

CHAPTER 9.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

How are meals at your home? Busy and boisterous? Or quick and quiet? Meals can be special occasions, but the busyness of life sometimes compromises their value. When you are in a hurry, a meal easily becomes a brief pause to fill your stomach.

Ideally speaking, though, a meal should be much more than a fast pit stop. The best meals include other people—perhaps your spouse and children or a group of extended family members and friends. Eating with others is usually more enjoyable and satisfying than eating alone. Beyond that, if some extra care has been put into preparing the meal, with a tasty combination of flavours and perhaps even an appropriate bottle of wine, the common meal takes on a truly festive quality.

Still, whether a meal is regular or festive, eating together is an excellent way to become familiar with each other and build a relationship of trust. In this way meals not only nourish our bodies but also rejuvenate our spirits. This applies even more to us as believers, because we live a twofold life (BC 35). We have a natural, physical life, just like everyone else in the world, and we need to eat regular meals to stay healthy and strong. Yet we also have a spiritual, heavenly life, since we have been born again (John 3:5–7), and our spiritual life needs to be sustained just as much as our physical life. As Christ himself said, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you” (John 6:27). Nourishment for our com-

mon life is dished up in our dining rooms. Nourishment for our new life is served within the worship services of the church.

Seeing that our new life needs nourishment, it is certainly no surprise that the Lord Jesus Christ instituted a special meal, called the Lord's supper, as a means of grace and as the second sacrament. Like the washing of baptism, the basic symbolism of the Lord's supper is easy to understand. Just as the body needs food to stay healthy, so our souls need to draw strength from the sacrifice of Christ. That is why Christ bids us to come, eat, and drink the special meal that he prepares for us at the Lord's table.

Meals are often under-appreciated. How many young adults, when they leave their parental home and strike out on their own, wistfully remember how good Mom's cooking really was? To under-appreciate Mom's cooking is one thing; to under-value the Lord's supper is a much more serious matter. If we have some sense of how much the Bridegroom sacrificed in order to nourish his Bride at his table (Eph 5:29), then we will eagerly and earnestly participate in this meal until he drinks the wine new with us in the kingdom of his Father.

Our exploration of the doctrine of the Lord's supper will follow much the same pattern as our investigation concerning holy baptism. First, we will look at how the Lord's supper fits the description of a sacrament. Next, we will look at what the New Testament teaches us about this topic, after which we will trace some Old Testament lines forward to the New Testament feast. Finally, we will look at the some more specialized questions concerning the Lord's supper, as well as how the Holy Spirit uses this sacrament in order to cultivate an assured faith in us.

LORD'S SUPPER AS SACRAMENT

By way of review, here is our general definition of the sacraments: sacraments are *holy, visible signs and seals which were instituted by God so that by their use he might more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel*. Now let us take a closer look at how this applies to the Lord's supper.

The *holy, visible sign* found in the Lord's supper is more multifaceted than what is found in baptism. To begin with, in this sacrament there are two signs rather than just one. Baptism involves water; the Lord's supper includes both bread *and* wine. As Jesus Christ said, the bread corresponds to his body (Matt 26:26) and the wine signifies his blood, or more specifically, "my blood of the covenant" (Matt 26:28), or alternatively, "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Thus, not only are there two elements in this sacrament, but the second element, wine, symbolizes two related yet distinct things: Christ's blood and the new covenant made with his blood.

Having stipulated that, however, we still have not plumbed the depths of what is signified in this sacrament. Bread is a nearly universal, staple food. Think, for instance, of the fourth petition: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). By contrast, wine is more special. Indeed, as the psalmist says, bread strengthens a person while wine gladdens the heart (Ps 104:15). In other words, each part of the meal benefits you in its own way. Likewise, in the Lord's supper the bread signifies staple nourishment for our spiritual life, whereas the wine symbolizes the joy of salvation that the Spirit gives to the forgiven sinner (Ps 51:12). Obviously there are many different layers to the symbolism involved in the Lord's supper.

At the same time, all of this rich symbolism should not obscure the fact that this supper is also a *holy, visible pledge*. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "This is my body, which is given *for you*," and referred to "the cup that is poured out *for you*" (Luke 22:19–20; emphasis added). So, the sacrament not only assures us that the atoning sacrifice of Christ actually happened, but also that it actually happened *for us*. That is to say, Christ died in our place and for our benefit. That the eternal Son of God would do this for us, wretched sinners that we are, is so astounding that at times it seems hard to believe. Therefore Christ gave us this meal as a sure pledge guaranteeing to each sincere believer that he or she truly benefits from this one-of-a-kind sacrifice.

