

COMMUNION: STRATEGY FOR UNITY AND COMMUNITY

Jesus empowered the ancient church with a communion strategy designed to create supernatural unity, loving community, and holy living in view of His return. One aspect of this strategy was to partake of the Lord's Supper weekly. The other was the celebration of the Supper as an actual meal: a sacred, covenant meal. Because modern churches are not following this strategy, the last supper has become the lost supper.

PROFIT

The bread and wine look back to Jesus' death on the cross. Placing them in the context of a meal adds a forward look to the wedding banquet of the Lamb. This relaxed, unhurried, weekly meal is a significant means for encouraging fellowship, edifying the church, developing community, cementing the ties of love, and creating unity.

PROFESSORS

Scholarly opinion is clearly weighted toward the conclusion that the Lord's Supper was originally eaten as a meal:

In *New Testament Theology*, **Donald Guthrie** stated that the apostle Paul "sets the Lord's supper in the context of the fellowship meal."¹

Editor of the notable evangelical commentary series *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, **Gordon Fee**, noted "the nearly universal phenomenon of cultic meals as a part of worship in antiquity." He asserted that "in the early church the Lord's Supper was most likely eaten as, or in conjunction with, such a meal." Fee further noted: "From the beginning, the *Last Supper* was for Christians not an annual Christian Passover, but a regularly repeated meal in 'honor of the Lord,' hence the *Lord's Supper*."²

In the *New Bible Dictionary*, **G.W. Grogan** observed: "The administration of the Eucharist shows it set in the context of a fellowship supper.... The separation of the meal or Agape from the Eucharist lies outside the times of the NT."³

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, **C.K. Barrett** stated: "The Lord's Supper was still at Corinth an ordinary meal to which acts of symbolical significance were attached, rather than a purely symbolical meal."⁴

United Methodist Publishing House editor **John Gooch** wrote: "In the first century, the Lord's Supper included not only the bread and the cup but an entire meal."⁵

Yale professor **J.J. Pelikan** concluded: "Often, if not always, it was celebrated in the setting of a common meal."⁶

¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 758.

² Fee, "Corinthians," 532, 555.

³ G. W. Grogan, "Love Feast," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982), 712.

⁴ C. K. Barrett, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," *Black's New Testament Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1968), 276.

⁵ John Gooch, *Christian History & Biography*, Issue 37 (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1993), 3.

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Eucharist," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. Warren Preece, Vol. 8 (Chicago: William Benton, Publisher, 1973), 808.

PROOF

The setting for the first Lord's Supper was the Passover *Feast*. Jesus and His disciples reclined around a table heaping with food (**Ex 12, Dt 16**). Jesus took bread and compared it to His body "while they were eating" (**Mt 26:26**; emphasis mine). "After the supper" (**Lk 22:20**; emphasis mine), Jesus took the cup and compared it to His blood, soon to be poured out for sin. Timing is everything. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were introduced in the context of an actual meal. The twelve would have naturally understood the Lord's Supper to be a meal also. *Deipnon*, the Greek word for "supper," means dinner or banquet: the main meal toward evening.⁷ Arguably, it never refers to anything less than a full meal.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said: "I confer on you a kingdom ... so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (**Lk 22:29–30**). What is the reason for this eschatological eating? First-century Jews thought of heaven as a time of feasting at the Messiah's table. For example, a Jewish leader once said to Jesus: "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (**Lk 14:15**). Jesus Himself spoke of those who will "take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (**Mt 8:11**).⁸

Isaiah described the coming kingdom feast in this way: "the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined ... He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken" (**Isa 25:6–8**). The Book of Revelation describes a future time of feasting at the Lamb's wedding banquet (**Rev 19:9**).

When the early church observed the Lord's Supper, which included the bread and the cup, it was as a true meal. It is important to appreciate why the Lord's Supper was originally a meal. It is an image and foretaste of what we will be doing when Jesus returns to eat it with us. What better way to typify the marriage banquet of the Lamb than a meal manifesting all the excitement, fellowship, and love of the heavenly feast?

