

## **The Lord's Supper**

### **By David Feddes**

What a wonderful gift our Lord Jesus Christ gave the night before he died, when he gave the wine and the bread as a memorial of himself and as a way of participating in himself. Unfortunately, sometimes there have been sharp disagreements over the Lord's Supper and difficulties about it. I want to go through the teaching on the Supper today in order to understand what our Lord and his apostles have taught us about the Supper, how we can best benefit from it, and how we should understand it. As we do this, I want to explore three main questions.

#### **A. What happens in the Supper?**

#### **B. What must not happen?**

#### **C. Who should eat and drink?**

Let us begin, though, not with my talk or the outline of it, but with one of the key passages in the Bible about the Lord's Supper, found in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. That is the longest sustained treatment of the Lord's Supper in the Bible. The apostle Paul writes,

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons (1 Corinthians 10:16–21).

This theme of participation, communion in, taking part in, is key in this particular statement of the apostle Paul. He says that when you take part in the Lord's Supper, you cannot also be feasting in the temples of demons. There were some people who were Christians at the time, very new believers, who thought they could still go to the pagan feasts as well as to the Lord's Supper. The apostle Paul said, "No way." There are a couple of different ways of thinking about the gods. One way is to think of them as nothings and zeros, so if you are in their temple and eating their food, it is no big deal because there are no gods anyway and no special food for them. But the apostle Paul says it is not merely the worship of a nothing; it often involves evil spirits, fallen angels, demons. Paul says, "I do not want you to be participating with demons." There is a very clear boundary here. Paul says you have got to choose one or the other. You cannot do both. You cannot still act like a pagan, go through the pagan rituals, and then take this precious Supper of our Lord.

Another thing that Paul talks about is the selfish divisions that could occur among people, where some of the wealthier people, who had more to eat and who were greedy, were exploiting those who were weaker. He writes,

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:20-32)

The Lord's Supper is to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are going to do that, you had better check on yourself and on whether you are coming with faith, with a right attitude toward Christ, and with a determination to leave behind your sins. Unworthy participation in the body of Christ brings judgment. People in Corinth were eating the Lord's Supper, and it was killing them because they were doing so in a wicked and unworthy manner.

Those are excerpts from 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, the longest sustained treatment of the Lord's Supper in the Holy Scriptures. Now let us think about what this and other parts of the Bible say about the Supper and understand it more clearly. What happens in the supper? What must not happen? Who should eat and drink?

### **A. What happens in the Supper?**

**Communion** (*koinonia*: sharing, participation, fellowship, togetherness)

- Communion with the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus Christ.
- Communion with the living Christ.
- Communion with fellow members in Christ's earthly body, the church.

What happens in the Supper? If we have to summarize it in one word, we could use another word that people often use for the Lord's Supper, and that word is communion. The Greek word for that is *koinonia*, which can be translated communion, sharing, participating in, or taking part in. It is also translated fellowship or togetherness. What happens in the supper is communion.

It is communion, first of all, with the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. Scripture says that drinking the cup is communion in the blood of Christ, and that eating the bread is communion in the body of Christ. You are taking part somehow. We will get into that more later,

but you are taking part in the real crucified body and shed blood of Jesus Christ in communion. It is a partaking.

It is also communion, a relationship, a fellowship with the living Christ. You are not only benefiting from the death of his body and the pouring out of his blood, but you are also being brought into a relationship and communion and enjoying a time of connection with the living Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. You are lifting up your heart unto the Lord.

You are also experiencing communion with others who are part of the body of Jesus Christ, his earthly body, the church. That is a vital part of communion. That is why it was so serious for some members of the church to be getting drunk or mistreating others at the Lord's Supper, because they were not discerning the body of Christ in the church. It is a very serious thing not to discern the body of Christ that he sacrificed for us, but it is also very serious not to discern the body of Christ in the people whom he has given to one another. What happens in the supper is communion with those people, and in communing with them, communion with the head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are different views of the presence of Jesus Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper or in the event of the Lord's Supper, and I want to highlight a few of those. One is a view called **transubstantiation**. That is the view that a priest represents Christ's sacrifice and that, in a sense, the sacrifice of Jesus is being enacted all over again, and the bread and the wine become the actual body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This view was given voice by Thomas Aquinas, the great thinker of the Middle Ages, and it is the view officially held by the Roman Catholic Church today.

