

CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH THE LORD'S SUPPER

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The Lord's Supper builds personal spirituality, the church community, and Christian character. Through it, God calls us to link our beliefs more closely with our relationships, our practices, and our witness to the world.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND PERSONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Most people think of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a way to an individual spiritual experience of deeper connection to God. They are right. It is one of the few times in most Protestant services when people stop talking for a while and have time to reflect.

The abstract, invisible concepts of Christ's propitiatory, vicarious, and substitutionary death for us are translated into a palpable sign—the bread and the cup—that engages the physical senses of sight and touch, taste and smell. All this makes Jesus' sacrifice more “real” to us, and at that moment most participants find personal interaction with God is profoundly enhanced and facilitated.

We believe that Christ is truly “present” when we eat. This is, of course, a major theological issue. Presbyterians historically have taken a middle road in their belief about the nature of the sacrament.

On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church, and even Martin Luther, believed the bread and the wine literally became the body and blood of Jesus during the observance. They quoted Jesus: “*Hoc est corpus meum*”—“This is my body,” not “This is a *symbol* of my body.”

On the other hand, Ulrich Zwingli (one of the most influential Protestant Reformers) as well as the Anabaptists and the Radical Reformation believed the bread and the wine were symbols, not the actual body and blood of Christ.

John Calvin, the main founder of what became the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, took a mediating position. When Jesus actually said the words “This is my body,” he couldn't have meant them literally, since his human body was right there and had not been broken yet. So he must have been speaking symbolically in some sense. On the other hand, Calvin took seriously the momentous and central place the gospel writers gave to the sacrament. It was a covenant-making meal at which Jesus essentially constituted the church as the new people of God and solemnly told them to do this continually. Other references in the New Testament also suggest this reading. John brings the effect of the meal forward into earthly ministry in John 6:56, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.” It was central in the earliest Christian worship.

Calvin and Presbyterians after him have taught (in a most wonderfully balanced way!) that Jesus is *spiritually present* in the Lord's Supper in a unique way that differs and is heightened over other exercises of prayer or

worship, gathered or private. He is really there spiritually to meet you, but the bread and cup are not literally the body and blood. The Catholic and Orthodox churches taught that you get the life of Christ automatically and apart from hearing and faith (see below), while Calvin stressed that this presence happens through faith in Jesus' word of the gospel.

The Lord's Supper is a matchless resource for personal spiritual growth in our relationship with God. We meet him in the sacrament.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND SPIRITUAL CONVERSION

The Lord's Supper is also what has been called a "converting ordinance."

As attendees at our church know, the minister distributing the elements is usually careful to invite baptized Christians to partake of the bread and the cup. The first Lord's Supper was a covenant-making ceremony, in which Jesus created a new people and entered into covenant with them as their Lord. Ancient covenants were marked by an oath-sign in which the curse of disobeying the covenant was made clear, but Jesus shows us that this time, he takes on the curse for breaking the covenant himself. He will take the cup of God's wrath so we can have the cup of fellowship and blessing. We who are made his people by his grace are now in a committed relationship to him and to each other.

Meals were also signs of intimacy and community. The Passover meal was always celebrated with one's family; yet, Jesus at the first Passover eats it with the disciples! Why? He is turning them into his family (cf. Matt. 12:48). The Lord's Supper, then, is a meal that creates and commemorates a committed community.

Thus, every subsequent Lord's Supper is a *covenant renewal* ceremony. We are to remember what he did for us—how he took the curse of the covenant so we could be in relationship with him by grace. This means then that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament for those who are *already* Christians, who are already in covenant with him.¹

Over the years I have heard from scores of people that "fencing the table" this way forced them to ask themselves, "Well, then, where do I stand? Am I a Christian? Do I really believe the gospel I've been hearing about in a new way here?" The average person who begins coming to our church has some religious background but has been spiritually skeptical or at least "drifting" for years. She or he is drawn by friends into a small group and/or worship, and this begins an exploration of the Christian faith in earnest. This exploration may go on for some time. Then, one Sunday the Lord's Supper is served, the invitation is made, and all the searching is brought to a head in a way that would not happen in a regular church service. That is why we always print a prayer of belief in the bulletin on those Sundays, to help people receive Jesus by faith in a decisive, life-changing way.²

Note: Despite saying, "If this is the day you give your life to Christ, take him, not the bread and cup," I know many people give their lives to Christ and then take the sacrament. As long as they are believers, they are "jumping the gun" but not severely in the wrong. (See Footnote 1 on the vagaries of membership. Our desire that partakers of the Lord's Supper be formally committed to a particular church is a traditional and wise piece of quality control.)

