



The Lord's Supper

Its Purpose, Power and Promise

By

Mark McGee

Chapters

Introduction to the Lord's Supper	3
The Disciples and the Lord's Supper	5
Paul and the Lord's Supper	7
Who's Right About the Lord's Supper?	20
Defense of the Lord's Supper	23
Changes in the Lord's Supper	28
Purpose, Power, Promise	31

Introduction to the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is one of the most powerful evangelistic and faith-building tools in the arsenal of the Church. Jesus introduced it on the night before His Crucifixion.

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, ‘This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.’” Mark 14:22-24

The disciples were experienced with the Passover Feast (also known as the Passover Seder). They had participated in the annual Feast most of their lives. It was the retelling of how God delivered Israel from His Judgment of Egypt. Moses told the Israelites to take a male lamb in its first year, without blemish, and kill it at twilight (one lamb for every household). Moses instructed them to take the lamb's blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the house where they ate it. The families ate the flesh of the lamb on the same night after it was roasted in fire, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Moses told them not to eat the lamb raw or boil it in water. The entire lamb had to be roasted in fire and consumed completely. Anything that remained in the morning was to be burned with fire. The people were to eat the lamb, unleavened bread and

bitter herbs with a belt on their waist, sandals on their feet and a staff in their hands. "So you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover." (Exodus 12:11)

God said He was going to strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and that He would execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt. Moses told the Israelites that the blood on their houses would be a sign to God – "And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." (Exodus 12:13) Moses told the Israelites that the Passover Feast would be a memorial to them throughout all generations. He called it "an everlasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:14). Moses said that when Jewish children asked their parents the purpose for the Passover Seder, parents were to answer – "It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households." (Exodus 12:27) God did as He promised and the people of Israel were freed to leave Egypt.

The primary theme of the Passover Feast is freedom from slavery. Israel lived in slavery to Egypt for many years, but God freed them to leave Egypt and return to Canaan, the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The theme is played out during the Passover Seder through carefully orchestrated steps, along with specific foods and drinks that illustrate Israel's journey from slavery to freedom.

The Disciples and the Lord's Supper

The disciples were familiar with the blessings, washings, eating, drinking, telling, praying, and singing of the Passover Feast – but on the night before Jesus was Crucified, the Lord added something they had never seen before. As they were eating, Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My Body.” Then Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, gave the cup to the disciples, and they all drank from it. Jesus said, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.” Jesus was telling the disciples that He was – “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

How did the Jesus' followers participate in the Lord's Supper after He returned to Heaven? Luke wrote in Acts 2:46-47 that Jewish believers continued daily with one accord in the Temple, broke bread from house to house, and ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. The words “breaking bread” in the Greek are *klontes arton* and are used for breaking off pieces of bread to eat an ordinary meal as well as the Lord's breaking of bread at the Last Supper. It could have been the Jewish followers of Jesus remembering the Lord's death or it could have been Christian fellowship around a meal.

We see a few other places in Acts where believers “broke bread” together and the Apostle Paul was involved in each one (Acts 20 and 27). In fact, Paul is the only Apostle to explain in detail what we call “the Lord's Supper.”

Paul explained that the Lord's Supper was something Jesus had given him – "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you." (1 Corinthians 11:23) It's amazing that in all the historical information we have in the Book of Acts and the Letters of the Apostles that Paul is the only one to write anything about the Lord's Supper – and even Paul only wrote about it one time. He wrote to the Corinthians because they were doing it wrong.

Jesus added a new dimension to the centuries-old practice of the Seder when He told His disciples that the bread was illustrative of His Body and the cup of wine of His Blood. However, other than these mentions in the Gospel accounts, the only other person to write about the Lord's Supper was the Apostle Paul – and he wrote about it because Christians in Corinth were doing it wrong.

Paul and the Lord's Supper

The Corinthians were an interesting group – Jews, Greeks and Romans who came from many parts of the world after Julius Caesar had Corinth rebuilt about a hundred years before Paul's first visit there. Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey and ministered there for about 18 months (approx. A.D 50-51) before traveling to Ephesus (approx. A.D. 52). He wrote 1 Corinthians during his third missionary journey while he revisited the church in Ephesus (approx. A.D. 53-57). The reason for writing the letter was because several church leaders from Corinth visited Paul and told him about the many problems they were dealing with in the assembly.

