

People of the World SS Class
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The Lord=s Supper

This observance is also known as (Holy) Communion (from the idea of table fellowship), the Eucharist (from the Greek word for giving thanks [over the bread and wine]), and the Mass (from the Latin, for dismissal of the non-baptized from the service before the supper begins). This is one of the two primary ceremonies (ordinances or sacraments) that are established in the New Testament for the observance of Christians, the other being Baptism. A few Christian groups observe Foot-Washing as another such ordinance, and the Roman Catholic Church adds several more, for a total of seven Sacraments.

Jesus established this ordinance at his last meal with the disciples before his death, and it is narrated for us in Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22. Paul describes it in his First letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, in responding to abuses that had developed. The Gospel of John (in chapter 6) provides insight into the meaning of the Lord=s Supper in Jesus= teaching on an earlier occasion, the day after he fed the 5000.

Matthew 26:26-30: (26) While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ATake and eat; this is my body.@ (27) Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ADrink from it, all of you. (28) This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (29) I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink if anew with you in my Father=s kingdom.@ (30) When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

It appears that the Bible=s liturgical ceremonies were designed to be Aacted parables,@ in which the physical actions of the priest, worshiper, pastor, etc., symbolized the spiritual significance of something God is doing B an Aearthly story with a heavenly meaning.@ We are not always told just what this significance is, but some are easy to guess. Animal sacrifice is the death of an innocent substitute in place of the sinner who offers the sacrifice. Circumcision is the removal of sinful flesh, probably also a picture of the cutting off of the promised Seed who was to come. The temple liturgy reminds the worshiper of the difficulty of approaching God because of our sins, but that God has provided a way of approach. In the New Testament, baptism is obviously a cleansing, and pictures our identifying ourselves with Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection.

What is the significance of the Lord=s Supper? Each worshiper eats a small piece of (usually unleavened) bread and drinks a sip of wine or grape juice, while the pastor reads one of the NT passages mentioned above. Jesus, in instituting the supper, explained that the bread was his body, Abroken@ for believers, that the wine was Athe New Covenant in his blood.@

Jesus took the first Lord=s Supper from the Jewish Passover service. There the flesh of a sacrificed lamb was eaten. This was to remind the worshipers of the death of that lamb whose

blood was sprinkled on the doorposts of the house of each Israelite family at the time of the Exodus, when they left Egypt. The blood was to protect them from the death angel that was going to kill the firstborn of each Egyptian family. The Passover event then led to the Exodus, the redemption of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. In the Lord's supper, the bread and wine replace the meat, as this ceremony is designed to be observed when there will be no temple for sacrifices. Besides, Jesus himself is the final sacrifice toward which all other sacrifices pointed.

The Lord's Supper, like the Passover, is thus a meal commemorating God's redemption, but now that redemption is seen to be through the death of his Son Jesus Christ. It looks backward to his death for us (see Mt 26:26-30, Mk 14:22-25, Lk 22:14-23, and 1 Cor 11:23-26).

But the Lord's Supper also looks forward (Mt 26:29, Mk 14:25, Lk 22:18, 1 Cor 11:26). Jesus told his disciples he would not again drink of the fruit of the vine until he drank it with them new in the kingdom of God. Paul tells us we are by this observance to show the Lord's death until he comes. We eat a mere bite and drink only a sip to remind us of that great banquet which we will one day have with Jesus when he comes (Isa 25:6-8, Ps 22:22-31, Ps 23:5-6). See also Jesus' parables about the banquet (Mt 22:1-14, Lk 14:15-24) and his remarks concerning the Roman centurion in Mt 8:10-12. The Lord's Supper is another example of the "already, but not yet" theme that is so common in the New Testament. With Jesus' first coming, the end of the age has already begun, but it is not yet what it will be when he comes again.

Lastly, the Lord's Supper looks at our present situation as believers in Christ, still living in a sinful world between Jesus' first and second comings. This is seen most clearly in John 6:30-35, 47-51, and 53-58. Unless we eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood, we have no life in ourselves, but if we do drink and eat, we will live forever. Eating and drinking Christ is not what happens when we participate in the Lord's Supper, but the Lord's Supper pictures this. By Jesus' death, we have eternal life, just as by the death of plants and animals we humans have physical life. But we must accept his death and appropriate it to ourselves, just as we must eat ordinary foods in order to get their nourishment. Each day, as we depend upon what Christ has done, he provides us with that which is necessary to eternal life, namely forgiveness from our sins, the gift of his righteousness, and the power of the Holy Spirit within us to help us become more and more like Jesus.