

## The Lord's Supper

### *Essay #2*

Is the Lord's Supper we practice today the same as the "pattern" we see in the first century church?  
Does it matter?

It doesn't require a great deal of analysis to see that the way we practice the Lord's Supper today is not the same as it was practiced in the first century. There are definitely similarities but there also some significant differences.

Some obvious similarities:

1. A type of bread used to represent the body of Christ
2. Some kind of fruit of the vine used to represent the blood of the covenant
3. Taken at least once per week
4. Taken in remembrance of Jesus and to proclaim his death until he comes again

Some obvious differences:

1. Location, location, location – first century Lord's Supper in homes, not "church buildings"
2. Quantity – first century Lord's Supper incorporated in a meal, not just a chip & a sip
3. Style/format – first century Lord's Supper was table format, not altar format and no communion trays to be passed!

Okay, those are some easy things to spot but some things may not be as obvious – like the purpose, meaning and intent of the Supper and whether or not the form of the Supper is tied into its meaning. We've obviously taken some liberty with form. Have we lost some theological significance as a result?

## Passover

The Lord's Supper was established by Jesus during the Passover meal. You might say the Passover prefigures the atoning work of Jesus in some ways. Just as the Israelites escaped judgment by the sign of the blood of the lamb, we also escape judgment by the blood of the Lamb and we pass out of slavery into freedom. Something to celebrate, isn't it?

Our God gave very specific instructions to the Israelites regarding *their* celebration.

Please take a moment to read Exodus 12:1-50 and Deuteronomy 16:1-8. Okay, what we see here are some very explicit instructions (commands) given to the Israelites regarding the practice of the Passover. Here are the “authorized elements” of the Passover:

1. Lamb (or goat) roasted (I’m told, however, that the same word in Hebrew can be used for roast and for boil)
2. Bitter herbs
3. Bread without yeast

How was it to be eaten?

1. In haste
2. Cloak tucked into belt
3. Sandals on feet
4. Staff in hand
5. No leftovers

And it was to be eaten once per year and at twilight (Leviticus 23:5).

Restrictions:

1. No uncircumcised male was allowed to participate
2. No foreigner was to participate
3. It must be eaten in a house (later the sacrifices would occur at “the place the LORD will choose as a dwelling for his Name” Deut. 16:2)
4. No bones of the lamb broken

“. . . if a man who is ceremonially clean and not on a journey fails to celebrate the Passover, that person must be cut off from his people because he did not present the LORD’s offering at the appointed time. That man will bear the consequences of his sin.” (Numbers 9:13) Wow. That’s a pretty severe punishment for missing the meal. Personally, it doesn’t fit with my idea of how Yahweh should act. I’m not sure I understand the necessity for such a severe punishment. Then again, I’m not God (and all the people said, “Amen!!”) and my understanding is pretty limited on a lot of things. Evidently, Yahweh meant for the meal to be taken seriously. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the God of Moses took his side of the covenant seriously.

Despite the severity of missing the meal, it seems that many did – for years and years they did. Or, at least it seems it was not celebrated on the same grand scale or with the same inclusiveness/unity of all Yahweh’s people (North and South):

“The king gave this order to all the people: ‘Celebrate the Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in the Book of the Covenant.’ Not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed. But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to the LORD in Jerusalem.” (2 Kings 23:21-23).

You can read more detail about this Passover in 2 Chronicles 35:1-19. Something of interest to note in Chronicles is that the Passover is not celebrated as detailed in Exodus where the people sacrifice their own lambs. Josiah has the Levites do it for the people. This, at least at first blush, does not appear to be in exact compliance with the commands in Exodus. You might say it is “unauthorized” and yet Chronicles indicates that everything was done as “is written in the Book of Moses.” What do you think about that? Of course, the Temple was not yet built at the time of the original Passover instructions.

I’m no expert on the Passover but I think it is useful to study these passages as a backdrop to the Lord’s Supper.

