

THE LORD'S SUPPER (Week 4): THE FORM OF THE MEAL

1. Bread

1.1 Bread made with yeast is best

- Last Supper

Jesus probably established the Lord's Supper using unleavened bread because he used the materials from the Passover meal. However, the Lord's Supper is distinct from the Passover ritual and fulfills not just the Passover event but also all the other sacrificial meals in the OT as well.

- Unleavened bread in the OT

- Unleavened bread was used primarily for the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed it (Exod 12:33–13:10) and in the tribute offerings (Lev 2). However, unleavened bread = not made from a former lump of bread (like sourdough bread made from a starter dough). If bread is made with fresh yeast, it is technically not unleavened in the OT sense.

- The main reason for unleavened bread in the Passover seems to be that they had to leave Egypt in haste and so there was no time for the bread to be leavened (Exod 12:34, 39). Thus, unleavened bread would remind the people of Israel of the particular circumstances under which they left Egypt. This particular detail has no direct relevance for a new covenant context because we are not re-enacting that OT circumstance of the exodus in the Lord's Supper.

- Leavened bread in the OT

Leavened bread was regularly eaten used in the sacrificial system in the OT (e.g., in peace offerings [Lev 7:13] and in the feast of Pentecost [Lev 23:17]). Once Israel arrived in the promised land, they started over again with the yeast of God's new world. They would no longer get their "life" from Egypt, but now from the Lord's Spirit. They ate unleavened bread in the wilderness until they could get to the new land, harvest grapes, make wine, and also new yeast.

- Leaven as a symbol

- Leaven is sometimes a negative symbol (Matt 16:6–12 and parallels; 1 Cor 5:6–8). The connotation is that "leaven" = the old lump of bread (representing the evil, old life one leaves behind) and we must reject that to be a "new lump" (1 Cor 5:7). Fresh yeast used to make bread in the modern world has no connotation of oldness or evil, so Paul's analogy depends upon the old world techniques of making new bread from old lumps of dough.

- On the other hand, leaven is also a positive symbol of something small that has a large impact on the whole (e.g., the kingdom of God in Matt 13:33; Luke 13:21). So even if "leaven" simply meant yeast of any kind, then using eating leavened bread in the Supper would mean that Jesus is offering us the new life of the kingdom of God that will continue to grow and bear fruit in our own lives and in the whole church and the whole world until the whole creation is leavened with the life and glory of the resurrected Christ and the power of the Spirit. Thus, eating freshly yeasted bread in the Lord's Supper (which is technically unleavened) would not be a symbol of evil but rather of the growing kingdom of God.

- The bread of the new covenant and new creation ought to taste good.

In the Supper, the people of God should eat good-tasting bread to emphasize that eating with God should be something aesthetically pleasing and tasty. If we invite people to taste and see that the Lord is good, and their response to the bread is "Yuck," the sign contradicts to a certain extent the thing signified. Above all, people should come away saying that eating bread with God is good and something to look forward to, and the bread ought to taste good in order for that to happen with maximal effectiveness.

1.2 Daily bread is best

The bread ought to be the daily bread that we eat. Jesus teaches us to ask for daily bread in the Lord's Prayer, and the Lord's Supper is the primary occasion in which he not only gives us daily bread but also tangibly discloses by that ritual context that all daily bread comes from God. Furthermore, since the bread is a symbol of Jesus' body, it is most fitting for it to be ordinary bread because Jesus is assumed an ordinary human nature just like ours (apart from sin) in order to identify with us and be one with us as our Redeemer and Covenant Lord.

1.3 Breaking off pieces from a common loaf is best

The Lord's Supper constitutes the unity of the church with Christ and with one another. Paul infers this fact from our common partaking of "one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). If the Lord's Supper is celebrated only with pre-cut cubes of bread or individual wafers/crackers, this meaning of the Supper is not embodied at all in the practice of the Supper. Instead, breaking a common loaf and passing it to one another communicates the unity of the Supper best. If the congregation is sufficiently large that the one loaf on the communion table must be "multiplied" into many loaves, passing loaves and breaking off individual pieces still embodies the unity of the one loaf better than passing trays of pre-cut pieces or wafers/crackers.

