

CHAPTER 29

OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Purpose of the Lord's Supper

“1. Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the Sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his Church unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death, the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in, and to all duties which they owe unto him; and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.”

The Lord's Supper has various names in the New Testament: “breaking bread” (Acts 2:42; 20:7), “the feast” (1 Cor 5:8), “the bread and the cup” (1 Cor 10:16), “communion” (1 Cor 10:16-17), “the table of the Lord” (1 Cor 10:21), “the Lord's Supper” (1 Cor 11:20). Perhaps it also is referred to by the terms “eat” (2 Thess 3:10) and “love-feast” (Jude 12).

These terms help us determine its purpose. Our Confession lists six purposes for which the Lord's Supper was given:

- 1) A remembrance, to be a memorial of Christ's death for us (1 Cor 11:24-26)
- 2) A seal of Christ's benefits to true believers (even as circumcision was a seal of the salvation of Abraham, Rom 4:11)
- 3) A means of spiritual nourishment and growth (1 Cor 11:28-32)
- 4) A promise to be faithful to the Lord (1 Cor 10:21)
- 5) A bond and pledge of our communion with God (1 Cor 10:16)
- 6) A bond and pledge of our unity with one another in the church (1 Cor 10:17)

Results of the Lord's Supper

“2. In this Sacrament Christ is not offered up to his Father, nor any real sacrifice made at all for remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that once offering up

of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all; and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God for the same: so that the Popish sacrifice of the mass, as they call it, is most abominably injurious to Christ's one only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect."

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the priest actually changes the elements of the Lord's Supper to the physical body and blood of Christ, and that the sacrifice of Christ is literally repeated on the altar of the church each time the mass is said. That is why the table is called an "altar." Reformed churches avoid that name for the communion table.

The book of Hebrews, especially, teaches that Christ's sacrifice was done on Golgotha, once for all. Unlike the Old Testament priests, who sacrificed to God often, Jesus' sacrifice of himself is not repeated; no additional sacrifices are necessary (Heb 9:22, 25-26, 28; 10:11-12, 14, 18). The Lord's Supper is only a commemoration of that great sacrifice.

Administration of the Lord's Supper

The next two sections discuss how the Lord's Supper is to be administered in the church.

Proper procedure

"3. The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people, to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use: and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants, but to none who are not then present in the congregation."

The institution of the Lord's Supper is recorded in 1 Cor 11:23-25, and in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 26:26-28 = Mark 14:22-24 = Luke 22:19-20). According to these passages Jesus partook of the elements himself, and instructed his apostles to do the same. He commanded them to perpetuate this ordinance until he returns to the earth.

It is generally recognized that Jesus celebrated the Passover and instituted the Lord's Supper at the same meal. The elements were used in the Passover ritual, and Jesus gave them new meaning when he instituted the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was celebrated frequently in the Apostolic church; today many churches celebrate it quarterly, monthly, or even weekly (cf. WLC 177, "to be administered often").

The pastor and the people should partake of both elements. Obviously, there should be no adoration of the elements; nor is it necessary to receive the elements in a kneeling position.

The elements should be "bread and wine." The bread may be leavened or unleavened. There is no New Testament requirement to keep the ceremonial law against unleavened bread at Passover. The wine may be fermented, but need not be. American evangelical churches usually use unfermented grape juice, to avoid giving any offence or cause of stumbling. These matters

relating to the mode of administration do not comprise the essence of the sacrament, and are best left to the discretion of the local churches.

Abuses in procedure

“4. Private masses, or receiving this Sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone; as likewise the denial of the cup to the people; worshipping the elements; the lifting them up, or carrying them about for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this Sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.”

These practices of the Roman Catholic Church, or even some Protestant churches, change the significance of the Supper, and institute elements in idolatry into the church itself. Our Confession specifies several abuses:

- Private masses

Since the Lord’s Supper is a communion of the church, it is contrary to its nature to avoid the fellowship of the church to receive it privately. This was common practice to wealthy Catholic nobility in the days the Confession was written. This prohibition was not aimed at serving communion to shut-ins, those unable to come to church; in that case, a “mini-service” is held with as many people present as possible.

- Denying the cup to the laity

Until recently (Vatican II) the Roman Catholic Church had allowed the laity to partake of the bread only. Only the priest drank the wine. Their doctrine of transubstantiation declares that, since the bread becomes actual flesh, there is blood present in the bread; thus the laity do not need the cup. The Protestant reformers rightly demanded the cup as well as the bread for all the communicants.

- Elevating, adoring, and worshipping the elements

If the Roman Catholic doctrine is correct, then the elements actually become Jesus Christ, and should be worshiped. This in fact they do. This “adoration” of the elements in the mass is actually idolatry, worshipping the creation as God.

- Keeping the elements for religious use

The Roman Catholic doctrine requires that any elements left over after the service be treated with all reverence, since they are a part of Jesus’ body. They can only be used by keeping them to the next mass. Actually, the sacrament’s power does not reside in the elements themselves, but in the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. The elements remain simple bread and wine, and still are suitable for common use.

Significance of the Lord's Supper

The next two sections explain what the Lord's Supper actually signifies and accomplishes, and contrasts that with false doctrines.

Sacramental representation

“5. The outward elements in this Sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly, and only, bread and wine, as they were before.”

Sometimes the elements are referred to by the names body and blood of Christ (Matt 26:26-28). Other times the names bread and cup are used (1 Cor 11:26-28). It is clear that the elements remain the same, but represent the body and blood of Christ (as in John 6:53-56, 63). We call this “sacramental” representation.

