.” What does it mean to remember? Jesus is talking about something much more powerful than to “recall” what he did. What is the opposite of remember? It is not “to forget.” Rather it is to dismember! That conjures up pictures of fingers, toes, arms and legs being severed. The word “member” refers to a body part. To remember means more than to “recall.” It means to reattach and connect. It means to take something that is not part of you and make it part of you.

If today we are bitter or anxious, could it be because we do not remember that Jesus Christ gave himself for us? Has it really become a part of my life, in fact central to my life, that the Son of God values me so much that he would give his life for me? I need to feed on that truth until it becomes central to my life—until it gets out of my head and into my heart. Then my life is changed. When we realize deep at the core of our being how much we are loved, it changes everything. Our lives are filled with peace and joy. When you take the bread and the cup, remember how much you are loved and feed on that truth until it becomes central to your life.

The Lord's Supper also connects to community. I love to read the letters to the Corinthians. When I think we have problems at LakeRidge, I can read those letters and see how many problems they had, and it makes me feel better. One of the problems of the church at Corinth was division. There were groups that did not get along at all. In fact they had disdain for each other. This division surfaced especially during the Lord's Supper.

The first century church observed communion at the end of worship as we do. However for them it was not sip of juice and a tiny wafer. It was a full meal. Everyone brought food from home and spread it out together. They were the first potluck dinners. However at Corinth, some of the people were not sharing. As soon as the service was over, they gobbled down their food and wine and left so they would not have to interact with others. We can infer from Paul's comments that some of the division was between the wealthy and the poor. Those who were wealthy were bringing large quantities of food and drink and consuming it themselves—some even got drunk. While others who could afford to bring little were going away hungry. The wealthy did not want to share with those who were poor. Some believed they were superior to others.

Paul reminds them Jesus died for all of us. Therefore we are all equal in the sight of God. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all sinners saved by grace. No one is superior to another. One of the ways we demonstrate our unity is through sharing—those who have been given much share with those who have been given little. Communion reminds us that everything we have is a gift from God. We have been blessed not because we are special, but so that we can be a blessing.

The Lord's Supper connects us with the future. Paul said, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." When Jesus comes he is going to throw a banquet—a big supper. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." We will be invited to the wedding feast of the lamb. Christ will be the bridegroom and we, the church, will be his bride. This is the banquet that will finally bring complete satisfaction to our souls. We will never hunger or thirst again. There will be no more emptiness. All anxiety, pain and worry will be gone. We will be filled with fullness of Christ.

Today we share in communion. We will take a small cup and tiny wafer. It is the first course of the great banquet to come. When you hold the bread and the cup: remember Jesus. Remember how much he loves you. Remember that he gave his life for you. Remember who you are in his eyes. Do more than just recall. Feed on those words until Jesus fills your heart with Himself.