A meal is a particularly effective way for Christ to deliver this pledge. By way of comparison, think of how a husband may take his wife out for dinner as a reaffirmation of his abiding love for his bride. Also, by way of contrast, people at odds with each other find it difficult, if not impossible, to eat together. Thankfully, through the reconciling work of Christ, we have peace with God (Rom 5:1–2), so that he and we can be together at table for a joyful and love-filled meal.

That this sacrament was *instituted by our Lord* is abundantly clear from the gospels. The disciples were eager to prepare for the Passover (Matt 26:17), but they had no plans for anything beyond that. Rather, while they were eating the Passover it was Jesus who took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and initiated something new when he said, “This is my body” (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22). Later the apostle Paul also explained to the church at Corinth that the Lord’s supper was certainly not his own idea, as is evident from the words “for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you” (1 Cor 11:23). For this reason the Holy Spirit calls this sacramental meal the *Lord’s* supper (1 Cor 11:20) or the table *of the Lord* (1 Cor 10:21).

Since Christ initiated the meal it properly belongs to him. Accordingly, we must be circumspect about using it only for his holy purposes and not for our own personal agendas. Among other problems, this was one of the issues facing the church in Corinth. A meal belonging to the Lord was hijacked by self-centred sinners in order to advance their own social standing (1 Cor 11:17–22).

This leads us to the last phrase of our definition. Sacraments focus our attention on the central *promise of the gospel*, namely, the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of eternal life through the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Lord’s supper certainly has this focus. Not only did Christ himself say that the bread symbolizes his body *given for us* and the wine portrays his blood *poured out for us* (Luke 22:19–20), but the early church also referred to this sacrament simply as “breaking bread” (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11). Breaking the bread is not only necessary to distribute the loaf among many, but it is also an unmistakable symbol of

the sacrifice of Christ's body. Although the bones of our Passover Lamb were not physically broken (John 19:33; see also Exod 12:46, Num 9:12, Ps 34:20), he was still crushed for our iniquity, giving his very life as a guilt offering for us (Isa 53:5, 10). Thus, whether the bread is being broken or the wine is being poured out, all signs point in one direction: to the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the cross.

This central focus of the sacrament also needs to be emphasized in an age when the communal fellowship among believers often takes centre stage in the sacrament. True, the fellowship among believers is part of the sacrament, but it is not primary. Moreover, since it is the Lord's supper and not ours, we had best keep as primary what he regards as primary, and secondary what he deems secondary.

WHAT DOES THE LORD REVEAL ABOUT HIS SUPPER?

In the New Testament the Lord reveals several noteworthy things about his meal. In the first place, unlike baptism, this sacrament involves our action. This is clear from the numerous commands that are associated with the meal: *eat, drink, do this in remembrance of me*, and *proclaim the Lord's death* (1 Cor 11:24, 26). Grammarians would call these active commands. By comparison, with baptism the verbs tend to be passive: *be baptized* or *have been united* (Acts 2:38; Rom 6:5). Technical terms aside, the main point is that baptism is something that happens to us, whereas the Lord's supper is something that, in a certain sense, we do. Our hand takes the bread and brings it to our mouth. We chew and swallow. Likewise, we raise the cup to our lips and drink. Of course, ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who uses this meal in order to strengthen our faith. Still, in a very real way we participate in the Lord's supper (1 Cor 10:16). This is what you would expect at a meal. Only the very young and the very old need to be fed (passive); other than that, we ourselves eat and drink (active) at meals. With active participation also come certain responsibilities, which we will explore later on in this chapter.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that during this sacrament the eye of faith is looking in two different directions, both backwards and forwards.

At this meal we must look back and remember Christ (Luke 22:19), and especially his once-for-all sacrificial death (Rom 6:9; Heb 7:27; 10:10). In Scripture remembering often involves acting in a way that lines up with the event being commemorated. For example, to remember the Sabbath day is not merely to recall which day of the week it is, but also to arrange your life in such a way that you can rest from your daily labours in the same way that the LORD rested from his creative work. In a similar fashion, remembering the death of Christ includes, among other things, counting ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:11).

