

The Lord's Supper

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A Means of Grace

In the Lord's Supper, true believers "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." (Westminster Confession of Faith, 29.7) God does not give empty signs. When God-given signs are received in faith, we receive the things that those signs represent. When we receive the Lord's Supper believing that Jesus died for our sins, we really receive Jesus and all His saving benefits. The bread and wine are still just bread and wine, but they are used as a means by which the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus and regularly renews us in our relationship with Him.

God gives sacraments (the other New Testament sacrament is baptism) in order to confirm what he promises to us in his Word. In the sacraments, God condescends to our weakness, knowing that it is difficult for us to believe things that we cannot see. One 16th century minister explained it this way: "Why then is the sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word. The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word...The sacraments ...serve to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word...Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seal, you believe it better...for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe...The Word is appointed to work belief, and the sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief." (Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 64-5). We get a better hold on Christ in the sacraments because they awaken our outward senses to the spiritual realities presented to us in the gospel.

The fact that the Lord's Supper is more than a bare sign is made evident in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, where Paul exhorts the Corinthian Christians to flee from the idolatrous pagan sacrificial meals of their culture. He warns them that those who partake of those meals are actually having fellowship with the demons that stand behind the idols. The context shows that this argument is based upon Paul's understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper. In verse 16, Paul refers to the Lord's Supper as an actual participation (the Greek term is *koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ. To have *koinonia* in Christ is to have a common share in His life, death, and resurrection. This tells us that the Lord's Supper is more than just a reminder, but a means by which true believers are strengthened in our union with Christ. This is further emphasized in verse 18, where Paul points out that the Old Testament believers who ate the animal sacrifices were made participants in the benefits provided by those sacrifices. In the

same sense, when we partake of the bread and wine in faith, we appropriate Christ and the benefits of His death for our continued spiritual nourishment. The Holy Spirit really uses the bread and wine to unite us to Jesus.

Who May Participate?

Because the Lord's Supper signifies and seals the communion that exists between Christ and his people, it is a meal for Christians only. Scripture warns that those who partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner do themselves spiritual harm (see 1 Cor. 11:29). For this reason, at our church the Lord's table is open to those who bear these three New Testament marks of Christian identity: (1) You must have received the sacrament of baptism from a Christian church (see Mt. 28:19); (2) You must have faith in Christ alone for your salvation (see Acts 4:12); (3) You must have been admitted to the Lord's table by a gospel-believing church upon your profession of faith in Christ and continued submission to Him as a faithful member of His church (see 1 Tim. 6:12; Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor. 11:27-29). While some might object to this third requirement, we believe that it is a necessary corrective to a prevalent misunderstanding. Many professing Christians seem to believe that the idea of church membership is not a necessary element of Christian discipleship. But this view runs contrary to the teaching of Scripture. How is it possible for elders to shepherd a flock whose members are undefined? How is it possible for the church to exercise discipline over those who are not formally under its authority? (see Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17) Furthermore, Jesus' teachings show that the church, not the individual believer, has been entrusted with the task of preserving and proclaiming the gospel. When a person responds to the gospel in faith, the church has the authority to declare that, as far as it is able to tell, that person's sins are forgiven and he or she is a member of God's kingdom (see Mt. 16:18-19; Jn. 20:23). When the idea of church membership is seen as an optional aspect of discipleship, the meaning of the gospel becomes subject to redefinition by every individual who professes faith in Christ. This is why we believe that the church, not private consciences, should grant access to the Lord's table.

How Often?

We celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday at our evening service and on the first Sunday of the month in our morning service. There are three main arguments in favor of a weekly celebration of this sacrament. First, the evidence from the New Testament indicates that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper as a regular part of their worship on the Lord's Day (see Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). In fact, there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that anything less than weekly observance of this sacrament is the norm. Second, the fact that the Lord's Supper is an objective means of grace, and not merely a sign, strongly favors a weekly celebration of the sacrament. If God really confers an objective spiritual benefit to true believers in this sacrament, then we ought to avail ourselves of it every week. Third, weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper is most consistent with the fact that the main purpose of corporate worship is covenant renewal. In worship, God graciously draws us into His saving presence to renew us in our relationship with Him. The Lord's Supper is the point in the

service where our covenant relationship with the Lord is celebrated as a relationship of genuine “communion.” It is the climax of the service of covenant renewal. In light of these factors, we can understand why John Calvin said that this sacrament should be celebrated “at least once a week” (Institutes, 4.17.43).

Some might ask, ‘Doesn’t weekly communion run the risk of making it a dead ritual?’ But the same could be said of any part of worship, including singing, praying, and listening to sermons. We do not limit the frequency of those things. Why do so with regard to the Lord’s Supper? It is true that rituals can be done in an empty and formalistic manner. But in the OT, when God rebuked Israel for their vain and empty sacrifices, He did not tell them to stop offering sacrifices altogether. Rather, He called for their hearts to be renewed so their worship could be acceptable in His sight. The way to keep something from becoming a dead ritual is not to limit how often we do it but to keep watch over our hearts and be sure that we are sincerely engaged in what we are doing.

Others might ask, ‘Doesn’t weekly communion run the risk of confusing our beliefs with those of the Roman Catholic Church?’ But actually, the opposite is true. Weekly communion provides us with more opportunities to teach the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Also, it is a mistake to reject something just because it is a part of Roman Catholic practice. For example, the Roman Catholic Church baptizes infants, but this does not cause us to reject the notion of infant baptism. In the same manner, our disagreements with aspects of the Roman Church’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper should not cause us to reject the notion of weekly communion.

Wine or Grape Juice?

We use real wine in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper because Jesus used wine, not grape juice, when he instituted this sacrament. Though some have tried to argue that the wine that Jesus used was unfermented, such arguments cannot withstand scrutiny. For one thing, in the days before modern preservation techniques, it would have been impossible to have unfermented grape juice on hand at all times. In addition, the meal at which Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper was the Passover, at which real wine was used. Jesus used wine as the symbol of the new covenant in His blood because of its symbolic value. Its bitter taste makes it a good reminder of the cost paid to secure our redemption. It is also a drink of celebration, a drink that we will share with Christ at the great feast on the day of His return (see Matthew 26:29). Grape juice does not have the same symbolic value as wine.

Why do so many American churches use grape juice? The reason dates back to the 19th century temperance movement, which argued that alcohol should be outlawed altogether because of its potential for abuse. But this is not a Biblical rationale. The Bible does not prohibit things because of their potential for misuse. Jesus certainly knew that wine could be abused, but this did not prevent Him from commanding its use in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Some may ask, 'What about alcoholics? Couldn't we cause a recovering alcoholic to fall off the wagon by offering wine in the Lord's Supper?' However, contrary to our culture's way of thinking, the Bible does not view alcoholism as a disease, but as a sinful behavior. This means that it is a behavior from which the gospel can set a person free. As with other sins of over-indulgence, the biblical solution is not abstinence but Spirit-worked self-control. Ultimately, to blame the use of alcohol in the Lord's Supper for a person's abuse of alcohol is to condemn Jesus, because it was Jesus who instituted this sacrament by using wine.