

Means of Grace: Lord's Supper

Let us discuss the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. I am going to touch lightly on the terminology. It is called the "Lord's Supper" and the "Lord's Table" in the Corinthian passages. The meaning comes out perhaps in the contrast where Paul says to the Corinthians who are abusing the Lord's Table, "eat in your own houses. You are not having the Lord's Supper; it is your own supper." It seems to speak of the institution of the origin of the Supper as coming from the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus as belonging to Him. The word *communion*, or fellowship or participation, is used in 1 Corinthians 10:16, as we have seen in the past. It is where that good word comes from for the Lord's Supper. We could call it Eucharist. I know we might have a tendency not to do that because of Roman Catholic abuse, but it is a perfectly good name. It means "thanksgiving." And it is a time for the giving of thanks. It rehearses the fact that Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread and when He had given thanks, and so forth. So there is nothing wrong with the name itself. The breaking of the bread is the reference to it in Acts 11, and later on in the book of Acts, perhaps chapter 20, which speaks of the actual physical institution by Jesus in breaking the loaf.

In terms of institution, the Lord Jesus Himself instituted the Lord's Supper. And we have four passages; notice none in the Gospel of John. John does not mention the institution of the Lord's Supper. We have the first three Gospels, the synoptic Gospels, and 1 Corinthians 11. And they match up like this: all three of the Gospels' accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper are given two chapters from the end of that Gospel. So, in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, we have the words "This is my body and this is my blood of the covenant," or something close to that. In the Luke 22 account and 1 Corinthians 11, we have "This is my body." We have, in addition, "Do this in remembrance of me." We will talk about that concept in a little bit. In general, I have found it has more meaning than most people realize. It is more than just a mental activity. And also, "This is the new covenant in my blood." Paul in 1 Corinthians and Luke in chapter 22 of his Gospel both mention that. So, the main thing is to see that Jesus Himself instituted the Lord's Supper. That is indispensable for there being a sacrament. It must be instituted by God and the new covenant by God the Son.

Let us move on to the background of Passover. Many of you have gone to a Jewish Christian Passover celebration probably at some time in your Christian experience. Probably, unless the people were very careful, they did a more modern Passover service than that of the first century. It was a very bare bones affair. And from I. Howard Marshall's book, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, and Joachim Jeremias' *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, I have gleaned the 13, or perhaps 14, steps to that more primitive Jewish Passover, and there are certain places where the Gospels make contact with this first century Jewish Passover service. Obviously the Gospels were not given to us that we might be able to recover every aspect that was not important. So the first six steps are not even listed in the Gospel. But they are in ancient Jewish Passover services. The meal began with thanksgiving with a cadoush for the feast day itself, and specifically, for the first cup of wine. A number of cups were given. This explains Luke's order, by the way. The other Gospels, Matthew and Mark, have bread and cup. The reader of Luke for the first time could be perplexed because he has cup, bread, then cup. Well, he has two of the four cups at the first century Passover meal. The first cup was then drunk. This cup is not mentioned anywhere in our literature. A preliminary course was served, probably something like appetizers, greens, and herbs with a special haraseth sauce (a sweet and sour sauce). The main course was then served, and the Hallel were sung. We know these are psalms of praise to God from the Psalter. At least it involved Psalm 113. We are not sure whether it also involved Psalm 114.

Later on in the meal, at the end, at least Psalms 115- 118 were sung, and maybe 114-118. So I am listing places where there is some uncertainty, but it is not that big of a deal. They are singing from this part of the Psalter, at least the first, Psalm 113. The Hagadah was then recited by the president of the feast, usually the father of the family. That is the Passover story from Exodus Chapter 12. The second cup was drunk, and this began the actual partaking of the main course. Luke 22:17 records this second cup. And this is why Luke has a cup before the bread, as well as one after the bread. Luke alone mentions the second cup. Thanksgiving is given for the bread. By the way, presumably Jesus followed this traditional service and He only altered it in two places. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, from the time they were little boys, would remember many Passover services. And the details were pretty much the same as Jesus did on this particular night. Jesus took the place of the father of the family, of the president of the feast, and nothing new has been done yet. It is all the same. Their “father” said the same words, and the same foods were served, basically, and so forth. But here is a difference at the time of the thanksgiving for the bread. The breaking of the bread was the same and its distribution was the same. Then we have these shocking words: “This is my body.” They never heard their father say that. It is a shock to them. Think about what that meant to them at the time, and what it means in perfect hindsight. The main course was then eaten, roasted lamb or kid, herbs and fruit puree. The third cup was drunk, the so-called cup of blessing. This is the communion cup. Not the first or second cup, or the fourth. We have a reference to that in 1 Corinthians 10:16 where Paul says, “The cup of blessing that we drink, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?” The very name is given there. This, too, was done by their fathers, year after year at the Passover ceremony in their homes. But here is an astonishing difference. The only other difference is when Jesus says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Wow. Daddy never said that at the Passover feast. What is the meaning of that? Thanksgiving was then given for the third cup and for the meal as a whole. This too is recorded in the Scriptures. Later on, we know that Jewish families had dessert at this point, at this twelfth place. Apparently in the first century it was omitted.