Yet even as our hearts remember the past, we also anticipate the future return of Christ on the clouds of heaven. In fact, Christ himself was looking forward when he instituted this sacrament. He was eager to eat the Passover, and then he went on to explain why: “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). In this way, Christ already cast his eyes beyond the cross, even beyond his resurrection and ascension, all the way forward to the final consummation when all sins will be swept away and the Groom and his Bride will share unhindered joy forever. This bi-directional focus at the Lord’s supper makes for a meal of mixed emotions. On the one hand, it has a sober ambiance, for an agonizing death is being remembered. Yet, on the other hand, there should be an undeniable excitement in the air as the Bride and Groom are eagerly looking forward to their glorious wedding day (Rev 19:9). The challenge for any congregation, and particularly for the one leading the worship service, is to combine these two emotions in a God-pleasing manner.

Next, from the New Testament we learn that the Lord’s supper is a meal of fellowship. When the apostle Paul describes the sacrament as a *participation* in the blood and body of Christ, he uses a word which speaks of having certain things in common (1 Cor 10:16). In the first place, then, Christ does not keep the benefits of his sacrifice for himself. Indeed, he has no need of forgiveness! Instead, he shares them with his people, regardless of gender, income, or social standing. Yet, if the Host of the meal has been generous to those seated at his table, the members of the

congregation should also be generous toward each other. In this respect it is noteworthy that the apostle Paul, after speaking about participating in the body and blood of Christ, immediately goes on to say, “Because there is one bread, *we who are many are one body*, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17; emphasis added). Being one body is further elaborated in 1 Corinthians 12:12–31, where each member of the congregation is urged to use his time, talent, and financial resources for the benefit of the other members. The early church is a shining example of how this principle ought to be put in practice (Acts 2:44–47).

Before we move on to look at some Old Testament passages, there is one more aspect that Jesus Christ teaches us about the Lord’s supper. It is found in John 6 and it concerns the special kind of eating that believers do. Now, of course, John 6 comes before John 13–16, chapters which record the institution of the Lord’s supper at the Last Supper. For this reason some are reluctant to apply John 6 to the sacrament. To be sure, we need to exercise caution here. Nevertheless, in this chapter Christ teaches at length that anyone who wants to live forever must, in some way, “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” (John 6:53). At the Last Supper Jesus broke the bread and said, “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matt 26:26); therefore it is natural to connect the two passages and allow the one to explain the other.

What, then, is our Saviour teaching us in John 6? At face value, it is nothing short of shocking! Jesus said, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (John 6:54). That sounds not only crude, but also cannibalistic, and even unscriptural, for already in the Old Testament the LORD had strictly prohibited his people from drinking blood (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:12–14). Certainly the Jews, and even some of his own disciples, took great offence at what Jesus said (John 6:52, 60–61, 66). However, if we listen carefully to everything that Jesus says on this occasion, then the cloud of offence is removed and the sunlight of redemptive truth begins to shine through. On three distinct occasions in John 6, Christ emphasized the necessity of believing. The first occasion was when the Jews crowded around him, looking for more food to fill their empty stomachs (vv. 1–15, 26). Yet Jesus directs them to work for a

completely different kind of food—not only what fills the stomach but what endures to eternal life (v. 27). This different kind of food requires a different kind of eating as well. That is precisely what he goes on to explain when he says shortly thereafter, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (v. 29). In other words, to ingest the food that endures to eternal life you do not need to chew and swallow but rather to repent and believe. Our Saviour then explains that the food unto eternal life is actually he himself (“I am the bread of life,” v. 35), but the Jews repeatedly take offence. However, Jesus keeps coming back to the same opening point. Twice more he indicates that his disciples must believe (vv. 36, 64), and those who remain with him affirm that they do believe (v. 69).

What does all of this mean? Obviously, physical eating and drinking occur at the Lord’s supper. We eat bread and drink wine. However, as Christ teaches us in John 6, normal physical eating will never sustain the new, heavenly life that results from being born again. That life requires a different kind of eating, which is not done by chewing but by believing. Faith becomes the mouth of the soul. In order to use the Lord’s supper properly, it is critical to distinguish between the physical eating by teeth and tongue, which is part of the sign, and the spiritual eating by faith, which is part of the redemptive reality to which the sign is pointing. In this regard the Belgic Confession is particularly helpful when it explains:

To represent to us the spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of his body and wine as a sacrament of his blood. He testifies to us that as certainly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands and eat and drink it with our mouths, by which our physical life is then sustained, so certainly do we receive by faith, as the hand and mouth of our soul, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Saviour, in our souls for our spiritual life (Art. 35).