Paul addressed the major problems head on in the first part of his Letter:

“To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints ... Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” 1 Corinthians 1:2, 10

The Christians in Corinth were set apart for sacred service (sanctified), but were not behaving like saints. They were also divided on many fronts and not united in Christ. Paul addressed those two themes many times in 1 Corinthians and promised that he would deal with the problems the next time he visited them if they didn't address them properly.

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” 1 Corinthians 4:14-16

“Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?” 1 Corinthians 4:18-21

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you ... Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened.” 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 6-7

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? ... Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren! ... Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of

Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!" 1 Corinthians 6:1-2, 7-8, 15

"But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak ... But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." 1 Corinthians 8:9, 12

"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being." 1 Corinthians 10:23-24

"Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." 1 Corinthians 11:17-19

"But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it." 1 Corinthians 12:24-26

A major problem in the Corinthian Church was their lack of love for each other. They were so carried away with their own opinions and divisions, that they forgot the number one ingredient in the Christian Faith – Love. Paul reminded them that everything they did would be judged in that marvelous Light – the Light of Agape Love.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Paul ended his letter to the Corinthians with that reminder – “Let all that you do be done with love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14)

So there we have it – the many problems of the Corinthian Church. Paul addressed them lovingly and firmly (the two do go hand in hand).

Is this a problem in your church? It is in many churches across the country and around the world. As I've thought about what Paul told the Corinthians, I'm reminded of his warning to the churches in Galatia: “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite

and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" (Galatians 5:13-15) Love in a church is a beautiful thing – but without love we become like wild animals, biting and devouring one another – consuming one another. If you've been around churches long enough, you've seen it. The lack of love for one another is an ugly thing. We, the members of Christ's Body on earth today, need to take hold of ourselves and do what our Master tells us to do.

The problems in the Corinthian church were symptoms of a deeper problem. The root was a lack of love for God and others. Interesting how everything goes back to what Jesus said when he was asked about the most important Commandment in Moses' Law.

“Jesus answered him, ‘The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:29-31

The Corinthian believers, Jews and Gentiles, were disobeying the most important Commandments of God – leading to their many sins and the sickness and premature deaths that plagued the young Church. The Apostle Paul prescribed the spiritual medicine that would heal them.

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” 1 Corinthians 1:10

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:18

“He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.” 1 Corinthians 1:31

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.” 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

“Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.” 1 Corinthians 4:5

“I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you.” 1 Corinthians 4:14

“Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” 1 Corinthians 5:8

“Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” 1 Corinthians 8:13

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of

escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ” 1 Corinthians 10:11-14

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being.” 1 Corinthians 10:21-24

“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” 1 Corinthians 10:31

“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” 1 Corinthians 11:1

This is Paul’s advice as he approaches specific instructions about the Lord’s Supper. It’s important that we read the full letter to understand Paul’s context as he approaches. It’s important that we think on these things carefully before interpreting meaning to and problems with the Lord’s Supper. I say that because the Church today is greatly divided about something so precious and important. It shouldn’t be that way, but it is and has been for many years. Thoughts on those differences in the next part of our study.

The Apostle Paul gave Christians in ancient Corinth that would bring them physical as well as spiritual health. Paul did that out of great concern that the Corinthian believers were doing more harm than good during the Lord’s Supper. What about since that time? How has the Supper changed since

those early days to become what it is today in your church experience? Let's begin by looking closely at what happened on the night before Jesus died.

The Lord's Supper is also known as the Holy Communion and Eucharist. The Greek word *eucharistia* means "thanksgiving" and is used in 1 Corinthians 11:24:

"... and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'"

The Apostle Paul said he received this information directly from the Lord and had delivered it to the Corinthians on a previous occasion (1 Corinthians 11:23). Paul founded the Corinthian Church and spent about 18 months with believers in Corinth before moving on to preach the Gospel in other cities. He most likely taught the young Christians about the Lord's Supper during his time with them. The New Testament does not contain any teaching about the Lord's Supper outside of the Gospels, so we must go to Paul's Letter to the Corinthians for further understanding.

It's important here to compare what Paul said the Lord delivered to him about what He said during the Passover Feast the night before He died and what the Gospel accounts record that Jesus said.

