

WHAT ABOUT THE LORD'S SUPPER?

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All kinds of questions are often asked about the Lord's Supper.

What does it actually mean?

Why do we celebrate it?

Can visitors come, or is it some kind of club members only affair?

What are we actually doing there?

I hope in this short comment to outline some of the basic teachings of Scripture with respect to the Lord's Supper, especially as the apostle Paul shows them to us in his first letter to the Corinthians. This letter addresses the matter of the Lord's Supper time and again in various different contexts. Why? Apparently the church at Corinth did not properly understand what the Supper was really all about (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-22). The church at Corinth had many other problems which Paul also addresses (e.g. prostitution, toleration of incest, participation at idol feasts, etc.), but it is interesting to see that the apostle chose at many points to relate his teaching on these other matters to the Supper of our Lord. That is why references to the Supper are scattered throughout the letter. By taking a tour through these references I hope we shall be able to put together a Scriptural picture of the meaning and use of this sacrament. It would be advisable to read through each passage of Scripture as we come to it.

1) The first place Paul introduces the Supper in 1 Corinthians is in chapter 5. In this chapter the apostle reprimands the congregation for tolerating a case of incest in their midst (v.1). They have not mourned this terrible sin, nor disciplined the man who had committed it. The apostle Paul instructs the congregation that such a person must be cast out of the congregation and handed over to Satan (v.5). Tough words. But it was a very serious matter (as is any unconfessed sin before God! cf. Ps. 32:1-5). This disciplinary action was to be officially declared during their worship service (v.4). Note that this disciplinary procedure was not only to be done for the sake of the congregation, but also for the person concerned, that he might realise his sin, repent, and be saved (v.5b). What concerns us here, however, is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:6ff. Paul is outlining some of the implications of casting this person out of the congregation. In verses 6-8 he brings up the image of the Passover; that famous Old Testament feast celebrating Israel's deliverance out of Egypt when the destroying angel went around killing all the first born children (Ex. 12). Only Israel was spared, and that only because of the blood of lambs smeared upon their doorposts. As part of the celebration of the Passover, the Israelites were not to eat any leavened bread. Paul uses this image of unleavened bread to suggest that just as the Israelites clean out the leaven from the bread when they celebrate Passover, so also the church of Jesus Christ should clean out unrepentant sinners from their midst when they "celebrate the feast" (v.8).

Wait a minute. Does the Christian church celebrate Passover? Yes it does! But not with the blood of a lamb, rather, with the blood of Christ! Christ Jesus is our Passover lamb. We "celebrate the feast" every time we celebrate Lord's Supper! That is our Passover meal! Remember that the Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper at the celebration of the Jewish Passover. The Gospels relate how Jesus instructed his disciples to remember this last meal with their Lord. Why? Primarily as a celebration of his death. Jesus himself made this connection. Note how in Matt.26:2 he connects the coming Passover with his coming crucifixion. Then at the Passover meal itself he institutes the supper by saying "this is my blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt.2:28). You see the apostle Paul was quite correct when he referred in his letter to the Corinthians celebrating the (Christian) Passover. What do we learn from this passage?

a) In the first place, that the Lord's Supper is a celebration and remembrance of the death of Jesus Christ for our sins.

b) In the second place, that the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ must be careful to exclude from the table anybody who is living in unconfessed sin. The table is not open to all! The congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ has the duty to remove all the old leaven from the celebration, that is, the leaven of unconfessed

sin. No member of the congregation may eat or drink of the Supper if he has not confessed his sin. Discipline *must* be exercised! Wickedness cannot be tolerated at the Supper.

c) In the third place, notice too, that it is not up to someone's conscience whether he goes to the Supper or not. The man who had committed incest obviously still thought it was quite alright to go. But the apostle says that he must actually be *removed*! That means that people in the church have to make a judgment. It is interesting to note that Paul continues in chapter 6 by speaking about this matter of making judgments in church. He argues that the church should be able to appoint wise men as judges among themselves, rather than having to go to a secular court (vs.5-6)! The church does this of course by appointing elders through whom the Lord governs his church. That is why it is the (Biblical) practice in Reformed churches that the elders oversee who may and who may not attend Lord's Supper. It is not a free for all.

2) The apostle returns to the Lord's Supper in chapter 10:15-22, this time in the context of dealing with the matter of eating food sacrificed to idols. May a Christian eat food that has been dedicated to heathen gods? Nearly all meat sold in Corinth at the time had been so dedicated! Were Christians then to be vegetarians? Or could they eat such meat, even if they were invited to a feast where the meat was eaten in honour of various heathen gods? This was a matter that had caused quite a bit of confusion in Corinth and so Paul addresses it at length, beginning in chapter 8. In chapter 10 however he again relates the matter to the Lord's Supper. This is helpful for us, for at the same time we learn some more about the character of the Supper itself.