The most extensive treatment of the Lord's Supper is found in **1 Corinthians 10–11**. The church in Corinth clearly celebrated it as a meal. However, class and cultural divisions resulted in their communion meetings doing more harm than good (**11:17–18**). The upper class, not wanting to dine with those of a lower social class, evidently came to the gathering early to avoid the poor. By the time the working-class believers arrived, delayed perhaps by employment constraints, all the food had been eaten. The poor went home hungry (**11:21–22**). The wealthy failed to esteem their impoverished brethren as equal members of the body of Christ (**11:23–32**).

The Corinthian abuse was so serious that the *Lord's Supper* had instead become their *own* suppers: "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" (**11:20–21**). If merely eating one's own supper had been the entire objective, then private dining at home would have sufficed. Thus, Paul asked the rich: "Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (**11:22**). Considering the nature of the abuse, it is evident that the Corinthian church regularly partook of the Lord's Supper as a meal.

It has been suggested that the abuses in Corinth led Paul to end the meal. For example, the original commentary in the 1599 *Geneva Bible* stated: "The Apostle thinketh it good to take away the love feasts, for their abuse, although they had been a long time, and with

⁷ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 173. Used in 1 Corinthians 11:20.

⁸ This picture of heaven as eating in God's presence may have originated from the Sinai experience. When the elders went with Moses to the top of the mountain, God did not raise his hand against them. Instead, "they saw God, and they ate and drank" (Ex 24:11).

commendation used in Churches, and were appointed and instituted by the Apostles.”⁹ This prompts the following question: Would Paul have single-handedly overturned a practice that had been established by Jesus, taught by the apostles, and upheld by all the churches? We think not. However, the *Geneva Bible*’s commentary affirms the simultaneous celebration of the Lord’s Supper and the love feast, as instituted by the apostles.

It has been said that the best antidote to abuse is appropriate use rather than disuse. Paul’s solution to Corinthian abuse was *not* to do away with the meal. Instead, Paul wrote: “when you come together to eat, wait for each other” (11:33). Only those who are so famished that they could not wait for the others were instructed to “eat at home” (11:34). Acclaimed commentator **C.K. Barrett** cautioned: “Paul’s point is that, if the rich wish to eat and drink on their own, enjoying better food than their poorer brothers, they should do this at home; if they cannot wait for others (verse 33), if they must indulge to excess, they can at least keep the church’s common meal free from practices that can only bring discredit upon it. . . . Paul simply means that those who are so hungry that they cannot wait for their brothers should satisfy their hunger before they leave home, in order that decency and order may prevail in the assembly.”¹⁰

In summary, it is clear from Scripture that in the early church, the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper were eaten in the context of a meal. Communion was celebrated not only with the Lord through the elements but also with other believers through the meal. This early church practice builds community and unity, edifies the church, and typifies the coming eschatological feast. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper as a meal is like participating in the rehearsal dinner for a great wedding and feast.

PERSPECTIVE: A FUTURE FOCUS

Fritz Reinecker stated: “The Passover celebrated two events, the deliverance from Egypt and the anticipated coming Messianic deliverance.”¹¹ It looked both to the past and the future. When Jesus transformed the Passover Feast into the Lord’s Supper, He endowed it both past and future characteristics. It looks back to Jesus’ sacrifice as the ultimate Passover Lamb who delivers His people from their sins, and it looks forward to the time when He will come again and eat it with us. The 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* stated: “The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and *anticipate His second coming*” (emphasis added).¹²

R.P. Martin, professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote of the “eschatological overtones” in the Lord’s Supper “with a forward look to the advent in glory.”¹³ The future kingdom of God weighed on the Lord’s mind during the Last Supper. Jesus first mentioned the future at the beginning of the Passover: “I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:16). “Until,” *heos hutou*, is forward-looking. It indicates a *future* occurrence. Furthermore, Jesus’ use of “fulfilled” suggests that there is something prophetic about the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus mentioned a future meal while passing the cup: “from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Lk 22:18). Every time we partake of the

⁹1599 *Geneva Bible* (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2006), 1180.