First, what Jesus told Paul:

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

What Matthew records about the Lord's Words during the Passover Feast:

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.” Matthew 26:26-29

What Mark records about the Lord's Words during the Passover Feast:

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He

gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'" Mark 14:22-25

What Luke records about the Lord's Words during the Passover Feast:

"With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you. But behold, the hand of My betrayer is with Me on the table. And truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!'" Luke 22:15-22

John records many more Words that Jesus spoke during that evening with His disciples, but the specific Words that Paul, Matthew, Mark and Luke record about the Body and Blood are not found in John's Gospel. The only mention of bread used during the Feast is when Jesus says – 'It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.' And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, 'What you

do, do quickly.” (John 13:26-27) We find no mention of the cup or wine in the discourse between Jesus and His apostles found in John Chapters 13 – 17.

Matthew and Mark's accounts of the Lord's Supper do not tell us when Judas left the table to finish his betrayal of the Lord, but we learn more about Judas in Luke. In Luke's Gospel account the Lord said this after presenting the bread and wine to His disciples – “But behold, the hand of My betrayer is with Me on the table. And truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!” It's interesting to see that Judas also partook of the bread and wine before he left the table to go out into the night. Jesus was sharing an amazing spiritual insight with His disciples about the heart of the Good News He had brought with Him from Heaven – His Death, Burial and Resurrection. They would later understand the spiritual meaning of the bread and wine and would remember the Lord's Sacrifice every time they partook of the Supper. Paul made it clear that the purpose of the Supper was proclaiming Christ's Death until He returns for His Church – “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.”

Who's Right About the Lord's Supper?

My theory of theology is that Jesus and His Apostles got it right. Anyone who disagrees with what Jesus and the Apostles got right – is wrong. I know that sounds simplistic, but my view of Scripture is simple. I believe that God's Word is what it claims to be – God's Word. While the intricacies of Bible study are wonderfully complex and filled with great spiritual and intellectual depth, believing God's Word to be what it claims to be is rather simple - and correct.

I am saddened by the various divisions that have developed within Christianity through the centuries. Jesus made it clear that He wanted His people to be united, even as He and His Father are united (John 17:20-23). That's a pretty strong argument for unity and against division in the Church. In fact, Jesus said that the unity of believers would be how the world would believe that God had sent Him into the world – “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” Wow! That's convicting. The Apostle Paul emphasized unity among Christians to the point that he said we should “endeavor, make haste, give diligence, make every effort” (*spoudazo*) to keep the unity of the

Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3) Again, a strong argument for unity and against division in the Church.

What do you think about unity, or the lack of it, in the Christian Church today? How are we doing with what Jesus prayed to His Father? Jesus prayed for unity among believers, but Christianity has more than 20,000 divisions (some say it goes as high as 35,000). Do a search on Google or Bing or whatever your favorite search engine is for “how many christian denominations exist today.” You will get hundreds of thousands of results with lots of long lists of divisions within the Church. It's pretty sad reading in light of what Jesus prayed to His Father on the night before He Sacrificed Himself for our sins. Jesus asked for unity – we gave Him a mess.

The Lord's Supper is one of those points of theology that has deeply divided the Church. As we've already seen in this study, the only Apostolic writer outside of the Gospels to mention the Lord's Supper by name was Paul. The reason Paul wrote about it was because it was part of the divisions (factions) in the Corinthian Church of the 1st century. Something that was supposed to bring them together was tearing them apart – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Other divisions among the Corinthians included spiritual gifts, sexual practices, authority and leadership in the Church, love for the brethren, and the resurrection of the dead. Even though many members of the Corinthian Church responded positively to Paul's admonition (read 2 Corinthians), it didn't take long for the Church to become divided about what to do with the Lord's Supper. In fact, the seeds of division had already been sown – as we see in several of Paul's letters (e.g. Judaism, gnosticism, etc.). Once Paul died those seeds

took root in the young Church and quickly enveloped the thinking of Christians and their leaders.