a) In the first place, we learn that the cup from which we drink is symbolic of the blood of Christ, and likewise the bread is symbolic of Christ's body. When we eat and drink the bread and wine, we share in the body and blood of Christ. Paul goes on to liken the Lord's Supper to a sacrificial meal, like those common in the Old Testament (i.e. at peace offerings, cf. Passover). A lamb would be sacrificed on the altar and then portions of the meat would be given out to be eaten. Those that ate took part in the benefits of the sacrifice, i.e. they received the forgiveness of sins symbolised by the sacrifice. Paul uses this point to show why taking part in idol feasts was wrong. But we learn at the same time that the Lord's Supper is like this too. When we eat and drink at the Lord's Supper we testify to the fact that we are receiving the benefits of Christ's death on the cross for our sins. Incidentally that is why it is so important to make sure that no one is present who has not believed in Jesus Christ, nor confessed all his sins to God.

b) But there is one other important point that the apostle makes here. In verse 17 he argues that the Lord's Supper also symbolises the unity of the body of the congregation. He says:

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.
(ESV)

The bread obviously represents the body of Jesus Christ. But Paul explains that in so far that everyone "partakes" of this one bread, all represent *one body*. In other words, just as a human body eats bread to be nourished, so also the one body of Christ's church partakes of this one bread of Christ to be nourished. Paul picks up this image of the congregation as a body again in chapter 12:12ff. Here he refers to the Corinthian congregation as the "body of Christ" cf. 12:27. It is important to note that the image of the "body of Christ" refers to the local congregation in this letter. We may conclude that each local church is a complete body of Christ, a complete church, with its own ruling consistory of elders. We learn here from verse 16 that the Lord's Supper symbolises the unity that the members of a particular local church (the body) have in their Lord and Saviour. That is then why each local church has its own celebration of the sacrament. We do not all gather together once a year as churches to celebrate Lord's Supper in one huge gathering, as the Jews used to gather for the Passover. No, our Lord has commanded that the Lord's Supper be celebrated as the symbol of unity for each individual church. Our celebration of the sacrament then, is in the first place a celebration for our own local church, our body of Christ. This body consists of those who have committed themselves to the Lord *and* committed themselves to the Lord's church as it is instituted in a local place, under the supervision of the Lord's servants, the elders. That is the body. Thus the celebration of the Lord's Supper can *never* be divorced from a local church setting. It is always the celebration of the Supper of a particular church. That is why even the Westminster Confession of Faith states that the Supper is to be given "to none who are not then present in the congregation" (WCF 29:3).

What does that imply for visitors? Well, it does not necessarily mean that no visitors may ever be admitted. But it does mean that the Supper is in the first place not really celebrated for their sake. It is celebrated for the sake of the congregation itself. Now we saw from chapter 5 that Paul demanded that each congregation judge and oversee who goes to the Lord's Supper. The elders of a particular congregation are of course well able to do that with respect to their own members (for whom the Supper is served). They should know the flock which they shepherd, and will therefore be able to know who should take part and who should not. It is more difficult for them when they must deal with visitors. Remember that they are responsible to God for overseeing the celebration. That is why traditionally in Reformed circles the elders only admitted those visitors who came from other sister churches and provided an attestation, i.e. proof that they were members of another true church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that they were not under discipline. The elders could then in good conscience admit such people to their church's celebration of the sacrament. If people came without such an attestation, and there were no witnesses to their church faithfulness (cf. 2 Cor. 13:1), or if they came from some church of which the elders had no knowledge, they could not take part.

But this was not to judge the hearts or faith of the visitors concerned.

It was a frank confession that,

- a) the celebration of the Supper was in the first place for that particular congregation,
- b) that the elders could not be expected to take responsibility for those people whom they did not know, nor knew of their churches. If they admitted such visitors, they would be ignoring the oversight that God had charged them with (cf. Acts 20:28ff.).

3) In chapter 11:17-34 Paul takes up the issue of the Lord's Supper for its own sake, to correct the abuses taking place in Corinth. The Corinthians were apparently in the habit of turning it into a drunken party! Paul certainly reprimands them for this! In doing so he goes over the words of institution of our Lord, showing that the meaning of the Supper is rooted in Christ's death, as we have seen. He tells the Corinthians that they need to examine their own hearts before they eat the Supper. They have been sinning against it. This is serious. In fact it is so serious that God has punished some of them with sickness and even death (v.30)! Although the apostle does not again bring up the matter of oversight over who attends the Supper here, yet we see why it is so important. When elders bar someone from taking part (for example, the man who committed incest), then they are sparing him from the possible disastrous consequences that result when it is taken improperly. Those who eat and drink unworthily are guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord (v.27). It is a serious business, and we ourselves should learn never to take the Supper lightly.

In summary we should see that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a very important and serious part of the worship of each local church of Christ. It is not something to be taken lightly. God does not take it lightly. He is willing even to kill those who abuse it. We must therefore approach this subject with due reverence and caution, and seek to examine even ourselves before we attend, to see that we too really understand and confess from the heart that Jesus has died once for all, for all of our sins.