HOW DOES THE LORD’S SUPPER FULFIL THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Speaking about the Lord’s supper, the apostle Paul gives us the following instructions:

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. 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).

As leaven, or yeast, spreads in a lump of dough, so sin, malice, and wickedness tend to pervade every nook and cranny of our lives. Consequently, those who celebrate the Lord's supper must be sincere about fighting against sin—that is, cleaning out the old leaven—by the power of the Spirit. Yet the added element of interest in this passage is how the Holy Spirit draws a direct parallel between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Lord's supper when he identifies Christ as our Passover Lamb.

The depth of this parallel becomes obvious if we look at it more closely. When the very first Passover lambs were sacrificed, on the night the Israelites left Egypt (Exod 12:1–11), there were two starkly different realities. On the one side there was death everywhere (Exod 11:5–6; 12:30), while on the other side there was life (Exod 11:7), and life in abundance (Exod 12:35–36). On the one side there was backbreaking slavery (Exod 5:1–21), while on the other side there was freedom (Exod 12:31–32), which led to a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 13:5). The pivot point between these two different realities was blood—blood from the Passover lamb smeared on the doorframes of the houses of God's people (Exod 12:7).

Similarly, in the New Testament, the pivot point is but a few drops of spear-shed blood, the blood of the great Passover Lamb of God, Jesus Christ (John 1:29; 19:34). On the one side is eternal death; while on the other side is eternal and abundant life (John 3:16; 10:10). On the one side is slavery to sin and Satan (John 8:34), while on the other side is freedom (John 8:36), which leads to a new earth flowing with blessedness and holiness (Rev 21:1–4, 27). This is all signified and sealed in the Lord's supper, which is a rich fulfillment of the Old Testament Passover.

However, this is not the only line that stretches from the Old to the New Testament. Christ himself hinted at another connection when he said,

“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The new covenant in Christ’s blood is the reality that was already foreshadowed by the old covenant made with the blood of young bulls. At the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses used almost exactly the same words when he sprinkled God’s people with sacrificial blood and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you” (Exod 24:8). Immediately thereafter, the leaders of Israel—Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, along with seventy elders—went up on Mount Sinai, saw God, and “ate and drank” (Exod 24:10). Precisely what they ate and drank we do not know. Undoubtedly they would never forget that meal for the rest of their lives!

Still, in essence, the New Testament sacrament of the Lord’s supper is greater than that meal on Sinai. At Sinai the blood came from young bulls (Exod 24:5), while at the Lord’s supper we participate in the blood of the Lamb who is God’s only-begotten Son (1 Cor 10:16). Obviously the latter is greater than the former. Furthermore, the menu at Sinai, whatever it may have been, was certainly a selection of physical food for the body. By comparison, the Lord’s supper has physical food plus spiritual food, since the participants partake of nothing less than the body and blood of Christ through the mouth of faith (1 Cor 10:16, with John 6:55–56). Again, the latter is undoubtedly much more splendid than the former.

There is one more aspect of Old Testament revelation that should be highlighted. In the tabernacle, and later in the temple, the LORD dwelt in the Holy of Holies and the people remained outside in the courtyard. Interestingly, though, between the people and the LORD stood first the bronze altar for sacrifices and next, inside the tent, the table of the bread of the Presence, upon which not only bread but also wine was placed (Exod 25:29–30; 29:40). For God’s people the message should have been clear: even though God is so holy, via sacrifice there is the possibility of meal fellowship with him. Yet the special bread that was restricted to the priests in the Old Testament (Lev 24:9) is shared by all of God’s people, the royal priesthood, in the new covenant (1 Pet 2:9).

Considering the points mentioned above, it is clear that although Christ instituted something new in his supper, he did so by fulfilling various Old Testament ceremonies and laws in a profound and multidimensional way (Matt 5:17).

WHO SHOULD RECEIVE THE LORD'S SUPPER?