¹⁰ Barrett, “Corinthians,” 263 & 277.

¹¹ Fritz Reinecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 207.

¹² “The Baptist Faith and Message,” sbc.net, accessed September 6, 2016.

¹³ R. P. Martin, “The Lord’s Supper,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982), 709.

cup, Jesus' promise to return to drink it with us should be considered. After the supper, He referred to the future meal yet again: "I confer on you a kingdom ... so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (**Lk 22:29–30**).

Thus, we see that Jesus imbued the Lord's Supper with several forward-looking characteristics. As a full meal, it prefigures the marriage supper of the Lamb. When we partake of the cup, we should be reminded of Jesus' words: "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (**Lk 22:18**). The following description is provided in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "Early Christianity regarded this institution as a mandate ... learning to know, even in this present life, the joy of the heavenly banquet that was to come in the kingdom of God ... the past, the present, and the future came together in the Eucharist."¹⁴

1 Corinthians 11:26 states that through the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the Lord's death "until" He comes. "Until" normally denotes a time frame. For example, an umbrella is used *until* it stops raining; then it is put away. Using the umbrella does not cause the rain to stop. However, Paul's statement focuses on the reason for proclaiming the Lord's death. The Greek word for "until," *achri hou*, is unusual. Conservative German theology professor **Fritz Rienecker** indicated that this usage (with an aorist subjunctive verb) denotes much more than a mere time frame. It can denote a goal or an objective.¹⁵

In *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, argument was made that the Greek words *achri hou*, which underlies "until" (**1Co 11:26**), is not simply a temporal reference. It functions as a final clause. In other words, the meal functions as a constant reminder to God to bring about the Second Coming.¹⁶ Paul instructed the church to partake of the bread and cup as a means of proclaiming the Lord's death with the goal of His return. Thus, in proclaiming His death through the loaf and cup, the Supper anticipates His return. Professor **Herman Ridderbos** stated: "It is not merely a subjective recalling to mind, but an active manifestation of the continuing and actual significance of the death of Christ. "Proclaim" in this respect has a prophetic, declaratory significance.... Everything is directed not only toward the past, but also toward the future. It is the proclamation that in the death of Christ the new and eternal covenant of grace has taken effect, if still in a provisional and not yet consummated sense."¹⁷

It is interesting that the earliest believers used *maranatha* ("Our Lord, come") in *Didache* x.6 as a prayer in relation to the Lord's Supper, "a context at once eucharistic and eschatological."¹⁸ Linking this to the situation in Corinth, **R. P. Martin** wrote: "*Maranatha* in 1 Cor. 16:22 may very well be placed in a Eucharistic setting so that the conclusion of the letter ends with the invocation 'Our Lord, come!' and prepares the scene for the celebration of the meal after the letter has been read to the congregation."¹⁹

PURPOSE # 1: COMMUNITY

In ancient Jewish culture, sharing a meal symbolized acceptance and fellowship. Thus, in **Revelation 3:20**, Jesus offered to "eat" (*deipneo*) with anyone who heard His voice and opened the door. One of the major blessings of celebrating the Lord's Supper as a meal is the genuine fellowship that everyone enjoys. This theme of fellowship in feasting is evident in the

¹⁴ Pelikan, "Eucharist," 808.

¹⁵ Reinecker, *Linguistic*, 427. Other instances of this construction in the eschatological passages include Luke 21:24, Romans 11:25, and 1 Corinthians 15:25.

¹⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 252–254.

¹⁷ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. deWitt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 422.

¹⁸ Barrett, "Corinthians", 397.