### Jesus’ Passover

Jesus celebrated his last Passover before his death with his apostles (Matthew 26, Luke 22, John 13ff). One of the first things you notice in Matthew’s account is that they were “reclining” at the table (v.20). Evidently this was the customary way to eat but it appears to be at variance with the instructions about eating it with staff in hand, cloak tucked in, etc. One of the other interesting deviations from the original instructions is that Jesus was drinking wine (or at least “fruit of the vine”). Where is wine ever mentioned among the “authorized elements” of the Passover meal? I may have missed it (and if I have, I apologize) but I don’t see it anywhere in the Exodus/Deuteronomy accounts. Now I assume that if wine was used in the Passover by Jesus then it must have been just fine to do so. I only bring it up because there are those who take a very strict approach to scripture that says if something is not “explicitly authorized” then it is forbidden. I’m not sure how adherents of that view explain Jesus’ “unauthorized” use of wine. Perhaps there is something instructive there in the way we interpret scripture and practice its principles ourselves. We

also know from John 13 that during the meal sandals were removed and feet were washed. The original Passover commands seem to be pretty clear that sandals were to be worn during the meal. Now obviously I'm not saying that Jesus did anything wrong. I just find it curious because I come from a tradition that frowned on people even singing during the Lord's Supper let alone washing feet – that's because there is no example or command to sing during the Lord's Supper – not authorized, you see.

The account in Luke provides a little more detail. In fact, it has Jesus taking the cup first, then the bread and then the cup again. He seems to give the second passing of the cup more explicit significance but the cup is definitely passed twice. In both accounts the Lord's Supper is instituted within the context of a meal.

The passage in John gives even more detail and emphasizes different aspects of what occurred that night. We see the foot washing and we see a Lord's Supper that involved a great deal of teaching and dialogue, not reflective silent meditation. It was a communion of the apostles with the Lord and with one another.

### The Lord's Supper in the First Century Church

In Acts 20:7 we see some Christians at Troas coming together on the first day of the week to "break bread." It seems that many if not most Christians understand this "breaking bread" as a reference to the Lord's Supper. If that is the case, then we see the Lord's Supper has moved from a week night (when the Passover was taken) to a Sunday. There is no command to meet on a Sunday to share in the Lord's Supper but here we have the Christians doing it. So a question arises as to the frequency of the Lord's Supper. The Passover was only taken once per year. What about the Lord's Supper?

We have a couple of references to the frequency of the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34 we find Paul chastising some Christians in Corinth for their abuse of the Lord's Supper. Verse 26 says "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." There is no specified day, time of day or frequency. Paul simply says "whenever" you do it. I don't get the idea that Paul really had any intent to address the frequency, etc. He was more concerned about the purpose and meaning.

In Acts 2:42-47 we see the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem “breaking bread” DAILY. It’s the same phrase we interpret in Acts 20:7 as referring to the Lord’s Supper. We notice in the Acts 2 passage that the breaking of bread took place in their homes while they continued to assemble on the Temple grounds to hear the apostles’ teaching.

At some point in history we know that the practice of the Lord’s Supper shifted almost exclusively to Sunday. It makes sense. Sunday is the anniversary of the resurrection. It is a day of celebration and the Lord’s Supper is a celebratory meal in which we recall the grace and mercy of our Lord and the fellowship that we enjoy with him and with each other. However, we have examples of some Christians taking it daily and some on Sunday and the original occurrence was on a week night. I’d like to suggest that the Lord’s Supper may be taken as frequently as we like. The scriptures do not focus on the precise day or time of the Lord’s Supper. The scriptures focus on the purpose.

### The Format of the Lord's Supper

Now we know that our God can be very particular about details. Numerous examples exist (especially from the Old Testament but not limited to it) of details and form making a difference. There also seem to be plenty of examples of allowances for variance in detail and form. What about the Lord’s Supper? Does the form matter? What form is commanded or modeled?

Let’s look at the “elements” first. Is there any command regarding what elements are to be used? Not really. We see bread and wine used but is the meal limited to just those elements? The original meal certainly was not. In fact, the wine is taken at a different time from the bread. It is taken after a meal. Does that mean that we must do it the same way?

Jesus talks about A cup being passed – one cup. In 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 Paul argues for unity and holiness and uses the Lord’s Supper as an illustration. He says, “Is not THE cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?” It seems the only examples we have are of a single cup. Or is Paul only utilizing metonymy so that THE cup stands for the element of the wine and its significance and not the number of containers used? He goes on to say that “Because there is ONE loaf, we, who are many, are ONE body, for we all partake of the ONE loaf.” There seems to be a real emphasis on ONE here. Should we use just one cup and one loaf because the form is inextricably tied into the theological significance? I’ll make some suggestions about this toward the end of this little essay.

## Abuses of the Lord's Supper

There were a group of Christians in Corinth who abused the Lord's Supper and it is Paul's response to this abuse that gives us much of the information that we have regarding the practice and meaning. In the 1 Corinthians 11 passage, we see that a meal was actually taking place but that there were apparently social or class divisions or some form of cliques that resulted in some of the Christians not waiting for the others to begin eating. Some were "pigging out" and getting drunk (which, by the way, leads me to believe we're talking wine, not Welch's). They were making a mockery of the meal and exhibiting blatant disregard and contempt for one another. It had become merely a meal (and not a very polite one at that) and the purpose had been forgotten. In fact, you might say it was adherence to form without meaning.