Thirteenth, the Hallel is sung, the rest of the Hallel. Hallel was Psalms 113-118. So either 114, if it was not sung earlier, or at least 115-118 would now be sung. We have that recorded in the Gospels. They sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. That is what we are talking about here. It is debatable whether there was a fourth cup in the first century. Already by the second century (I am guessing here), we learn of a fourth cup. But we are not sure whether there was a fourth cup.

What is the newness? It is Jesus’ words: “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood of the new covenant.” Or in Matthew’s rendition, “...which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” What is the meaning? I do not think they could take it in. I think they were shocked. They did not understand any of this that was going on, including Jesus’ predictions of His death and resurrection. And I do not think they could take it in. But the meaning is surely union with Christ: “This is my body,” He says. And then He tells them to ingest it. “This is my blood, partake of it.” Is this not picturing their union with Him, their sharing in the benefits of His death and resurrection to come? Again, they could not have figured it out ahead of time, I do not think. But later on, after His resurrection, no doubt this was one of the things He explained to them in the 50 days before His ascension to the Father.

Do you see how some of the more recent Passover meals have gotten glamorized? It is quite curious to me that, as Jewish history developed, they have the three wafers and the middle one is taken out and broken. That is incredible to me. I would guess that God’s providence led, in Jewish history, to have a picture of the Gospel and the crucifixion of the second person of the Trinity. I do not know how to explain it otherwise. But that does not go back this early at all. It seems to be a development in medieval Judaism. The rabbis were not trying to make the Gospel come through, I am sure of that. Perhaps God was.

The significance of the Lord's Supper pertains to the past, the present, and the future, and may your own celebration of the Lord's Supper be richer as a result of our studies in this lesson. The background is the Old Testament Passover. After all, the Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the last Passover meal He had with His disciples. The Old Testament Passover was a memorial, a commemoration, of the great redemptive act of God. Those verses used the very word to commemorate God's passing over of the Israelite homes and not striking their firstborn of human beings and animals.

The Lord's Supper, second, was instituted at the Passover. "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you" and so forth, Jesus said. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 it says, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." Here Paul indicates that the Passover lamb is a type of Christ, is a prefiguration of Christ. Remember the Old Testament predicted the coming one, the Messiah, in words, as in prophecies, but also in institutions, persons, and events, which themselves were predictive of Christ. Here the Passover lamb, or kid, is an acted prophecy, if you will, of the Lamb of God who would come and shed His blood and take away the sins of the world.

Now we eat and drink in remembrance of Christ. Does this not simply mean we rehearse the history lesson in our minds? No. It means that, but it means more than that. Because in the Scriptures, the whole notion of remembrance is more significant than merely using our minds to remember events. So for example, God is said to remember in Exodus 2. Exodus 2:23 says, "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them." This does not mean that God had forgotten. The meaning is He had compassion for them, and He began to act on their behalf in response to their pleas to Him. In the same way, Psalm 103:2 does not use the word "remember," but it uses the negative "do not forget" the benefits of the Lord. Psalm 103 says, "Praise the Lord oh my soul. All my inmost being praise his holy name. Praise the Lord oh my soul and forget not all his benefits." It is the equivalent to saying, "remember His benefits." Now what is going on in Psalm 103? Does He merely want some cerebral activity going on? He wants that, but it is not merely a mental recollection that He wants. He wants the Israelites to involve their whole persons in thinking about the mighty acts of God, in this context, His loving kindness and forgiveness of their sins. But He wants an involvement of their whole being. In the same way, when Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me," He did mean for us to rehearse the facts of the cross and His passion. But He also meant for us to respond with our whole beings—to love Him with our minds and hearts and to dedicate our lives to Him. Meditate on that biblical concept of remembrance, and it will increase our own worship of the Lord at the Lord's Supper.

