

THE DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER"

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1. Introduction
2. Relationship to The Old Covenant Passover
3. Covenantal
4. Sacrament or Ordinance
5. Epistolary Teaching
6. Its Connection to Water Baptism

1. Introduction

The Lord's Supper is an expression used by the apostle Paul in First Corinthians 11:20 (and should not be confused with the expression "the Lord's Table" which does not occur in the New Testament or even "the table of the Lord" referred to in 1 Cor. 10:21). It is not used anywhere else to describe the rite which Christ established when He had His last Passover meal with His disciples before He was taken by the Temple guards to be tried for blasphemy (Mtt. 26:55-61). It is now also referred to as Holy Communion. We will now consider: how this rite has been understood by the Church and consider its relationship to the Old Covenant Passover recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus; its covenantal significance; whether it is a sacrament or an ordinance; its early development as noted in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians and why this is the New Testament's only epistolary reference to it; and, its connection to water baptism as particularly noted in the Second Century book, *The Didache*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

In Matthew's Gospel -

¶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is

poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." ¶ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Matthew 26:26-30

In Mark's Gospel -

¶ And as they were eating, He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is My body." And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Mark 14:22-25

In Luke's Gospel -

For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. ¶ A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

Luke 22:18-24

From John's Gospel, there is no direct reference to the Lord's Supper, although some Roman Catholic scholar believe there is an allusion to it in John 6 although it is unlikely that the context of John 6 supports this. The Gospel of John does however describe the night of the last supper that Jesus celebrated with His disciples before he was taken and tried for blasphemy -

¶ Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son,

to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

John 13:1-5

2. Relationship to The Old Covenant Passover

What Christ was celebrating with His disciples during this ritual meal of His last supper with them, was the Passover instigated in Exodus 12. It marked rite for every Israelite who was to enter a covenant with Yahweh which would later accrete to include certain distinguishing laws, and the practice of circumcision for every Hebrew male.

(1) ¶ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, (2) “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. (3) Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. (4) And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbour shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. (5) Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, (6) and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. (7)

¶ “Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. (8) They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. (9) Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. (10) And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. (11) In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD'S Passover. (12) For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the

firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. (13) The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt. (14)

¶ “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. (15) Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. (16) On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you. (17) And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day, throughout your generations, as a statute forever. (18) In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. (19) For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. (20) You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.”

Exodus 12:1-20

3. Covenantal

In the Old Testament there are numerous examples of the different types of covenants that people, kings and the subjects, nations with each other, and, a husband with his wife, form. Perhaps the Genesis 31 account of Jacob and Laban illustrates some of the common elements in a biblically described:

(44) Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” (45) So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. (46) And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. (47) Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. (48) Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named

it Galeed, (49) and Mizpah, for he said, “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight. (50) If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.” (51) ¶Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. (52) This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm.

Genesis 31:44-52

The elements of a biblically recorded covenant include:

- Agreement (usually with conditions) (vs. 44).
- Some kind of memorial (vss. 45-48).
- Elements of union and a new identity, which often involved a change of name: Abram became Abraham (Gen. 17:5), Yahweh became *The God of Abraham* (Gen. 26:24).
- The exchange of vows.
- Terms and Penalty for Violation (vss. 50-52).

In addition to these elements, other personal covenants often included the sacrifice of an animal that would be a token of their agreed punishment if either of them broke the covenant. This slaughter animal would then be roasted and eaten by the covenant makers and the witnesses (another element to the formation of a covenant) to their covenant vows - which included pledges to come to the other’s aid in the moments of being attacked by a foe. After a careful study of the covenants within the Old Testament including: Adam and his wife, God with Noah. God with Abram/Isaac/Jacob, God with Israel, and David and Jonathan, as examples, the atoning work of Christ described in the Gospels will be seen as an exhibition of the elements of a covenant.

And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the New Covenant in My blood.

Luke 22:20

4. Sacrament or Ordinance

In the various Christian traditions, Holy Communion is variously regarded as a sacrament - an outward sign or display of an inward grace. Roman Catholics believe that The Lord's Supper is a sacerdotal act where the body and blood of Christ were literally present in the "accidents" (the unleavened bread and fruit of the vine) by "transubstantiation". Protestants generally regard Holy Communion as an ordinance which is seen by many Protestants as a spiritual partaking of the body and blood of Christ. Other Protestants however regard the Lord's Supper simply as a commemorative of the salvific work of Christ. This view is close to the Zwinglian (named after Huldreich Zwingli, 1484-1536) view of Communion which regards it as symbolic of the body and blood of Christ.

However you regard The Lord's Supper, it is clear from the New Testament's epistles reveal that Holy Communion is not something to be treated triflingly, as we will now consider.

5. Epistolary Teaching

The clearest treatment of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament is thanks to the believers in Corinth mistreating this ordinance so seriously. At the very least, a careful reading of First Corinthians 11 should cause a believer to treat the partaking of the Lord's body and blood together with others believers as a sacred rite:

[28] Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. [30] That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [31] But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. [32] But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. [33] ¶ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—[34] if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

First Corinthians 11:28-34

We see within this text that this rite is meant to be taken together within a church community, ideally as part of a weekly worship service of a local

church, and that it should be done with due consideration of the worshiper's relationship and fellowship with their fellow worshipers. The taking of the unleavened bread is at least a declaration of belonging in unity with these other worshipers. This is the context of verse 28 referring to examining oneself. It needs to be done together in a manner which makes our brothers and sisters feel like our brothers and sisters (vs. 34).

6. Its Connection to Water Baptism

In the early Church, the Lord's Supper was not for the uninitiated. That is, only those who had been baptised in water as believers could be admitted to be partakers of Holy Communion. This is evident in significant early Church documents, *The Didache*, and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [running] water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water, and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, pour water three times on the head, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Didache 7:1

5 Let no one eat and drink of your Eucharist but those baptized in the name of the Lord; to this, too, the saying of the Lord is applicable: *Do not give to dogs what is sacred*.

Didache 9:5

From *The Shepherd of Hermas* -

"I have heard, sir," said I [to the Shepherd], "from some teacher, that there is no other repentance except that which took place **when we went down into the water and obtained the remission of our former sins**." He said to me, "You have heard rightly, for so it is."

—Hermas, The Shepherd 4:3:1–2 Date: 80 A.D.

Parents of young children are well advised to teach their children from an early age that partaking of the Lord's Supper is the celebration that they made with the Lord and Saviour when they were baptised as a believer, and one day, if you also choose to commit your life to serve and follow Jesus you can be baptised as well, and then join Mum and Dad as partakers of this sacred rite.

Conclusion

Holy Communion is at the least a memorial meal of the atoning sacrifice that Jesus made by laying down His life as our Substitute for the punishment our sins deserved. But it is also much more. The believer should seriously consider the early tradition that considered this as a sacred rite in which the believer could renew their relationship with Christ by seeing the elements of the bread and fruit of the vine as the real presence of Christ partaken in the community of fellow believers that marks a mystical not only with Christ but also with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

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