Another view is **consubstantiation**, a label for a view that many Lutherans hold, that Jesus is physically present in, with, and under the bread and wine. The elements are not necessarily transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ by any words of the priest, but nonetheless Jesus, who is ubiquitous and present everywhere, is physically present in, with, and under the bread and wine. That view is called consubstantiation.

Another view is **symbolic presence**, held by Ulrich Zwingli and some other people of the Reformation era. Ulrich Zwingli taught that it is a symbol. The supper pictures Jesus Christ given for us, and it is a visual aid, and that is all it is. Christ is not uniquely present when the supper is served, and we need to understand it only as a picture and a reminder. There are some Baptists, though certainly not all, and some people of independent churches and other evangelicals who hold that Jesus is known symbolically in the bread and wine, but no more.

A final view, the one that I hold, one that Wayne Grudem teaches in his book *Systematic Theology*, and one that many Reformed theologians and Reformed Baptists hold, is that Jesus Christ is present in a special way in the Lord's Supper. He is present in a manner we cannot fully explain or understand, but he is present spiritually and not merely symbolically. Christ comes to us in a special way in the Supper, and our hearts are caught up to him. There is not a physical transformation of bread and wine, and yet there is a spiritual participation in the very body and blood of Christ and a spiritual communion with Jesus Christ. John Calvin held this view, and

many other Reformed and Presbyterian thinkers, including Reformed Baptists, and a variety of others have held to the spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper.

This view is given voice in some of the great confessions of the Reformation era that followed Calvin's thinking on the sacrament. Belgic Confession Article 35 says, "To support the physical and earthly life, God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread, which is as common to us as life itself is. But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers, he has sent a living bread that came down from heaven, namely Jesus Christ, who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten, that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith"

This part of the Belgic Confession is saying what the Bible says when Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (John 6:51). They are saying that the way you eat of this living bread, Jesus, is by faith in Jesus. That is fundamental. Before you start bickering about what exactly happens to the bread or what exactly happens to the wine, remember that the core of it all is that the mouth of your soul is faith. You are receiving the living bread from heaven, Jesus Christ, by faith.

The Belgic Confession continues, "To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood. He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink them with our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls for our spiritual life the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls. Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God's Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible."

This is where I think the Belgic Confession and the spiritual presence view get it right. God somehow works through these holy signs. We are not sure how, but he does it, and he does it by his Holy Spirit. When you start explaining how the bread becomes this or the wine becomes that, you may get yourself into more trouble than you should and give false explanations. Leave it a mystery and say that God does it in a way we cannot figure out, by his Holy Spirit, connecting us with the living Christ and with the body and blood of Christ. As the Belgic Confession puts it, "Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ's own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood--but the manner in which we eat is not by the mouth but by the Spirit through faith." As your mouth takes in bread and wine, your soul is taking in by the Holy Spirit participation in the blood and body of Christ and all of his benefits.

The Heidelberg Catechism, another Reformation era confession, says, "Are the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ? No. Just as the water of baptism is not changed into Christ's blood and does not itself wash away sin, but is simply God's sign and assurance, so too the bread of the Lord's Supper is not changed into the actual body of Christ, even though it is called the body of Christ in keeping with the nature and language of sacraments" (Q&A 78).

"Why then does Christ call the bread his body and the cup his blood? Christ has good reason for these words. He wants to teach us that as bread and wine nourish our temporal life, so his crucified body and poured-out blood truly nourish our souls for eternal life. More importantly, he wants to assure us by this visible sign and pledge that we, through the Holy Spirit's work, share in his true body and blood as surely as our mouths receive these holy signs in his remembrance, and that all of his suffering and obedience are as definitely ours as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins" (Q&A 79).

Some churches have an altar call, an invitation to walk to the front of the church and show your faith in Christ. In a sense, the Lord's Supper is the real altar call. Whenever you take in the body of Jesus Christ by faith and eat that bread, whenever you drink that cup and receive Jesus' blood by faith, you are coming to the true altar that God has provided, that everlasting altar where Jesus sacrificed himself once for all. We receive these holy signs, and those things are definitely ours. Jesus' salvation and all that he did for us is as surely ours as that bread goes down into your stomach and as that wine goes down into your stomach. All the benefits and blessings of Jesus Christ go into the mouth of faith and nourish you and your soul for everlasting life.