One of the big issues for developing any theology from God's Word is – what is God's Word? The Bible I have studied for 47 years has 66 Books in it – 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. However, I've seen Bibles that have more than 70 books and some with more than 80 (e.g. Tobit, Judith, 1 & 2 Esdras, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, Enoch, Prayer of Azariah, Wisdom of Sirach, The Book of Abraham, Melchizedek, Epistle of the Apostles, Gospel of Thomas, Letter of Peter to Philip, Secret Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Bartholomew, The Didache, Gospel of Mary, The Narrative of Joseph of Arimathaea, Gospel of Phillip, Hermas, and many others). Accepting more than 66 Books as God's Word is bound to lead to divisions within the Church. I readily admit that I teach from only 66 Books of the Bible – what I believe is God's Word – so I understand why someone who believes that other books are also part of God's Word might disagree with some things I teach. That, I believe, goes to the point of how important it is that we agree on what constitutes "God's Word." If I base my beliefs about the Lord's Supper on what Jesus and Paul said about it (which I do) and another Christian believes something different because of what they read in another book they believe is part of God's Word, we are faced with a dilemma that can lead to division. We need to work through that. Unity is that important.

Defense of the Lord's Supper

Most of the apostles were dead by the time the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem. Luke's history of the Church, the Book of Acts, ends with Paul and Peter still alive and Jerusalem still standing, so Acts was written sometime before 70 A.D. Church historians believe the Roman Emperor Nero ordered Peter's death about 64 A.D. and Paul's death about 67 A.D. That left the Apostle John to finish communicating the Word of God to the world. Historians believe John died of natural causes by or before 100 A.D. John's Letters and the Revelation tell us quite a bit about the Church at the end of the 1st Century. John doesn't write specifically about the Lord's Supper, but we know there were many enemies inside and outside the Christian churches – just as Paul had prophesied. Here's what Paul told the leaders of the Ephesian would happen to their church after his death.

“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” Acts 20:29-31

Now, look at what Jesus told John to write to the leaders in the Ephesian church about 30 years after Paul's prophesy.

“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are

apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” Revelation 2:2-6

Just as Paul had prophesied would happen after his death, the Ephesian church was dealing with attacks from savage wolves inside and outside the church. This is the same church Paul started many years earlier (Acts 19:1-10). We see the same kinds of things happening with the churches in Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. Satan is attacking the Church with all his strength.

It's 101 A.D. All of the Lord's apostles are dead, so who's in charge of the direction of the Christian Church going into the 2nd Century? Many of the leaders of the 2nd Century Church were disciples of the apostles or had been taught by those disciples. They were pastors, evangelists and apologists who taught and preached and wrote. What they taught and wrote in the 2nd Century guided the Church in many areas of doctrine and practice. For the purpose of our study here, we're interested in their teachings about the Lord's Supper and how the 2nd Century Church partook of the Supper. Did they hold to the teaching of Paul or did they stray?

It's obvious from the 2nd and 3rd century Christian documents I've read that the leaders of the early Church held a high view of the Lord's Supper. Most of the writers used the term "eucharist" (*eucharistia* – thankfulness, thanksgiving) when speaking about the Lord's Supper. Here are some examples.

"Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God ... They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes." *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, Ignatius of Antioch

"It is allowed to no one else to participate in that food which we call Eucharist except the one who believes that the things taught by us are true, who has been cleansed in the washing unto rebirth and the forgiveness of sins and who is living according to the way Christ handed on to us. For we do not take these things as ordinary bread or ordinary drink. Just as our Savior Jesus Christ was made flesh by the word of God and took on flesh and blood for our salvation, so also were we taught that the food, for which thanksgiving has been made through the word of prayer instituted by him, and from which our blood and flesh are nourished after the change, is the flesh of that Jesus who was made flesh. Indeed, the Apostles, in the records left by them which are called

gospels, handed on that it was commanded to them in this manner: Jesus, having taken bread and given thanks said, 'Do this in memory of me, this is my body.' Likewise, having taken the cup and given thanks, he said, 'This is my blood', and he gave it to them alone." *Apology 1, 66-67, Justin Martyr*

"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." *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (the Didache)*

"We take anxious care lest something of our Cup of Bread should fall upon the ground." *The Crown, Tertullian*

"We offer him what is his, and so we proclaim communion and unity and profess our belief in the resurrection of flesh and spirit. Just as bread from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread but the Eucharist, made up of two elements, one earthly and one heavenly, so also our bodies, in receiving the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, for they have the hope of resurrection." *Against Heresies, Irenaeus*