Let us discuss one more truth under this notion of the past. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:26 communicate the significance of the Lord's Supper with relation to the past: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Lord's Supper is thus a proclamation of the death of Christ. It is a proclamation of the Gospel, of the atonement of the death of Christ. It is preaching the significance of this past event. Can we limit the supper to having significance, vis-à-vis the past? No, it also has significance in the present and the future as well. The Supper, in fact, in the present is a communion—a participation and a sharing in the benefits of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 it says, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?" He shed His blood in the past, but the Supper now, in the present, enables us to partake of Him. "And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" Again, His body was broken in the past, but our ceremony, in the present, communicates the benefits of

His past sacrifice to us. “Because there is one loaf, if we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” This is more than just a mental exercise. I will say it again. It is having fellowship with a living person. It is communing with Him. It is feeding on Him, if you will. He is the risen Christ, the true Minister of the Supper. Do not get nervous here. I am not being overly sacramental. Could you not call the Lord Jesus the true minister in the preaching of the Gospel in exactly the same way here the visible Word has the Lord Jesus as the minister, the ultimate minister, whose representative is the human minister? It is appropriating, by faith, the blessing signified by the bread and wine. When I say Zwinglianism is incomplete, I do not mean to put down our human response. Rather I mean to establish it. Only when we see God as the primary actor, in fact Christ as the primary actor, and ourselves then as responding to His overtures, responding to His grace, can we really see the true significance of our response.

The words, “this is my body,” have been interpreted in four ways, as we see from reading Berkhof. In Roman Catholic theology, an invisible miracle was said to take place. A *trans*, a *change* of the substance, a transubstantiation. Outwardly, the elements remain the same; inwardly, an invisible miracle occurs. According to Lutheran theology, because of the transference of Jesus’ divine qualities to His human nature in the resurrection of the dead, His body could be said to be everywhere present, including present in the Supper. By virtue of the communication of attributes, Lutheran theology believes in the omnipresence, the ubiquity, of the physical body of Christ. And thus, there is a bodily presence in, with, and under the bread. Reformed Christians hold that the spiritual presence of Christ is what is signified by the words “this is my body.” Reformed Christians hold to the spiritual presence of the glorified Christ whose body is not everywhere present, but is at the right hand of God the Father. The spiritual presence of the glorified Christ is mediated to the believing participants by the Holy Spirit. Zwinglians, of course, teach that there is a mere representation of Christ’s death.

The Supper pertains to the past, present, and also the future. Jesus gave hints of this in the Gospels when He said, “I will not partake of this fruit of the vine with you again until I do so in my Father’s kingdom.” Then there is our favorite verse on these matters, 1 Corinthians 11:26, which says, “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.” The word “again” is not there, but the thought is there. Thus the Supper points to the future and to the consummation of the Supper, if you will, even as the last Jewish Passover that Jesus celebrated was the first Lord’s Supper. You might say the last Lord’s Supper will be that which is referred to in Revelation 19:9, that eschatological feast of which the prophets spoke, the wedding supper of the Lamb. At that time, our communion, if you will, will be complete, because we will no longer worship the invisible Lord Jesus Christ, invisible to us. But we will be in His very presence.

As we think on the significance of the Supper with reference to the past, the present, and the future, I hope that your own worship will increase and that you will love the Lord better the next time you put the Lord’s Supper. I have found that the whole notion of the Word and ordinance going together is so important. And I think we have failed in our American evangelical churches, by and large, by regarding the Lord’s Supper as something that is tacked on, that is not an integral part of the service, and that has very little meaning because of that. Why not sometimes preach on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper? Why not give some time, why not build a whole service around it? Why not give real meaning and explain all these types of things that we have been speaking of together?