## **B. What must not happen?**

- **Superstition:** acting like the Supper is magic medicine that protects from sin and judgment
- **Syncretism:** eating in idol temples and communing at demons' table
- **Swinishness:** Factions, favoritism, and piggish violation of communion with fellow Christians

We have talked about what happens in the Supper. What must not happen? One thing that must not happen is **superstition**, acting as though the Supper is some sort of magic medicine that protects you from sin and judgment. There is a view of the sacraments that they act automatically, that they have an automatic effect that brings automatic blessing and saving benefit. That is superstition. The sacraments are of benefit, the ordinances of Christ are of benefit, only when taken in by faith. Otherwise, they can do more harm than good. We must avoid a superstitious notion that something magical is happening, that a priest or someone else, by pronouncing certain words, is transforming them.

Do you know where the phrase "hocus pocus" comes from? It comes from the Latin *hoc est corpus*, meaning, "This is the body," because priests were supposedly speaking the words that changed bread and wine into Jesus' body and blood. They were usually doing it in Latin, which most people at a certain point in history could no longer understand. "*Hoc est corpus*" became nonsensical "hocus pocus," and the Lord's Supper and the words spoken over it became a bunch of hocus pocus. That is one thing that must not happen. The apostle Paul wants us to understand that the Supper must be received by faith, because it brings judgment if it is not received by faith and with understanding of what is involved.

Another thing that must not happen is **syncretism**. Syncretism is the mixing together or blending of different religions. Paul talked about that in his letter to the Corinthians when he said that you cannot be eating in idol temples and communing at demons' tables and then coming to the

Lord's Supper as though you can straddle both at the same time. Remember what the prophet Elijah said to the people of Israel who were trying to worship the Lord and also trying to worship Baal at the same time. Elijah said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Every time you come to the Lord's Supper, there is a make-up-your-mind moment. If you are taking this Supper, you belong to Jesus Christ, and you cannot be communing with other religions, with other demons, or with other ways of life that are contrary to Christ.

If we are going to avoid superstition and syncretism, we must also get rid of **swinishness**. We already read about that in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, where there were factions and divisions among believers, where some were favoring one another, where they were acting like a bunch of hogs and engaging in piggish violation of communion. Some were getting drunk, some were stuffing their faces, others were going without anything, and believers were disregarding and mistreating one another. Away with such swinishness! says the apostle. That might not be a problem for most people today when they receive a small cup and a small piece of bread, but the principle remains. Avoid swinish treatment of others, avoid divisions among believers, avoid situations where some are wealthy beyond reason while others go without. These are all examples of swinishness that the Lord's Supper rules out.

The Lord's Supper is participation in real grace, not cheap grace. That is why these things must be avoided. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyr who served the Lord and died for his testimony and for his resistance to Adolf Hitler, wrote about cheap grace. He described it as "the preaching of forgiveness without repentance... communion without confession, grace without discipleship... Christianity without Christ." That is to be avoided in our faith and also in our treatment of communion. If you think you can go to the communion table without repenting of sin, without confessing sin, and without a determination to be a disciple who follows Jesus Christ himself, then the Lord's Supper is being treated as a cheap ritual and not as a real blessing. When it is real grace, the Lord's Supper is a tremendous gift from God to strengthen our faith and our union with Jesus Christ and with one another.

### **C. Who should eat and drink?**

#### **All those—and only those—who:**

- Are baptized as the mark of union with Christ and His church
- Trust Christ and publicly profess faith
- Know what bread and cup represent
- Seek separation from evil and pursue unity among believers

In light of all that, who should come to the Lord's Supper? Who should eat and drink? The Bible makes several things clear.

All those, and only those, who are baptized should come. Baptism is the mark of union with Christ and his church, the mark of becoming part of the people of God. Before you come to the Lord's Supper, you should be a baptized person who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, you should have personal trust in Jesus and publicly profess your faith in Jesus Christ before you come to the Lord's table. One way the church guards the Table from misuse and helps prevent people from eating and drinking judgment on themselves is for the elders of the church, as far as possible, to make sure that those who come do trust Jesus Christ and profess that trust. We cannot read hearts, but we can listen to professions of faith. This principle comes from Paul's words that a person should examine himself and understand what is going on.

We must know what the bread and the cup represent. Someone who does not understand the bread and the cup is not able to partake by faith in the elements of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, you should eat and drink only if you understand what the bread and the cup represent.