To be part of a festival is a joyful experience, but to partake of the Festival of the new covenant, all the while proclaiming Christ's death, is a privilege par excellence. It should also go without saying that it must then be celebrated in a worthy and God-pleasing manner. However, sometime the obvious needs to be stated. The congregation in Corinth celebrated the sacrament in such a self-centred manner that they were guilty of sinning against Christ's own body and blood, thereby bringing God's wrath down upon their own heads (1 Cor 11:27, 29).

What went so horribly wrong? In short, the members of that congregation took what was holy and treated it as if it were common. That is to say, they took the Lord's special, sacramental meal and turned it into a regular meal. Some ate and drank their fill, to the point of gluttony and drunkenness, all the while leaving others, most likely the poor and needy, to search for scraps and still go home hungry (1 Cor 11:21). However, they were not focusing on the core of the sacrament, which is the promise of the gospel: forgiveness of sins and life everlasting through the Christ who was crucified at Golgotha. No one was taking time to eat the Bread of Life by the mouth of faith (John 6:35), because they were all too busy trying to fill their stomachs with physical food. On top of that, the greedy actions of some were causing divisions in the congregation at the very meal in which their unity in Christ was supposed to come to full expression (1 Cor 11:18).

That was the sinful problem. What was the remedy? The apostle Paul gives this instruction: "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). In other words, this sacrament requires as much preparation as it does participation. It is noteworthy that the apostle becomes quite direct at this point: "Let a person

examine *himself*.” The meal itself is communal but preparing for it has a strong personal aspect.

So, what kind of prior self-examination should the sincere participant in the Lord’s supper undergo? In fact, the apostle had already given those instructions earlier in his letter, in a passage that we surveyed in the previous section: get rid of the leaven of malice and eat the bread of sincerity (1 Cor 5:7). In other words, everyone who wants to partake of this sacramental meal must first closely examine his conduct and conversation in order to become more sorry for the offence he has caused, more convinced that only Christ’s sacrifice can save him, and more fervent in his desire to fight sin through the Spirit’s strength. Where this kind of humble and repentant disposition prevails, believers are worthily prepared in order to partake of the Lord’s supper. But where this is not the case, people should abstain and take time to bear the fruit of genuine repentance, for it is better to abstain than to partake in an unworthy manner and bring God’s wrath upon individuals and congregation alike (1 Cor 11:29–32).

Sadly, not everyone who should abstain from the Lord’s table does so. Sin has a way of blinding us to our own malice. In this respect the ancient prophecy rings ever true: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). Therefore not everything can be left to the self-examination of individual believers. If there are those who manifest an ungodly and unbelieving lifestyle, the church must not bank on the possibility that they may withhold themselves. The holiness of the Lord’s table is not to be trifled with in such a manner. Concerning the stubborn sinner in Corinth, the apostle Paul did not say, “Expect him to abstain”; rather he said, “Purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor 5:13), which includes breaking off table fellowship (1 Cor 5:11).

Also today, the congregation, and especially the elders who hold the keys of the kingdom, must ensure that the holy supper remains holy (LD 31, Q&A 85). This does not mean that the contrite of heart should be afraid to partake of the sacrament. The sacrament is specifically meant to

assure those who tremble at the number of their transgressions. However, it also means that the elders of the church must act decisively, through church discipline, to prevent Corinth's contamination from perpetuating itself in the church today. This twofold preparation for the table, both by individual members and by the consistory, is summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism when it asks and answers two complementary questions: not only "Who are to come to the table of the Lord?" (LD 30, Q&A 81) but also "Are those to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?" (LD 30, Q&A 82).

CHILDREN AT THE LORD'S SUPPER?

In many respects, knowing how to prepare properly for the Lord's supper also answers the question whether children should partake of the sacrament. At first glance, we might be inclined to say, "Yes, why would they not be included?" After all, they are also part of God's covenant and congregation (LD 27, Q&A 74). So if they are included in the first sacrament, holy baptism, why shouldn't they be included in the second sacrament, holy supper, as well? Another factor is that both sacraments point to the same promise of the gospel (LD 25, Q&A 67), which is given to children of the covenant no less than to adults (LD 27, Q&A 74). Added to that, children did participate in the Old Testament sacrament of Passover, for the meat was measured according to the number of people in the household (Exod 12:3–4), and the children actively asked questions at the meal (Exod 12:26–27). Thinking along these lines, some churches do admit children, even infants, to the Lord's supper. This practice is called *paedo-communion*.