Moving on to the observance of the Supper, let us think of it in terms of frequency, liturgy, ministers, and communicants. We are not given a command in the New Testament as to how often we should observe the Supper. The “as often as” from 1 Corinthians 11:25-26 points to a recurrent and unceasing

observance. Not unceasing in the sense that we never get up from the Lord's Table, but unceasing in the fact that we never stop having it again until Jesus comes back. So it is recurrent and unceasing. The practice historically reflects the theology. So in the Middle Ages, the Lord's Supper was regarded as a fearsome thing, an awesome miracle that takes place, and you better not mishandle it or you are going to be struck in judgment by God. There had to be laws made, civil laws, that obligated the parishioners to take it once a year, because they did not want to take it. They were afraid. In a Zwinglian scheme where it is downplayed in significance, it is sometimes celebrated in quarterly fashion, four times a year. John Calvin never got what he wanted here, but he was in favor of a weekly Lord's Supper service, because he understood it as invigorating our union with Christ.

In terms of elements and actions, we have fruit of the vine, often times grape juice instead of wine (for understandable purposes in our culture) and bread; these are common elements. Eating and drinking is the action. There is Old Testament background here in the covenantal meals of Exodus 24:11, for example, and Deuteronomy 27:7. In recent years I have studied the doctrine of hell, as many of you know. I am delighted to tell you I have started to study the doctrine of heaven. And in my eternal destinies seminar, we studied a few passages in the Old and New Testament that speak of it. I was just amazed to find nestled back here, in the midst of the law in Exodus 24, a wonderful heaven passage. Exodus 24:9 says, "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel." They saw the God of Israel. What a statement. "Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself." I think I am reading the book of Revelation. Is it not incredible? "But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites. They saw God and they ate and drank." Here is a communal meal. It speaks of fellowship with God. It is some Old Testament background for the eating and drinking of communion, where, according to 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, our second favorite verse on this topic, we participate in the body and blood of Christ in the meal, and also the loaf of bread image speaks of us as being one. That is, the Supper speaks of the union with Christ, and also it speaks of union of believer with believer, because we are joined to each other when we are joined to Christ. So there is communion that is vertical and horizontal in nature.

The liturgy is derived from Christ's own example, the actual worship service itself, and repeated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the words of institution should be given. I agree. Without the Word there is no sacrament, remember. The words of institution should be read. The consecration of the elements should be done with prayer and then the taking up of the elements, and the distribution of both kinds—both the bread and the wine—to the people. So there should be four parts, according to the *Westminster Confession*: words of institution; consecration of the elements, setting them apart from their common use with prayer; the taking of the elements; and then the distribution of the same.

Sacraments are means of grace. Your notion of ministers along with some of these other things will depend on your theology of the Lord's Supper. But sacraments, in my understanding, are means of grace subordinate to the Word. So it is fitting for ministers of the Word to celebrate the sacraments. Administration, at least in Presbyterian polity, is restricted to ministers of the Word. The reason is good order and not sacerdotal power. Communicants are cautioned against partaking unworthily. This is one of the two ceremonies of the new covenant. And covenants have blessings. Remember 1 Corinthians 10, "the cup of blessing that we partake." Covenants also carry curses. In 1 Corinthians 11, people were sick and even sleeping, a euphemism for death, because of their abuses at the Lord's Table. There is a caution against partaking unworthily (1 Corinthians 11:27 and following). In 1 Corinthians 11:29 there is a caution against not discerning the body. In 1 Corinthians 11:28 there is an urging of self-

examination. Salvation is, of course, a prerequisite for participating in the Lord's Supper.

Remembering my previous outrageous comment about the soda and potato chips in the church basement and so forth, one might ask if we are obligated to use wine. And is it wrong to use grape juice? We know for a fact that the wine that they customarily drank was greatly diluted. So our grape juice is not far from it. I would say we are not obligated, as long as we do have genuine fruit of the vine. I do not have answers to the missionary question as to what you do in certain cultures where they do not have anything like this. I guess you get as close a parallel as you can get. But because of the problem of alcoholism in our country, and people being set off by one drink, I would regard churches as obligated to at least have a couple little cups that somebody could take and not have to take alcohol. I would say that I understand that we are not bound to duplicate the type of bread they had, or the exact specification of alcohol content, and so forth. I think that is maybe beside the point.

Is there a scriptural command about whether you use crackers or one loaf and so forth? I would say there is no command. I would say we ought to think through the symbolism, though, and if possible, use a common loaf. Now if churches get too big you cannot do it. But that is a beautiful symbol, according to 1 Corinthians 10, of the fact that we all belong to Christ. So it is desirable, but not commanded.