1. In Presbyterian polity, we also ask that people be members of a church if they are going to partake of the Lord's Supper. That is, they are Christians, and there is somewhere a church that has admitted them to membership. That church heard their profession of faith, so they are not self-accredited, and they made a public commitment to a particular church body. Why do Presbyterians ask that partakers be members of a church? The whole idea is that you should be in covenant with some congregation; you should have taken public oaths that commit you to that body. The meal is a covenant-renewal meal. Nevertheless, we don't usually use the word "member" when we distribute the elements in the brief invitation we have on Sundays. We say, "Be a baptized Christian" which implies membership. It is theoretically possible to be baptized as an infant and not be a member in covenant anywhere, but all this would be hard to get across in a sound bite on Sunday. If we said, "You have to be a member," it would get people wondering if they really were still a member of the church back home. On top of that, many churches have differing definitions of membership. Consequently, I personally don't think it is a sin to take the Lord's Supper if you are a Christian but not yet a formal member anywhere. What is a serious error and sin is not being committed to a particular fellowship in every possible way.

2. "Lord Jesus Christ, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before believed, but, through you, I am more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope. I thank you for paying my debt, bearing my punishment and offering forgiveness. I turn from my sin and receive you as Savior. Amen."

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

Practicing the Lord's Supper has ramifications beyond enhancing our individual relationship with Jesus. In fact, it unites facets of our lives that fragmented, modern, Western culture tends to split apart. The Lord's Supper builds community by forcing us to link together our individual and corporate lives.

The first Lord's Supper created a community when Jesus ate Passover with the disciples, turning them into his family. Since every subsequent Lord's Supper is a covenant renewal ceremony, it can't be enacted individualistically. We remember how he took the curse so we could be in relationship with God and others by his grace. We also renew relationships with Christian brothers and sisters, which may be why Jesus says in Matthew 5:23–24 to leave your gift at the altar and reconcile with your brother if “your brother has something against you.” He expects that in worship we are examining our relationships in our hearts.

“One Bread, one body, one Lord of all” goes the popular worship song.³ The service of the Lord's Supper starts with one bread and one cup, and then it is broken and poured out and distributed to all. This represents how the death of Christ makes us one in him. Paul insists, therefore, that during the Lord's Supper you are not only to think about your relationship with God, but with others: “I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. . . . For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:18, 20–21, 29).

Are your relationships strong? Are you a true member of this Christian community, or are you just dropping in for information and inspiration in a (frankly) consumerist manner? The Lord's Supper links your individual relationship to Jesus with your corporate community life with his people.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND BUILDING CHARACTER

The Lord's Supper also builds integrity by forcing us to link together our interior and behavioral lives. The old word “Eucharist” means thanksgiving. The bread is to be broken with “thanks” (1 Cor. 11:24), with awed and joyful gratitude. This of course is the gospel dynamic of the Christian life. We do not anxiously move out into the world, hoping that God will accept us provided we live up to standards. Rather, we know we are already accepted in Christ, and so we obey God out of joyful gratitude for his grace in Jesus Christ.

But does gospel-gratitude really result in a changed life? Has thanksgiving for his grace really changed you at your center, so that you live your daily life differently? Paul also insists that “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup” (1 Cor. 11:27–28). Paul has said not to take the Lord's Supper without thinking of the body—your relationships—but he also says not to take it without thinking about yourself—your practices and life patterns.

It is crucial that you keep this sobering note in balance with the note of gratitude for grace. Obviously, the Lord's Supper is not for perfect people, but for repentant people—but that is just the point. The Lord's Supper forces us to keep our inner experience linked with our outward behavior. It demands that we ask, “Am I truly living a life of gratitude and obeying God, as I would be if I really believed he saved me at the infinite cost of his only Son? Am I loving others sacrificially, as I would be if I really believed I was saved by sacrificial love?”

The Lord's Supper is concrete, making Jesus' loving self-donation visible and palpable to the senses. Now are *you* making Jesus' loving self-donation visible and palpable to others in the way you actually live your life?

In light of how the Lord's Supper links people to one another and links behavior to beliefs, *the very best possible place to celebrate the Lord's Supper is with your small group*, where you have a high percentage of close

3. John B. Foley, “One Bread, One Body,” 1978, New Dawn Music, Inc.

relationships. Since the Lord's Supper is a time to practice unity and examine your relationships, what better place to celebrate it than with your current primary community? Their presence forces you to ask, "Am I okay with these people?" Their presence also makes it easier to be grateful to God for your friends, maintain the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3), and build unity (Eph. 4:13). Moreover, your friends and small group are where much of your accountability resides, so it is harder to take the Supper in their presence if you are living inconsistently.