"We are not people with ungrateful hearts; it is true, we do not sacrifice ... to such beings who, far from bestowing their benefits upon us, are our enemies; but to God who has bestowed upon us an abundance of benefits ... we fear being ungrateful. The sign of this gratitude towards God is the bread called Eucharist." *Contra Celsum, Origen*

“Finally, the sacrifices of the Lord proclaim the unity of Christians, bound together by the bond of a firm and inviolable charity. For when the Lord, in speaking of bread which is produced by the compacting of many grains of wheat, refers to it as His Body, He is describing our people whose unity He has sustained, and when He refers to wine pressed from many grapes and berries, as His Blood, He is speaking of our flock, formed by the fusing of many united together.” *Letter of Cyprian to a Certain Magnus*, Cyprian

Changes in the Lord's Supper

Many of the writings of Church leaders about the Lord's Supper in the 4th and 5th centuries are similar to the earlier writings of the Church – an extremely high view of the Supper. However, many of their writings show a more mystical understanding of the elements of the Supper.

“And your floors shall be filled with wheat, and the presses shall overflow equally with wine and oil.’ ... This has been fulfilled mystically by Christ, who gave to the people whom He had redeemed, that is, to His Church, wheat and wine and oil in a mystic manner. For the wheat is the mystery of His sacred Body; and the wine His saving Blood; and again, the oil is the sweet unguent with which those who are baptized are signed, being clothed in the armaments of the Holy Spirit.” *Commentaries on Sacred Scripture*, Ephraim

“So long as the prayers of supplication and entreaties have not been made, there is only bread and wine. But after the great and wonderful prayers have been completed, then the bread is become the Body, and the wine the Blood, of our Lord Jesus Christ. ‘And again:’ Let us approach the celebration of the mysteries. This bread and this wine, so long as the prayers and supplications have not taken place, remain simply what they are. But after the great prayers and holy supplications have been sent forth, the Word comes down into the bread and wine –

and thus His Body is confectioned.” *Sermon to the Newly Baptized*, Athanasius

“Contemplate therefore the Bread and Wine not as bare elements, for they are, according to the Lord’s declaration, the Body and Blood of Christ; for though sense suggests this to thee, let faith stablish thee. Judge not the matter from taste, but from faith be fully assured without misgiving, that thou hast been vouchsafed the Body and Blood of Christ.” *Catechetical Lectures*, Cyril of Jerusalem

“As to the reality of His Flesh and Blood, there is no room left for doubt, because now, both by the declaration of the Lord Himself and by our own faith, it is truly the Flesh and it is truly Blood. And These Elements bring it about, when taken and consumed, that we are in Christ and Christ is in us. Is this not true? Let those who deny that Jesus Christ is true God be free to find these things untrue. But He Himself is in us through the flesh and we are in Him, while that which we are with Him is in God.” *The Trinity*, Hilary of Poitiers

“We see that the Saviour took [something] in His hands, as it is in the Gospel, when He was reclining at the supper; and He took this, and giving thanks, He said: ‘This is really Me.’ And He gave to His disciples and said: ‘This is really Me.’ And we see that It is not equal nor similar, not to the incarnate image, not to the invisible divinity, not to the outline of His limbs. For It is round of shape, and devoid of feeling. As to Its power, He means to say even of Its grace, ‘This is really Me.’; and none disbelieves His word. For anyone who does not believe the truth in what

He says is deprived of grace and of a Savior.” *The Man Well-Anchored*, Epiphanius of Salamis

“The bread is at first common bread; but when the mystery sanctifies it, it is called and actually becomes the Body of Christ.” *Orations and Sermons*, Gregory of Nyssa

“It is not the power of man which makes what is put before us the Body and Blood of Christ, but the power of Christ Himself who was crucified for us. The priest standing there in the place of Christ says these words but their power and grace are from God. ‘This is My Body,’ he says, and these words transform what lies before him.” *Homilies on the Treachery of Judas*, John Chrysostom

“You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily. That Bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. The chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ.” *Sermons*, Augustine

It's important to keep in mind that we do not have access to all the teachings of the early Church about the Lord's Supper, but we can see from what we do have that many leaders in the Church believed Christians should have a serious attitude about the Supper. It was not to be taken lightly or frivolously. That much is certainly in line with the seriousness presented by Paul in 1 Corinthians.