¹⁹ Martin, "Supper", 709.

book of **Acts**. A casual reading of **Acts 2:42** suggests that the Church had four priorities: the teachings of the apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper), and prayer. However, a closer examination reveals that the focus may have been on only three activities: teaching, fellowship through the breaking of bread, and prayer. (In Greek, "fellowship" and "breaking of bread" are simultaneous activities.)²⁰ It was **F.F. Bruce's** position that the fellowship described in **Acts 2:42** was manifested in the breaking of bread.²¹ The Lord's Supper has often been associated with the phrase "breaking of bread," which appears throughout the book of Acts. For example, **Bruce** argued that "breaking of bread" denotes "something more than the ordinary partaking of food together: the regular observance of the Lord's Supper is no doubt indicated ... this observance appears to have formed part of an ordinary meal."²² If this conclusion is accurate, the early church enjoyed the Lord's Supper as a time of fellowship and gladness as would have been the case at a wedding banquet: "breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people" (**Acts 2:46–47**). The Lord's Supper was characterized as a time of fellowship. Sounds inviting, doesn't it?

Many churches observe the Lord's Supper in a funereal atmosphere. An organ plays reflective music softly. Every head is bowed, and every eye is closed as the members of the congregation quietly search their souls for sins that need to be confessed. In an arrangement that is eerily reminiscent of a casket, the elements are laid out on a narrow rectangular table that is covered with a white cloth at the front of the church. Pall bearer-like deacons solemnly distribute the elements. Dutch theologian **Karl Deddens** noted: "Under the influence of pietism and mysticism, a sense of 'unworthiness' is awakened within them, and they become afraid that they may be 'eating and drinking judgment unto themselves.' As for those who were still bold enough to go to the table of the Lord, their faces suggest that a funeral is under way rather than a celebration."²³ Is this somber approach to the Supper in keeping with the apostles' tradition?

It was the unworthy *manner*, not unworthy *people*, that Paul criticized (**1Co 11:27**). He was referring to drunkenness at the Lord's Table, conniving to avoid eating with the poor, and humiliating the poor who went home hungry. This failure of the rich to recognize the body of the Lord in their poorer brethren resulted in divine judgment. Many of them were sick, and a number had even died (**1Co 11:27–32**). Indeed, every person ought to examine himself to be sure he is not guilty of the same gross sin: failing to recognize the body of the Lord in the other believers (**1Co 11:28–29**). Once we each have evaluated ourselves, we can come to the meal without fear of judgment to enjoy the fellowship of the Lord's Supper as the true wedding banquet it is intended to be.

We all desire church relationships that are genuine and meaningful: not just a friendly church but one where our friends are. The Lord's Supper can help to make this a reality. A middle-aged man, new in Christ and to the church, sat through a number of traditional Sunday services. Finally, he asked: "I see people greet each other just before the service. As soon as it

²⁰ In many English versions, "and" is placed between "teaching" and "fellowship" then again between "bread" and "prayer," but not between "fellowship" and "bread" (**Acts 2:42**). The reason is that in some Greek manuscripts, the words "fellowship" and "breaking of bread" are connected as simultaneous activities (no *kai* between fellowship and the breaking of bread).

²¹ F. F. Bruce, "The Book of Acts", *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 79.

²³ Karl Deddens, *Where Everything Points to Him*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, AB: Inheritance Publications, 1993), 93.

ends, they hug good-bye and quickly head home. I'm not getting to know anyone. What is the Christian equivalent of the neighborhood bar?"²⁴ Celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly as a relaxed fellowship meal is the biblical answer to his question.

The holy meal should be celebrated often to maximize the fellowship aspect. For the early believers, participation in the Lord's Supper was one of the main reasons for their coming together as a church every Lord's Day. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has described the Lord's Supper as "the central rite of Christian worship" and "an indispensable component of the Christian service since the earliest days of the church."²⁵

The first evidence of weekly communion is grammatical. To Christians, Sunday is the "Lord's Day" (**Rev 1:10**), the day Jesus rose from the dead. This is a translation of *kuriakon hemeran*, unique technical Greek wording. It is literally "the day belonging to the Lord." The phrase "belonging to the Lord" is from *kuriakos*, which is found in the New Testament in only **Revelation 1:10** and **1 Corinthians 11:20**, where it refers to the Supper as "belonging to the Lord" (*kuriakon deipnon*). The connection between these two unusual but identical ways in which these words are used must not be overlooked. The *supper* belonging to the Lord was eaten every week on the *day* belonging to the Lord. The Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper are a weekly package deal.²⁶

More evidence for the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper is found in the only clear reason given in Scripture for regular church meetings: to eat the Lord's Supper. In **Acts 20:7**, Luke stated: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." The words "to break bread" in **Acts 20:7** are known as a telic infinitive denoting a purpose or an objective. They met to break bread.