Although this line of reasoning is understandable, it is incomplete to the point of also being incorrect. A number of factors need our attention. First, although children could participate in the Passover (Exod 12), it is uncertain how many did, on a regular basis, once the Israelites were settled in the Promised Land. The LORD'S instruction in Deuteronomy 16:16 is relevant here. All adult males were required to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover each year, but a similar stipula-

tion was not made for women and children. Indeed, we are left with the impression that Jesus himself did not celebrate the Passover until he was twelve years old (Luke 2:41–42). These scriptural passages do not decide the matter one way or the other, but they do urge us to be cautious about arriving at conclusions too hastily.

More importantly, the kind of eating that is required at the Passover, or any Old Testament feast for that matter, is distinctly different from the manner of eating that is necessary for the Lord's supper. Even young children are physically mature enough to eat a piece of bread and drink a little bit of wine (although they may not appreciate the taste very much). However, that is not the kind of eating required at the Lord's table. During the sacrament we eat and drink spiritually by the mouth of the soul, that is, by faith. In order to eat by faith someone must be able to discern the difference between the signs of bread and wine and the redemptive reality to which these signs point, namely, the sacrificed body and shed blood of Christ (1 Cor 11:29). To make that discernment requires a certain level of spiritual maturity.

Still, one might argue that children, already at a surprisingly young age, are able to follow the path from sign to redemptive reality. Children can also understand the basics of the sacrament: bread signifies the body and wine portrays the blood. However, more than that is required in Scripture. All participants must examine themselves before eating the bread and drinking from the cup. As mentioned earlier, the language of this verse is quite plain. We cannot examine each other; neither can parents exercise *self*-examination on behalf their children. Rather, a person must examine himself (1 Cor 11:28). Self-examination, along the lines of 1 Corinthians 5:7–9, certainly requires spiritual maturity. There is no strict rule as to when a child reaches a point of sufficient spiritual maturity. However, the historical practice of waiting until children have attained the age of discernment and have committed, by vow, to follow Christ before admitting them to the Lord's table is surely a responsible route to follow.

All this having been said, children are not entirely excluded from the sacrament. Far from it! Sacraments are holy *visible* signs and seals. Children have keen eyes and rather keen minds as well. Guided by godly instruction from their parents, even young children can begin to see what the Lord's supper is all about. They can even begin to draw spiritual strength from it. All of this is good preparation for the day when they are able to also eat the bread and drink the wine after they can responsibly examine themselves.

HOW IS CHRIST PRESENT AT HIS SUPPER

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century there was hardly a more contentious debate than the dispute about precisely how Christ was present at his own supper. Generally speaking, there were four main views, each of which is described briefly below.

The Roman Catholic View

According to Rome, *is* simply means *is*. In other words, when Jesus held up the broken bread and said, "This *is* my body," then he meant it literally. The bread *is*, or equals, his body. Out of this conviction grew the teaching that whenever the priest says, "This is my body," the bread undergoes a special transformation. Even though its external attributes remain the same, so that it still looks and tastes like bread, in fact its inner essence changes and becomes the literal and physical body of Christ. This miraculous change of substance is captured in the term *transubstantiation* (literally, changeover of substance). In a similar way the substance of the wine is transformed into the actual blood of Christ.

Various other customs have developed from this doctrine. Since the bread becomes the body of Christ, communicants in the Roman Catholic Church bow down and adore the host, as it is called. Furthermore, if some of the wafers are left over, they are carefully kept inside a special, often ornate, box called the tabernacle. After all, Christ is physically present, and God rightly dwells in his tabernacle (2 Sam 7:2). In addition to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Eucharist, or mass, is "the very sacrifice of the Body and Blood

of the Lord Jesus which he instituted to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages.”¹ The sacrifice of Golgotha and the Eucharist are “one and the same sacrifice . . . only the manner of offering is different: in a bloody manner on the cross, in an unbloody manner in the Eucharist.”²

The Lutheran View

Martin Luther was never comfortable with the idea that the bread and wine actually changed into the body and blood of Christ. Since it still looks and tastes like bread and wine, the substances must be the same both before and after the minister says, “This is my body.” The Roman Catholic distinction between attributes and substance did not convince Luther. Still, he followed the same approach as Rome in maintaining that *is* means *is*. Since Christ said, “This is my body,” for Luther, in some miraculous way, Christ’s physical body must be present at the Lord’s table. How did he resolve the matter? He taught that Christ’s physical body took upon itself some of the qualities of his divine nature. Thus, for example, his human nature, including his physical body, became omnipresent like his divine nature. This omnipresence is also called the *ubiquity* of Christ’s human nature. This teaching allows Lutherans to teach that the physical body of Christ is present, in a special and concentrated manner, *close to* the bread and wine of the Lord’s supper. To be precise, they teach that Christ’s body is in, with, and under the elements of the supper, but the elements themselves remain unchanged. This view is called *consubstantiation*.