Purpose, Power, Promise

While I find Church history interesting, and the writings of early Church leaders insightful about the beliefs and practices of Christians hundreds of years ago, my mind and heart are persuaded to Truth through Scripture alone. Our Lord and His Apostles warned us on many occasions that there would come after them false teachers and wolves whose only desire would be to divide and devour the flock of God. I must not allow any “man” to persuade me against the clear Teaching of God’s Word on any subject of importance to our Lord. So, as I look at the Lord’s Supper – as I consider its **Purpose, Power** and **Promise** – I must put aside the arguments of men and listen to the Voice of the Spirit Who brings Truth to bear on the hearts of all who will hear Him.

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.” 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Remember – a simple idea ... “remember, don’t forget.” If Christians did that one thing – if we remembered the Holy Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross every day – we would “really” understand who we are and what we have in Christ.

Honestly, how many of us remember to remember the Lord’s Death every day? When we remember, what do we remember? Do we think of how nice it was of God to send His Son to die on the Cross to save us from our sins? Do we give God a quick nod, wink and a smile as we move on to the next thing in our life? Or do we REMEMBER what Jesus did for us on the Cross? Does His Sacrifice take hold of our heart and mind and shake us at the core of our very existence? Do we remember that Jesus was despised and rejected by men – that He was a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief – that He was despised, and we did not esteem Him – that He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows – that He was stricken and smitten by God, and afflicted – that He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities – that the chastisement for our peace was upon Him and by His stripes we are healed – that we like sheep have gone astray and turned to our own way and that God laid on Christ the iniquity of us all – that He was oppressed and afflicted, yet did not open His mouth – that He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers was silent, and He opened not His mouth – that He was cut off from the land of the living – that for His people He was stricken – that He made His grave with the wicked – that He had done no violence and no deceit was in His mouth, yet it pleased God to bruise Him, put Him to grief, and make His Soul an offering for sin – that He poured out His Soul unto

death and was numbered with the transgressors – that He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors? Is that what we remember? It should be, because THAT is what Jesus did for us on the Cross. That is what we should remember every day, and every day!

Proclaim – the second purpose of the Lord's Supper is to “proclaim” the Lord's Death until He comes again. The Lord's Supper is not a nice little quick spiritual thing we do at the end of a worship service. It is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which God calls “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.” (Romans 1:16) The Death of Jesus Christ is THE MESSAGE that all people need to hear because it is the POWER OF GOD to salvation for everyone who believes. Think about that – we have something everyone else needs. They need it to be saved from the most deadly disease known in the world – SIN. Sin steals -it kills – it destroys. Sin is worse than cancer, worse than heart disease, worse than the worst of all human diseases. Sin is the cancer of the soul. It eats and eats and eats until it is full and has emptied the soul of any hope. What will wash away my sin? Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.

The Blood of Jesus Christ is the Heavenly Medicine that brings life from death, light from darkness, hope from fear. The Blood of Jesus Christ shed on the Cross is the Holy Antidote to sin. There is no other hope for humanity. There is nothing else that will save the eternal soul. There is only the Blood of Jesus. That is our Gospel. That is our confession. That is our proclamation.

Promise – the Death of Jesus has two great promises for those who believe its message. (1) Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. (2) Jesus is COMING! Paul says loudly and clearly to all who will hear him – “proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.” Jesus is coming again. The prophets said He would come to die for our sins. Jesus did come and did die for our sins. The Apostle Paul said He will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first, then those who were alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and they will be with Him forever. Jesus is coming for you and for me. He is coming. The prophet Daniel said the Son of Man will come to earth with dominion and glory and a kingdom, and that all peoples, nations, and languages will serve Him, and that His dominion will be an everlasting dominion which will not pass away and not be destroyed. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, is coming again – to establish His Kingdom on earth. He will Rule and all people will serve Him. That is our Promise and will be the Promise of all who believe in the Name of Jesus.

Every time we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we are to do two things: **Remember and Proclaim.** The Promise is from God. Jesus will return.

“Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.”

Copyright © 1990-2018 GraceLife Ministries