Many churches only allow ordained clergy to celebrate the sacrament, however, and we have scores of groups and only a handful of ordained pastors. There are very good historical and theological reasons for this understanding, although it is hard to hold that the Bible really teaches this directly. But when we belong to a denomination—and a community!—we are accountable to common beliefs and structures that we can't simply discard. That's one of the things that community is about.

How can this be resolved? You could sit at worship services with your small group or friends (this often happens anyway). When our church holds its Corporate Prayer Renewal meeting twice a year, build it into your schedule to attend as a small group and very consciously take the Lord's Supper elements in love for one another. It is a much more intimate setting than the large Sunday services.

You could also ask the ordained ministers among us occasionally to come to your group and celebrate the sacrament in your group meeting.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND CHANGING THE WORLD

We can go even further yet in our understanding of the Lord's Supper. The Supper is so powerful (Christ is spiritually present) and so comprehensive (linking human to divine, inner life to practice, and individual to community) that it can *mold us into world-changers*.

One of the greatest problems for any age, but in particular this modern era, is that despite orthodox beliefs, the influences of our culture seal off our beliefs from really affecting the way we live. We may believe every word of the Bible formally yet be molded by our culture's consumer mindset, individualism, materialism, and so on. The Lord's Supper, properly understood and practiced—especially at the level of primary community—can affect us in a way that molds us more than the surrounding culture can, and thus makes us act very differently.

A remarkable example of this occurred in the Protestant Reformation. According to the minutes of the first Protestant churches in Geneva, Switzerland, for years large numbers of people tended to talk throughout the service, including the sermon. The reason is that in medieval worship, people usually stood passively for the whole service and watched the priests move about and the musicians chant and sing. The people were not expected to do much of anything. They waited for the bread but didn't even get the cup (that was for the priests). Why?

Thomas Aquinas believed that the sacraments were literally the cause of grace coming into someone's life, regardless of the recipient's state of piety.⁴ The important thing, then, was to have the sacrament "performed" by the priest well. The medieval service was very mystical and beautiful, and it included a great deal of activity, but the people themselves did not participate.

Reformed worship was a huge change. The differences in a Protestant service would have hit you instantly. The service was simpler, more understandable, and less mysterious—as well as far less awe-inspiring and aesthetically sensory (no smells or chants, fewer enormous spaces, etc.). You also would have noticed how frequently the Bible was read and taught.

Most importantly, everyone present was expected to participate at every point. At the very least, people had to listen, since they were being taught. They had to respond, pray, sing, and so on. All was now conducted in their own

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. III. Q. 62, art. 1.

language. No wonder these changes took years to get used to. People were accustomed to having their senses touched but not their minds. They were used to being passive and having things done for them by the experts. They were not accustomed to participating.

Why the change? The gospel. The Reformers believed that God's unmerited grace comes to us as a *word to believe*, not as a deed to be performed. They believed God's unmerited grace comes directly, unmediated, to the individual. They believed individuals must be converted by that word, not simply be incorporated into their family's religion. Every individual had to get their own relationship with God.

The impact of this kind of worship, although slow to work itself out in people's lives, eventually formed them and shaped them in profoundly new ways. Worship became far more democratic, obviously, and as a result democracy began growing in Protestant countries in ways that it did not in others. This is a larger topic than we can cover here, and other forces were certainly at work, but both scholarship and common sense agree that these changes had a huge impact on the culture.

The point is that the *practice* of weekly worship is what formed the people so profoundly. Transformation did not happen to people through reading books. It was not just an intellectual understanding or information transfer. They were shaped by the particular shape of the weekly worship.

If we begin taking worship and the Lord's Supper seriously, we may find ourselves becoming people whose daily life practice is molded by the gospel and not our culture. We will go from being controlled by our cultures to being controlled by the gospel, and thus become culture changers.

SUMMARY

What an amazing spiritual regimen for us, ordained by Jesus himself! Every time you partake of the Lord's Supper, God is calling you to link your heart more deeply into his heart, link your individual life more deeply into his people, and link your life and practice more deeply into your beliefs. In other words, it builds personal spirituality, the church community, and Christian character and integrity.

Our church believes the Lord's Supper is not "just a symbol," but that Jesus promised he is spiritually present at his table in this food. He meets us in a special, real way and helps us uniquely when we seek to make these linkages in the sacrament. It really is, then, "heavenly food" that quite literally builds us up and grows us up. That is why George Herbert could write about it this way:

*Thou hast restored us to this ease
By this thy heav'nly blood,
Which I can go to, when I please,
And leave th' earth to their food.*⁵

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5. George Herbert, "The Holy Communion," *The Temple* (1633). Christian Classics Ethereal Library: <http://www.ccel.org/h/herbert/temple/Communion.html> (March 29, 2010).