The Zwinglian View

It is not entirely easy to pinpoint Zwingli’s view on the Lord’s supper. Some have accused him of teaching that the sacrament is nothing more than a memorial meal, much the same as if a family would have a special but sombre meal marking the anniversary of a loved one’s death. Such an

1. *Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006) §271.

2. *Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church* §280.

understanding does not do justice to Zwingli's view, which also matured as time went on. For example, the Reformer of Zurich could also speak of the sacrament as a pledge, so highlighting the sealing function of the sacrament. At the same time, concerning the presence of Christ, Zwingli was quite clear: Christ was physically present in heaven, not at the table. In this respect he stood opposed to the views of both Rome and Luther.

The Reformed View

Much like Zwingli, the Reformed, led especially by John Calvin, taught that Christ's human nature was physically present at God's right hand and not at the table of the Lord here on earth. This also means that the Reformed reject both transubstantiation and consubstantiation. However, more so than Zwingli, the Reformed emphasized that Christ was still truly present at his supper, only he was present in his divine nature, especially through the working of the Holy Spirit rather than by some physical presence of his body and blood. In short, the Reformed maintain that Christ is certainly and Spiritually present when the sacrament is administered.

An Evaluation of the Different Views

If we now turn to an evaluation of these four views of the Lord's supper, a number of pertinent points can be mentioned. First, in every language the word *is* has multiple meanings. This is also true of the Greek language in which the New Testament was written and the Aramaic language that Jesus most likely spoke. For example, in John 10:7 Jesus said, "I *am* the gate for the sheep." The word *am* is just another form of the verb *is*, but no one has ever suggested that Jesus was, even for a moment, literally and physically a sheep-gate. Instead, everyone intuitively understands what Jesus means: "I *am comparing myself* to a gate for sheep." The same kind of thing is happening in Luke 22:19 when Jesus says, "This *is* my body." He is saying that the bread in his hand *can be compared* to his body. In other words, it is a sign of his body.

This truth is confirmed only one verse later when Jesus continues, “This cup . . . *is* the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). No one, not even the Roman Catholic Church, suggests that the cup in Christ’s hand, or the wine in the cup, was transformed into a covenant. A covenant is one kind of thing, and it is not a physical object. A cup, or wine in a cup, is a different kind of thing; it is a physical entity. By saying the cup is the new covenant in his blood, Jesus is obviously comparing, not equating, the two.

Secondly, once the word *is* in Luke 22:19–20 is properly understood, it is also clear that the Lutheran view of consubstantiation is unnecessary. More than that, it is incorrect, for it compromises the church’s confession through the ages that the divine and human natures of Christ remain distinct and are not confused or combined in any way (see Athanasian Creed 35–36). Also, the Lutheran view does not always appear to factor in fully the significance of Pentecost. At the Last Supper, Christ comforted his disciples, not by promising that he would be physically present in some way at the Lord’s supper, but rather by sending another Counselor, the Holy Spirit, in his place (John 14:16–17, 16:7). Thus, since Pentecost, Christ is present among us *through his Spirit*. This also applies at the table of the Lord. The blessed reality of Pentecost indicates that the Lutheran view of the Lord’s supper is incorrect and the Zwinglian view is insufficient.

Finally, although Rome tries to distinguish between Christ’s offering on the cross, which was given in a bloody manner, and the Eucharist, which offers exactly the same sacrifice in an unbloody manner, the fact remains that for them the Eucharist is a sacrifice that is offered perpetually, each time the mass is administered. This teaching clearly contradicts the Word of God in Hebrews 7:27, 9:26, and 10:10. In all of these verses the atoning work of Christ, accomplished on the cross, is described as being “once for all.” In other inspired words, where sins are forgiven on the basis of Christ’s work on the cross, “there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb 10:18). Christ’s words on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), remain eternally true. And what is finished need not be continued.

