

THE LORD'S SUPPER, OR HOLY COMMUNION by Rev. Tom Aicken

Reformed churches recognize only two sacraments. These are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We hold that these are the only sacraments ordained by Christ, the first being a sign and seal of the believer's engrafting into Christ and the second a sign and seal of the believer's continual communion with (and partaking of) the life of Christ

In the same night in which He was betrayed, Jesus instituted the sacrament of His body and blood called the Lord's Supper, and it is to be observed in all the churches unto the end of the world (1 Cor. 11:23-29; Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20).

Questions I shall attempt to answer in this article:

- Why do we celebrate the Lord's Supper?
- Who is eligible to partake of it?
- What is accomplished by means of it?
- What benefits do we receive from it?

But let's begin with a brief Historical Sketch from the Medieval Era to Today:

1. The Roman Catholic view of the Supper, or "Mass" as they call it, is known as transubstantiation. This word speaks of crossing over from one substance to another. Rome teaches that, under the blessing of the priest, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine becomes the blood of Christ. These elements are said to retain all their physical properties, nevertheless the bread is now the true body of Christ and the wine is now the true blood of Christ. This is, of course, contrary to all common sense and reason, yet it is a necessary doctrine because, according to Rome, each and every time the supper is celebrated Christ is again offered up and sacrificed on the cross.
2. Luther's view of the Supper is known as consubstantiation. This word speaks of crossing over from one substance to another, yet retaining something of the original element in the transformation. In other words, with every crumb of bread is a portion of the true body of Christ, and similarly, with every drop of wine is a portion of the true blood of Christ. Consubstantiation represents no real improvement over transubstantiation – in fact, it adds an even greater measure of confusion – but it illustrates what can too easily happen when someone abandons one error only to get caught up in another.
3. Zwingli's view of the Supper is that of commemoration. According to this view, the bread remains bread, the wine remains wine, and these elements serve no other purpose than to remind the person partaking of them of the sacrificial death of Christ, His substitutionary atonement for sinners on Calvary's cross.

This understanding of the Supper does not go far enough, as other reformers were careful to point out, but this interpretation is probably the most popular among evangelicals of our day.

4. The Reformed view of the Supper is that of commemoration plus nourishment, and this is the one that Reformed and Presbyterian churches embrace because they see it to be both biblical and the most spiritually profitable. The bread and wine are said to remain as they are, but, if they are consumed with a faithful remembrance of the finished work of Christ on the cross, with the feeding of the body there is as well a genuine feeding of the spirit. Such faith is thereby constrained to grow from strength to strength, and that person so hungering and thirsting after Christ is transformed to His likeness in ever increasing glory.

The Westminster Confession of Faith gives 5 fundamental reasons for the institution of the Supper:

- (a) “For the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of (Christ) Himself in His death”
- (b) “For the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers” - All the benefits of Christ, His righteousness, His life, His fullness, His presence, are all covenanted anew to us in this sacrament.
- (c) “For their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him” - The Supper is a means of grace whereby we receive Christ by faith and enter more fully into the wonder of His grace. (See the Reformed view above.)
- (d) “For their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him” - Our partaking of the Supper commits us again to the service of our Lord and to a yet more complete renouncing of the works of the devil.
- (e) “For a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body” - This means that at the Table we affirm the essential oneness of the church, not federative but spiritual unity, and our identification in Christ with all other believers.

That Christ was once offered up is New Testament teaching (Heb. 7-10) Any other offerings now would be an abomination, suggesting (as the Roman mass does) that His one only offering was not good enough, that it must be repeated endlessly as were the sacrificial offerings of Old Testament times. That cannot be. Scripture adds figure to figure and strengthens promise by promise to encourage us to believe the glorious truth that Christ is able to save unto the uttermost all who come unto God by Him, and that God is not only able but also willing, through the instrument of faith, to

justify (to declare righteous) the ungodly for Jesus' sake. Our sins, believer, are thereby plunged into the depths of the sea; they are buried; they are blotted out as a thick cloud; they are cancelled as a debt. The Holy Spirit assures us

“Jesus, how glorious is Thy grace,
When in Thy name we trust!
Our faith receives a righteousness
That makes the sinner just.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION:

1. How should the sacrament be received? The answer is by faith in Christ. It is to faith that Christ is revealed, and to faith alone. Compare the Supper and Passover. Faith was not necessary to partake of the Passover meal; it was sinful not to partake of it, but not sinful to partake of it without faith. Compare the Supper and hearing the Word of God proclaimed. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God preached, not by partaking of the Supper; yet faith is strengthened when exercised in the Supper. Compare the Supper and Baptism. Faith is not necessary in a covenant child to be baptized; baptism speaks of the necessity of faith to be saved. Without faith, however, the Lord's Supper becomes a mockery. It should be administered to professing believers only.
2. Is there a place for private communions? No, as the Passover meal was given to individual families, and to be shared by smaller households together, so the Lord's Supper was given to the local church, and is to be celebrated by the body of Christ meeting in fellowship with one another.
3. How often should the sacrament be received? The Lord tells us how the Supper should be received, but not how often. A practical rule of thumb, and it is only that, is to administer it more often in times of increased persecution (as we see in the very early Church), and less frequently in times of relative peace, so that familiarity may not be given opportunity to breed contempt.
4. Why are bread and wine so appropriate? These elements, representing the body and blood of Christ, are also symbols of both suffering and sustenance. The bread must be broken and the grapes must be crushed before their life-giving properties may be shared. So, too, was our Lord “wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.”
5. What do you think of the practice of some believers to refrain from coming to the Table on the grounds of humility? The Lord Himself calls us to the Supper. Real humility leads to obedience, not disobedience. What about those who are unable to attend? Can it be said that they are deprived of any of the blessings of Christ? No, they are not deprived of any spiritual benefits if they are under the ministry of

the Word and in fellowship with other believers; the Supper helps to open up the benefits of preaching, but does not add new benefits of its own.

Just as we do not fully understand how the Lord brings us to faith in Jesus through hearing God's Word preached, so we do not fully understand either how He gives us assurance of faith through the holy Supper. Nevertheless, to those who believe, the Lord Jesus is precious; and to those who partake of the elements, the bread and the wine, exercising true faith and a loving remembrance of Christ on the cross, there is a real and spiritual feeding of such souls on Christ.