Another New Testament passage in which the purpose of a church gathering is stated is **1 Corinthians 11:17–22**. The "meetings" (**11:17**) were doing more harm than good because when they came "together as a church" (**11:18a**), there were deep divisions. Thus, Paul wrote: "when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat" (**11:20**). Thus, the ostensible reason for the weekly church meetings was to eat the Lord's Supper.

The third and last reference to the explicitly stated reason for assembly is found in **1 Corinthians 11:33**, "When you come together *to eat*, wait for each other" (emphasis added). As before, the verse indicates that they came together to eat. The Scriptures give no other reason for weekly church meetings. It is clear that there were times for worship and teaching each Sunday; however, the focus was communion.

Early extra-biblical sources also indicate that the church originally celebrated the Lord's Supper weekly, such as **Justin Martyr's First Apology**, written in the middle of the second century. Another example is the *Didache*. Around A.D. 200, **Hippolytus** wrote of a typical worship service in Rome; it included the Lord's Supper.

It has been said that Protestant churches replaced the altar with the pulpit. Never-the-less, **John Calvin** advocated weekly communion.²⁷ **Karl Deddens** wrote: "If the Lord's Supper were celebrated more often, we should not view such a change as an accommodation to 'sacramentalists' who wish to place less emphasis on the service of the Word; rather, we should view it as an execution of Christ's command...."²⁸ The fellowship and encouragement that each member enjoys in such a weekly gathering is significant. This aspect

²⁴ Conversation with the author, mid-1980s.

²⁵ Pelikan, "Eucharist", 807.

²⁶ Eric Svendsen, *The Table of the Lord* (Atlanta: NTRF, 1997), 140.

²⁷ David Koyzis, "The Lord's Supper: How Often?", ReformedWorship.org, accessed September 1, 2016.

²⁸ Deddens, "Everything Points", 93.

of the Church's Sunday meeting should not be rushed or replaced. It is also important that it be devoted to prayer and the apostle's teachings (**Acts 2:42**); however, this should not be at the expense of the weekly Lord's Supper. The weekly celebration of the Holy Meal adds an unparalleled dynamic to church meetings.

PURPOSE #2: SUPERNATURAL UNITY

The celebration of the Lord's Supper each week as a fellowship meal makes a significant contribution to unity. Also important is the visual presentation of the elements. The Scriptures refer to *the* cup of thanksgiving (a single cup, **1Co 10:16**) and *one* loaf: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (**1Co 10:17**).²⁹ If using one cup and one loaf symbolizes our oneness in Christ, then using pre-broken crackers and multiple tiny cups represents disunity, division, and individualism.

The single loaf symbolizes our unity in Christ, and, according to **1 Corinthians 10:17**, partaking of it actually *creates* unity. The words of the inspired text should be noted. "Because" there is one loaf, therefore we are one body, "for" we all partake of the one loaf (**1Co 10:17**). One scholar argued that the Lord's Supper was "intended as a means of fostering the unity of the church..."³⁰ Professor **Gerd Theissen** said: "Because all have eaten portions of the same element, they have become a unity in which they have come as close to one another as members of the same body, as if the bodily boundaries between and among people had been transcended."³¹ In their commentary on Corinthians, **Archibald Robertson** and **Alfred Plummer** concluded: "The single loaf is a symbol and an instrument of unity."³² **Gordon Fee** wrote of the "solidarity of the fellowship of believers created by their all sharing 'the one loaf.'"³³

Some in Corinth were guilty of partaking of the Lord's Supper unworthily (**1Co 11:27**). Shameful class divisions cut at the heart of the unity that the Lord's Supper is designed to symbolize. What was Paul's solution to the harmful meetings? "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other" (**1Co 11:33**). A partial reason for the Corinthians' lack of unity was their failure to eat the Lord's Supper *together* as a meal centered around the one cup and one loaf.