In short, we are left to conclude that Christ is spiritually present at his table, particularly through the working of his Spirit, who was poured out on Pentecost Day. To be sure, there are still things associated with the Lord's supper that go beyond our full understanding. Yet, as the Belgic Confession so aptly says:

Therefore he [Christ] works in us all that he represents to us by these holy signs. We do not understand the manner in which this is done, just as we do not comprehend the hidden activity of the Spirit of God. Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ. However, the manner in which we eat it is not by mouth but in the spirit [or perhaps Spirit, jvv] by faith. In that way Jesus Christ always remains seated at the right hand of God his Father in heaven; yet he does not cease to communicate himself to us by faith (Art. 35).

THE SUPPER OF THE LORD AND THE ASSURANCE OF FAITH

In spite of all the debates, and even divisions, within the church over the Lord's supper, we do well to end by highlighting the simplicity of the sacrament. It is, after all, a meal—a holy, unique meal, to be sure, but still a meal. Meals are not hard to comprehend. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, meals nourish, rejuvenate, and reinforce relationships. With this in mind our eternal Bridegroom also gave his Bride, the church, a special meal, the holy supper. He knows that our faith is weak. He realizes that guilt feelings about our remaining sins can easily cause doubts to infect and fester within our souls. In his love, he gave this sacramental meal to address this most common spiritual affliction. He nourishes and refreshes our hungry and thirsty souls with his crucified body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit, as surely as we partake of the symbols of bread and wine.

Through this means of grace, the Holy Spirit draws Bride and Groom ever closer together. Since he is in heaven, and we are on earth, our covenantal betrothal is a long-distance relationship. Yet, drawing on language from the first marriage described in Genesis 2, the Heidelberg Catechism describes it so beautifully:

Therefore, although Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, yet we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, and we forever live and are governed by one Spirit, as the members of our body are by one soul (LD 28, Q&A 76).

Suggested Readings: Luke 22:14–23; 1 Corinthians 10:14–22

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Since we proclaim the Lord's death at his table (1 Cor 11:26), we naturally focus on the past, specifically on his death on the cross. Yet, the Lord's supper also looks forward to Christ's return and the glorious Wedding Feast (Rev 19:6–9). How can we maintain a proper balance in remembering the past and anticipating the future when we celebrate this sacrament together?
2. Clearly it is important to examine ourselves before participating in the Lord's supper, for in Corinth some members became sick and even died when the congregation failed to do so (1 Cor 11:30). Can that still happen today? If an unusually large number of members in our local church become sick or die, should we re-examine how we prepare for the sacrament? Or would that be an over-reaction?
3. Outline the four different views on the Lord's supper. Which one best represents the teaching of Scripture? Explain how it does so.
4. In Article 35 the Belgic Confession makes a surprisingly strong statement: "Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and true blood of Christ." Doesn't this sound like the Roman Catholic view? How do we explain this? (Hint: reading the entire article of the Belgic Confession will help.)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. The early church celebrated something called the *love feast*, or *agape meal* (Jude 12). In brief, the congregation shared a time of food and fellowship together in this communal meal. The Lord's supper, as a sacrament, was a distinct part within this larger and longer meal. The agape meal seems to have been discontinued because congregations lost sight of the special, sacramental aspect of the Lord's supper, and they turned the meal into a time of

gluttony rather than godliness (see 1 Cor 11:17–34). Is there a way in which our congregations today can recapture certain aspects of the agape meal without running into the same problems as the early church?

2. How often should the Lord's supper be celebrated? In the early church it was often celebrated weekly. In the time of the Reformation, John Calvin tried to reinstitute that practice, albeit unsuccessfully. Is there a point at which celebrating the sacrament reduces its value in our eyes? Or, if we value the gospel preaching every week, should we value the sacrament every Sunday as well? What practical considerations need to be addressed here?
3. Concerning admission to the Lord's supper, both self-examination and consistorial supervision are necessary, as the Heidelberg Catechism indicates in Lord's Day 30, Q&A 81 (self-examination) and 82 (consistorial supervision). When guests, who are not members of the local congregation, wish to participate in the sacrament, different churches handle supervision in different ways: by accepting a letter of testimony (i.e., an attestation), having elders conduct an interview, or making an announcement from the pulpit warning those who are living in sin to abstain. Which methods are acceptable? Which are necessary? Give clear, well-founded reasons for your answer.

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