Paul reiterates the purpose of the Lord's Supper. We eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of OUR Passover. We are celebrating the saving sacrifice of Jesus, the new covenant the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has made with us. A new agreement that says we are saved by grace. Paul also says that when we participate in the Lord's Supper we are proclaiming Jesus' death until he comes again. It is an evangelistic event. That's the meaning and purpose of the Lord's Supper – or at least, that's part of it. I'm sure there are many more things that are accomplished by our sharing in this "toast" to the Lord, but these seem to be the primary stated reasons for practicing it. Another purpose appears to be the celebration of our unity. The Corinthians are told to recognize "the body of the Lord" when they eat and drink. Paul may be speaking in a deliberately ambiguous way here. Does he mean the literal body of Jesus? Or does he mean the body as the church (as he refers to the church in chapter 12)? Maybe the answer is "yes!" We recognize one another (he was reprimanding them for not doing that) and we recognize our Savior who makes us all one.

Let's make a couple of quick side notes and then move to wrap up this essay. One note – beginning in 11:27 Paul talks about taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. The context of the entire discussion points to the unworthy manner being the divisive way they were doing it and the lack of theological connection. When Paul talks about examining yourself he is not talking about looking deep inside to see if your life was worthy enough this past week to allow you to participate. If that were the case then no one would be participating! One message of the Lord's Supper is that God knows you aren't worthy but you don't have to be. Jesus was worthy for you! Praise God!! Let's celebrate – what a load off that is. While the sacrifices performed by the priests were a

constant reminder of sin, a reminder that you are guilty, the Lord's Supper is exactly the opposite. It is a constant reminder that you are NOT guilty thanks to Jesus. Let's all raise our cup to him!

Another note – in v.22 when Paul says “don't you have homes to eat and drink in?” he wasn't saying don't come together for a meal. After all it was most likely a home they were coming to meet in as a church. In v. 33 he says, “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other.” He fully anticipates that they will be coming together as a church for the meal, BUT don't abuse it by pigging out and getting drunk and excluding others. If you're that hungry and you just can't wait for the others then “eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.” (v. 34).

### Conclusion

Okay, so now I'd like to draw some conclusions. I don't expect you to necessarily agree with my own conclusions and I don't think it will keep us from being united with Christ and with each other if we aren't precisely aligned on every point (feedback is welcome).

There are no real commands regarding the Lord's Supper except to do it in remembrance of Jesus and to proclaim his death and recognize one another as we participate. That's the *crux* of it. We can participate in the Lord's Supper as often as we want. I strongly suggest we move the Lord's Supper into our homes in the context of a meal where we can have communion with each other as well as with the Lord. I see nothing to indicate that the Lord's Supper was intended to be a private event where one withdraws into oneself in isolation. It is a celebratory reminder of our salvation. I believe that making the Lord's Supper an altar event rather than a table event has seriously degraded the meaning and purpose. I don't necessarily believe that it should be eliminated from the church building but I do believe that it would be best to at least supplement the Sunday morning token with a communal meal in home churches and at other events and gatherings of Christians. I believe that it would be advisable to move to the one loaf and one cup to underscore the oneness we share with each other in the body of Christ. At least beginning with one cup even if you poured it into multiple cups from there would be a significant symbol. I believe it is acceptable to use multiple cups, I just think we lose some theological significance by doing so.

I began this essay by asking if the Lord's Supper we practice today is the same as the "pattern" we see in the first century church? Does it matter? I'd say the answer to the first question is no (that one seems pretty obvious). What about the second question? Well, if you adhere to a philosophy of strict emulation of the first century church then the answer would be "yes" – it definitely matters because we have departed from the approved pattern and practice. If, however, we approach scripture with the philosophy that some scriptures are merely descriptive and not necessarily prescriptive, then the answer is "no." It doesn't matter as long as the purpose and meaning are kept intact. That doesn't mean we throw the baby out with the bath water. It doesn't mean that anything goes. It means that we seek to understand the principle and intent that the Lord had in mind and examine the context to see if some expressions and forms are essential or may only be culturally expressive of a particular church or churches we read about it. We may discover that different churches practiced things in slightly different ways in the first century.

This is just a brief essay designed to provoke thought and further study. It is not intended to be exhaustive or the last word on anything. I hope it causes you to spend time in the Word and prayer and that your life in the Lord is enriched as a result.

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