Jesus prayed "that they may be one even as we are one" (**Jn 17:11**). In the Lord's Supper, we express our oneness in Christ. The Lord's Supper is a fundamental practice that reflects the eternal image of the Church and Christianity: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (**Eph 4:4–6**). Our unity in Christ is a powerful witness. Jesus prayed that we "may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (**Jn 17:21**).

PURPOSE #3: JESUS' RETURN

In the covenant God made with Noah, He promised to never again destroy the earth by flood. God declared: "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, *I* will see it and *remember* the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures" (**Gn 9:16**; emphasis added).

²⁹ NIV.

³⁰ Pelikan, "Eucharist", 807.

³¹ Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1982), 165.

³² Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, "1 Corinthians", *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 213.

³³ Fee, "Corinthians", 515.

Wayne Grudem noted that the Bible “frequently speaks of God ‘remembering’ something and therefore I do not think it inappropriate or inconsistent for us to speak this way when we want to refer to God’s awareness of events that have happened in our past, events he recognizes as already having occurred and therefore as being ‘past.’”³⁴ It is biblical to say that God remembers covenant promises.

In His covenant with Abraham, God promised to bring the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. Accordingly, at the appointed time, “God heard their groaning, and *God remembered* his covenant with Abraham” (**Ex 2:24**; emphasis added). During the Babylonian captivity, God made a promise to the Jews: “*I will remember* my covenant with you” (the Sinai covenant, **Eze 16:60**; emphasis added). God remembers covenant promises.

In the Lord’s Supper, the fruit of the vine represents the “blood of the covenant” (**Mt 26:28**), and the bread symbolizes Jesus’ body. Jesus said to partake of the bread “in remembrance of me” (**Lk 22:19**). The bread and wine are reminders of His body and blood given for us. The Greek word for “remembrance,” *anamnesis*, means “reminder.” A reminder can be a prompt about either a previous or future occurrence. Translating *anamnesis* as “remembrance” leads to the exclusive focus on Jesus’ past sacrifice on the cross. However, if *anamnesis* is translated as “reminder,” it could be understood to refer to both the past (Jesus’ death on the cross) and the future (Jesus’ promise to return).

As we have already seen, God remembers covenant promises. Another very significant function of the Lord’s Supper is as a reminder to Jesus Himself of His new covenant promise to return.³⁵ Jesus said: “Do this unto my reminder.” The word “my” in “my reminder” is a translation of the Greek *emou*. More than a mere personal pronoun, it is a possessive pronoun. This suggests that the reminder is not simply about Jesus; it actually belongs to Jesus. It is His reminder. Theologian **Joachim Jeremias** understood Jesus to use *anamnesis* in the sense of a reminder for God: “The Lord’s Supper would thus be an enacted prayer.”³⁶ Just as seeing the rainbow reminds God of His covenant never to flood the world again, so too Jesus’ seeing us partake of the Lord’s Supper reminds Him of His promise to return to eat it with us. Thus, it is designed to be a prayer to ask Jesus to return (“Thy kingdom come,” **Lk 11:2**). God remembers covenant promises.

In summary, when we partake of the bread and wine, we are reminded of Jesus’ body and blood, which were given for the remission of sin. Along with Jesus, we should be reminded of His promise to return to eat it with us. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is an enacted prayer that reminds Jesus to return. This weekly reminder of the imminence of our Lord’s return can be a motivation for holy living: “we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (**1Jn 3:2–3**). *Maranatha!*

PROPOSITION

As was demonstrated above, there is general agreement within scholarly circles that the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper as a genuine meal. However, the post-apostolic church has had little use for this practice. **Williston Walker**, a well-respected professor of

³⁴ Wayne Grudem, “The Nature of Divine Eternity, A Response to William Craig”, WayneGrudem.com, accessed September 03, 2016.