2. Wine

- Jesus established the Lord's Supper with wine
 - The "cup": The Lord's Supper was established in the context of a Passover meal, and Jews drank cups of wine for the Passover celebration.
 - The "fruit of the vine" most likely refers to wine since the fruit of vineyards is wine (e.g., Gen 9:20–21; 49:11; Jdg 9:13; Isa 5:1–2; 24:7; Deut 7:13; Amos 9:14), although it could refer as well to any product of the vine. This specific phrase "fruit of the vine" may be used instead of "wine" in order to link Jesus to the Nazirite vow (Num 6:1–21), which forbade the consumption of grapes in any form. This link highlights Jesus' special act of setting himself apart to the Lord in his death, which explains why he did not drink wine against with his disciples until his suffering on the cross was finished (cf. Matt 26:29/Mark 14:25/Luke 22:18 with Matt 27:48/Mark 15:36/Luke 23:36 and Jesus' post-resurrection meals).
- Wine is a good gift of God
 - God created wine and blesses it as a good gift for man (Ps 4:7; 104:14–15; Jdg 9:13; Eccl 9:7) and offers it as a reward for his people's obedience (Deut 7:13; 11:14; Prov 3:10).
 - Jesus himself drank wine (Luke 7:33–35; cf. John 2:1–11: gallons of the best!)
 - Hebrew has a separate phrase for grape juice (Num 6:3). Wine is alcoholic.
- Wine was offered in worship: God commanded his people to offer wine at the altar (Exod 29:38, 40; Lev 23:13; Num 15:5, 7, 10; 28:7) and to drink it at festivals (Deut 14:22–26). [Note the social purpose of drinking in the Bible: to foster joyful fellowship].
- Royalty
 - Wine is often associated with royalty. It is the drink of kings (Gen 14:18; 40; 2 Sam 16:1–2; Neh 1:11; Esth 7:1, 2, 7, 8).
 - This royal connection is related directly to worship because the tabernacle/temple is God's palace and throne room from which he rules his kingdom. As God's royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9) and royal heirs of God's kingdom (Rom 8:17) destined to reign with Christ over the new creation (Rev 22:4), we drink wine of the Lord's Supper to gratefully celebrate our royal status in Christ's kingdom.
- Abundant wine is part of the images future blessings of the new covenant of which the Lord's Supper is a sacramental foretaste (Isa 25:6; 27:2; 55:1; Jer 31:12; Hos 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24; 3:18; Amos 9:13–15; Zech 9:15, 17; 10:7; Matt 9:17; 21:33–46; 22:2; 26:29; John 2:1–11; Rev 19:19).
- Blood: The Bible refers to wine (not grape juice) as the "blood of grape(s)" (Gen 49:11, Deut 32:14) and thus wine is a more fitting symbol of Christ's blood.
- Churches universally used wine until the late nineteenth century, and they switched to grape juice for poor reasons that have no biblical foundation. Welch's Grape Juice company was started by a Methodist temperance activist who wanted to produce a non-alcoholic "wine" for communion. His motive was a complete moral opposition to drinking alcohol that is contrary to biblical teaching.

3. Two Rites: From bread to wine

- Jesus established two rites:
 1. Bread rite: Take bread, give thanks, distribute and eat
 2. Wine rite: Take wine, give thanks, distribute and drink
- Bread and wine have distinct symbolic associations.

- Bread is food eaten at the beginning of the day to nourish one for work. In Israel's history, bread was the food from heaven that sustained their life in the wilderness. In worship, priests ate bread in God's presence.
- Wine is drink for the end of the day to celebrate and relax at the conclusion of one's labors (Gen 9:21; cf. Nazirites: Num 6).¹ In Israel's history, wine was the drink of the Promised Land that comes after the wilderness. Priests could not drink wine in the tabernacle and temple; instead, wine is especially associated with kings.
- The bread and wine rites of the Lord's Supper ought to be kept distinct in the order that Jesus practiced and commanded.
 - Completed sacrifice: The Lord's Supper is a liturgical presentation or memorial (remembrance) of Jesus' sacrifice before God the Father. The separation of bread and wine symbolizes what happened in OT sacrificial rites when the blood was separated from the bodies of the animals and displayed before God in various ways. Separation of body and blood = sacrificial symbol of Jesus' death using the imagery of the OT rites that the NT uses to explain Jesus' death.
 - The progress of redemptive history: OT priests were forbidden to drink wine in the Tabernacle and Temple (Lev 10:9) and the rest of the people poured out their wine at the altar (Exod 29:40; Num 15:1–10). But now we can drink wine before God at his table because the new covenant has come and it is better than the old. United to Christ who is the final high priest, temple, and king, the Church is now the temple of God and a royal priesthood drinking wine in the temple before God as a sign that the kingdom of God has come with the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, the temporal sequence or progression in the Lord's Supper from bread to wine is a ritualized replay of the progress of redemptive history from old covenant/creation to new covenant/creation. The fact that we drink wine before God in the temple is a sign that the new covenant and kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus our King and Priest.

4. Posture: Sitting and serving one another at the Lord's table

- Jesus' example and command

At the Last Supper, the disciples did not stand up and receive the bread and wine directly from Jesus individually. Jesus had them sit down, which he *always* does in the gospels whenever he takes food, gives thanks, and serves people (Matt 14:19; 15:35; **26:20**; Mark 6:39; 8:6; **14:18**; Luke 9:14–15; **22:14**; John 6:10). He then passed the bread to them which they in turn passed to one another. Then he did the same thing with the wine. He then commanded the disciples to follow his actions: "Do this." Since the biblical texts establishing the Lord's Supper describe a specific and consistent set of ritual actions in four separate biblical texts, it seems likely that there is theological significance to the particular form and sequence of the actions described there. If standing and going forward to receive in single-file lines would have embodied the theology of the Supper better than what Jesus actually did, then wouldn't Jesus have done it that way instead?
- Meal posture