Not transubstantiation

“6. That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense and reason; overthroweth the nature of the Sacrament; and hath been, and is the cause of manifold superstitions, yea, of gross idolatries.”

Basically, there are four positions regarding the significance and efficacy of the Lord's Supper:

Roman Catholic.—During the middle ages the Roman Catholic Church developed the idea of *transubstantiation*, which is that the *essence* of the bread and wine in the Eucharist actually changes to become the body and blood of Christ, physically. However, the *accidents*, or appearance of the elements, remain the same. Therefore, the elements are actually God, and are to be worshiped. Eating and drinking the elements actually brings Christ into the person, bringing all the grace promised.

Lutheran.—Martin Luther rejected the Catholic idea of transubstantiation, but he still believed that Christ was corporally present in the elements. The term often used to describe this view is *consubstantiation*. The essence of the bread and wine remains, but the corporeal body of Christ is present “in, with, and under” the elements, much as light is present in air. Thus, one “chews Christ with the teeth.”

Much stock is placed in (1) Christ's omnipresence, which is referred to his body as well as to his spirit, and (2) the word “is” in the words of institution.

Lutherans believe that grace will come to the person who partakes in faith, through the elements and the accompanying word.

The Reformed standards oppose consubstantiation (next section, 29:7). It is theologically difficult to base special significance for the Lord's Supper on a supposed omnipresence of Christ's body (would he not be present in all food?). Also, the word "is" often is metaphorical, meaning "represents, is similar to," as in the statement "I am the door."

Reformed.—The Reformed view denies both doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation. Rather, the sacrament exhibits and conveys grace to the elect who exercise faith and obedience in receiving it. This grace is always subject to God's sovereign will. It operates directly on the spirit of the person, not through the material elements. This grace is of the same type as that conveyed through the other means of grace. In a true but spiritual sense, worthy partakers do feast on Christ in the Lord's Supper.

Zwinglian.—This approach to the Lord's Supper makes it to be only a memorial ordinance. There is no promise of grace other than that which comes through obedience to any other command. This opinion is prevalent in many Baptist and independent churches today.

Sacrament of the new covenant.—The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper agrees well with recent discoveries about ancient treaties or covenants. Just as the Passover was a symbol of the covenant with Moses, so the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of the new covenant. This relation is clearly expressed in the words of institution:

- Matt 26:28 = Mark 14:24, "my blood of the covenant"
- Luke 22:20 = 1 Cor 11:25, "the new covenant in my blood"

The church now operates under the new covenant. The old Mosaic covenant is no longer operative (2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:6, 13).

The transition to the new covenant appears to be not Pentecost, but the institution of the Lord's Supper during Passover. Christ is our Passover lamb (John 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7).

An interesting suggestion is that, just as baptism is the initial covenant ritual, so the Lord's Supper is a repeated renewal ritual. It is clear that the sanctions of the new covenant are pictured in the Lord's Supper as well as in baptism: death for disobedience (the penalty paid by Christ), and life for faith and obedience (the believers live because of Christ).

Benefits for worthy receivers

"7. Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this Sacrament, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ

being then not corporally or carnally in, with or under the bread and wine; yet as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.”

True believers in Christ receive outwardly the elements through the mouth into the body. There is no special benefit in the elements themselves.

Yet inwardly, as they partake by faith and obedience, they receive Christ in their souls by the work of the Holy Spirit. Compare John 6 and 1 Cor 10:16.

In order to profit spiritually from the Lord’s Supper, the people should be encouraged to prepare for the sacrament by self-examination, prayer, meditation, repentance, and revival. In this way the Holy Spirit more abundantly blesses those who come in faith to the Lord’s Supper. The Larger Catechism gives good instruction for this preparation: WLC 171 (before), WLC 174 (during), WLC 175 (after).

These requirements for worthily receiving the Lord’s Supper have led most Reformed churches to limit recipients to the age of discretion, with the category of “communicant members.” Children are listed as “non-communicant members,” or “children of the covenant.” However, this age requirement was not required in the Old Testament for partaking of the Passover, and this matter is now being discussed in many Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

Judgment for unworthy receivers

“8. Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this Sacrament, yet they receive not the thing signified thereby; but by their unworthy coming thereunto are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord’s Table, and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto.”

Even though they receive the outward elements, unworthy partakers receive no spiritual benefit. This is true because the benefit is not tied to the elements, but to the Holy Spirit’s blessing the heart of faith. Instead, these people receive judgment for presuming upon this sacrament, just as unfaithful vassals invited the vengeance of their offended suzerain. God’s judgments are severe in these cases (1 Cor 11:27-30).

Some churches practice “close communion,” allowing only members of their own church or denomination to partake of the Lord’s Supper. This practice is designed to prevent people from partaking unworthily, thus bringing judgment on themselves, and also to protect the testimony and communion of the church from being compromised. On the other hand, most Protestant churches practice “open communion,” allowing all professing Christians present to participate. Only those judged too young or known to be unqualified are prevented from taking part. With reasonable safeguards this seems to be the best approach. It recognizes the spiritual unity of the visible church, and properly regards the communion as the Lord’s table, not the church’s table.

The warnings against approaching the Lord's table unworthily should not be pressed so that those who do not have assurance of salvation are barred. If someone has a true desire to be in Christ, yet feels unworthy, he should be encouraged to come to the Lord's table; it will strengthen and confirm his faith (WLC 172).