The Lord's Supper also rules out syncretism, this mixing of religions or of mixing with the world. You should not be eating and drinking of the Lord's Supper if you are trying to have it both ways. You should seek separation from evil, separation from the wickedness of the world, and pursue unity among believers instead of the swinishness and division that can arise.

Those are the four basics of who should eat and drink. Are you baptized? Do you trust Jesus and publicly profess faith in him? Scripture says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). Saved people are the ones who should be taking part in the Lord's Supper. It is nourishment for their faith. Know what the bread and cup represent, and be separate unto God. Realize that when you come to the Lord's table, you cannot take part in the table of the Lord and in the supper of demons.

The Belgic Confession, Article 35, explains some of these things. It says, "We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family, his church." There you have the requirement that you be a person of faith, one who has confessed faith and is born again. "Although the sacraments and the things signified are joined together, not all receive both of them. Some people can eat the bread and drink the wine and not receive the benefits. The wicked person certainly takes the sacrament to his condemnation but does not receive the truth of the sacrament, namely Christ... He is communicated only to believers." That is why it is so important to be a believer when you come to the Lord's table.

The Heidelberg Catechism says, "Who are to come to the Lord's table? Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves."

## **Summary**

To review: What happens in the Supper? Communion is what happens. There is partaking, sharing, fellowship, togetherness, communion in the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus, communion with the living Jesus in relationship with him, and communion and fellowship with fellow believers in Jesus' body.

What must not happen? At least three things. There must be no superstition, no treating it as some sort of magic hocus pocus. Syncretism must not happen, where you try to walk with Christ one minute, but the next minute do the work of demons, get involved in another religion, or pursue sinful practices. There must also be no swinishness, no factions, no acting like a pig and mistreating fellow believers, but treating them all as part of one body in Christ.

Who should eat and drink? All and only those who are baptized, who trust Jesus and have professed that trust, who know what the bread and cup represent, and who want to be separate from evil and pursue unity among believers.

Finally, how often should we celebrate the Lord's Supper? I think that at least once a week is a good pattern. That was the view of two of my favorite preachers and thinkers. John Calvin, the great Reformer, wanted weekly communion. Jonathan Edwards, a leader in the Great Awakening, sought to have weekly communion in his church. In the church that I helped plant, we celebrate the Lord's Supper every week. To celebrate the Lord's Supper at least once a week has biblical precedent. It seems that in the New Testament and in the records of the earliest believers after the New Testament, every time believers gathered for worship in Jesus' name, they took part in the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. They took part in the Eucharist, the thanksgiving, the communion.

Whether you agree with weekly communion or not, let me urge you to rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ and to receive him as the food of your soul for eternal life. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

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**1 Corinthians 10:16-21**

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

**1 Corinthians 11:20-32**

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

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## Different views of Christ's presence

- **Transubstantiation:** The priest re-presents Christ's sacrifice. Bread and wine become actual body and blood of Jesus. (Thomas Aquinas, Roman Catholics)
- **Consubstantiation:** Jesus is physically present in, with, and under the bread and wine. (Martin Luther; Lutherans)
- **Symbolic presence:** The Supper pictures Christ give for us. (Ulrich Zwingli; some Baptists)
- **Spiritual presence:** Christ is present spiritually, not just symbolically. (John Calvin, Reformed)

## Belgic Confession Article 35

To support the physical and earthly life, God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread, which is as common to all as life itself also is. But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers, he has sent a living bread that came down from heaven: namely Jesus Christ, who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten—that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith. To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood. He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls. Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God's Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible. Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ's own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood—but the manner in which we eat it is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith. (Belgic Confession Article 35)

## Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 78

*Are the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ?*

No. Just as the water of baptism is not changed into Christ's blood and does not itself wash away sin but is simply God's sign and assurance, so too the bread of the Lord's Supper is not changed into the actual body of Christ even though it is called the body of Christ in keeping with the nature and language of sacraments.

## Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 79

*Why then does Christ call the bread his body and the cup his blood?*

Christ has good reason for these words. He wants to teach us that as bread and wine nourish our temporal life, so too his crucified body and poured-out blood truly nourish our souls for eternal life. But more important, he wants to assure us, by this visible sign and pledge, that we, through the Holy Spirit's work, share in his true body and blood as surely as our mouths receive these holy signs in his remembrance, and that all of his suffering and obedience are as definitely ours as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins.

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## Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 81

*Who are to come to the Lord's table?*

Those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life. Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

### The Lord's Supper (summary)

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