We sit because communion is a meal, and thus the ritual form of the Supper ought to embody this reality as much as possible. The disciples sat because that was how they ate a meal, and in our cultural context that's how we eat meals together with other people as well. Performing the Supper in a way that looks less like a meal (e.g., standing in single-file lines to be served directly by the pastor) creates an unnecessary disconnect between the meal's meaning and its form. Why adopt a ritual form that looks less like a meal when we can easily do it in ways that look more like a meal? Striving for maximum coherence between meaning and ritual form is important because form impacts the way people interpret what is happening.
- Sitting = peaceful relaxation among friends

¹ In Genesis 9:21, the word *shakar*, which is usually translated "became drunk" (a misuse of alcohol), is only used elsewhere in Genesis in Genesis 43:34 where it is properly translated "made merry" (the correct, positive use of alcohol). Since nothing in Genesis 9 suggests that Noah sinned simply by drinking wine from his vineyard and relaxing in his tent at the end of his work, there is no contextual reason why the word should be read with a negative moral connotation (drunkenness) as opposed to a positive one, i.e., he experienced the positive, relaxing, God-designed function and effects of alcohol that Joseph and his brothers did when they celebrated a meal together.

- As the new covenant form of the peace offering, the Lord's Supper celebrates peace and friendship with God as the culmination of the service, and sitting at a meal is *a posture well suited for relaxation and peace*. The Bible prescribes standing for other liturgical actions (e.g., standing/walking/dancing in procession, kneeling for confession, standing for prayer, etc.) that embody some other mode of relating to God that is appropriate to those particular liturgical functions. But in communion, the liturgy culminates in a joyful, thanksgiving celebration of peace with God and a reception of his life given to us. For that kind of event, Jesus always commands people to sit when he serves them food in the gospels.
- Furthermore, sitting together at a table to share a common meal is a gesture that signifies the kind of *acceptance and familiarity found between friends and family*. Thus, by reclining at table with his disciples, Jesus established the Lord's Supper in a setting and manner that implied his close friendship with them. One of the most radical effects of the gospel is that the all-holy, almighty Creator adopts us into his own family and friendship and thus invites us to adopt a posture of familiarity and intimacy with him. While one would expect mere servants always to kneel or stand in the presence of a king, God has given us Lord's Supper to signify that we are more than mere servants; rather, we are highly honored servants, children, and friends of God because of what Jesus has done (cf. Luke 12:37; 17:7). Sitting at table with God in a relaxed posture of familiar friendship thus embodies in action the radical position and identity as children and heirs of God that Christians receive because of their union with Christ.
- **Sitting permits and promotes serving one another**
Communion while seated permits church members to serve one another. Again, this happens whenever Jesus serves people food. The food moves from him to the disciples who in turn pass it to other disciples. Jesus washed all of the disciples' feet himself, but he didn't have the disciples stand in a line while he served them communion by himself; rather, he passed the bread and wine to them to serve one another. This form makes it a much more corporate/communal act fitting for a shared meal. Sitting and serving one another also embodies one of the major theological meanings of the Supper, namely, its horizontal purpose of expressing fostering the unity of the whole church (1 Cor 10:16). To have everyone served directly by the pastors and/or elders reduces the handling of the elements to a transaction between individuals and a single pastor and/or elder, and it removes an aspect of the ritual form of the Supper that embodies that mutual service to one another in the passing of the bread and wine to others.
- **Sitting and passing the bread and wine best embodies the mode of Christ's presence.**
Jesus is not localized and thus "more present" in the bread and wine on the table than anywhere else. Rather, Jesus is present in the whole church (which is the temple of Jesus' Spirit) and in the *action* of receiving communion by the whole church. When bread and wine are passed from the minister and spread throughout the whole congregation, the very form of the action embodies this biblical teaching about the manner of Jesus' presence by the Spirit in the church. The tangible signs of Jesus' presence are not localized in one "holy" place in the front but rather distributed throughout the whole as a sign that the holy place of Jesus' special presence is the whole church.

5. Tone: A joyful community feast

- **Singing**
 - This makes sense within the sacrificial system, in that song accompanied not only the ascension offering but the peace offering (i.e., the sacrificial meal) as well: see 2 Chronicles 29. Singing during the distribution of communion also has ample precedent in later Christian tradition.
 - Eating with God in the Bible is never, ever, ever, ever private, individual introspection, repentance, mourning, and private prayer. Meals with God are always joyful corporate/social celebrations of peace and friendship with God. In the Supper, we celebrate the victory of Christ over sin, Satan, and death, and the coming and future hope of the new covenant and kingdom of God. That is worth singing about in a triumphant, loud, confident, festive manner, and corporate songs of that type make the event both joyful and genuinely corporate act.
- **There are other ways to practice the Supper in a festive and corporate manner.**
People can be instructed to say words of peace and blessing to one another as they pass the bread and wine.