³⁵ Statements about God’s remembering or being reminded are, of course, anthropomorphic. An omniscient God neither forgets nor needs to be reminded.

³⁶ K.H. Bartels, “Remember”, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. III, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 244–245.

church history at Yale, stated: “by the time Justin Martyr wrote his *Apology* in Rome (153), the common meal had disappeared, and the Supper was joined with the assembly for preaching, as a concluding sacrament.”³⁷

Throughout history, the church has sometimes deviated from New Testament patterns. For example, for more than a millennium, credo baptism was essentially unheard of in Christendom. However, since the Reformation, this long-neglected apostolic tradition has been widely practiced. Another example is the separation of church and state, a New Testament example that was disregarded during the long period in Europe when church and state were merged. Today, however, most believers appreciate this separation. The church today might be missing out on a great blessing in its neglect of the early church’s practice surrounding the Lord’s Supper. Given that celebrating the Lord’s Supper weekly as a meal was the practice of the early church, should we not follow this example?

PRESCRIPTION

For many church leaders, the New Testament example of the Lord’s Supper as a weekly fellowship meal is a precious historical memory that they feel no compulsion to follow. However, Scripture indicates that the practices of the early church should serve as more than a historical academic record. For example, **1 Corinthians 11–14** concerns church practice. The passage begins with praise for the Corinthian church for following Paul’s *traditions*: “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” (**11:2**). *Paradosis*, the Greek word for tradition, means “that which is passed on.”³⁸ This same Greek word is used as a verb form in **1 Corinthians 11:23** with regard to the practice of the Lord’s Supper (that it was passed on from Jesus to Paul and then to the Corinthians). Do we really want to disregard a tradition that was handed down by Jesus Himself? It was a commendable practice.

It is often mistakenly thought that there are no commands to follow tradition. However, **2 Thessalonians 2:15** specifically commands: “stand firm and hold to the traditions.”³⁹ Thus, we should adhere to not just apostolic *teachings* but also apostolic *traditions*.⁴⁰ The context of **2 Thessalonians 2:15** is the apostles’ tradition about the end times. The word “traditions” (**2:15**) is plural. The author was including traditions besides about the second coming. Should it not also apply to his traditions regarding church order, as indicated in the New Testament?⁴¹

The Lord’s Supper was the primary purpose the early church gathered each Lord’s Day. It was celebrated as a feast in a joyful wedding atmosphere rather than a somber funereal atmosphere. A major benefit of the Supper as a meal is the fellowship and encouragement each member experiences. Eaten as a meal, the Supper typifies the marriage supper of the Lamb and looks to the future. There should be one cup and one loaf to both symbolize and create unity in a body of believers. The bread and wine represent Jesus’ body and blood. They also serve as reminders of His promise to return to eat it with us. (Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!)

PRACTICUM

³⁷ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 38.

³⁸ Rienecker, *Linguistic*, 423.

³⁹ Imperative mode in Greek.

⁴⁰ Apostolic traditions, as recorded in the New Testament, are to be distinguished from later Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

⁴¹ A similar attitude toward tradition is expressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–7a. Tradition here refers to practice rather than just doctrine. The apostles clearly wanted the churches to follow their traditions of *both* theology and practice. Should we limit those apostolic traditions that we follow to eschatology and work habits?

The Elements: One cup and one loaf, symbolic of our unity in Christ, should be visible to the congregation. Pre-broken crackers and pre-poured tiny cups represent division and individualism. The entire congregation should partake of the same cup and loaf. Anglicans have done this for centuries without obvious harm to their health.⁴² Another option is to pour the wine from a large decanter (visible to all) into smaller cups, or to have each person dip his bread in the common cup.

The Beginning: Church planters can easily make the weekly celebration of the Holy Meal an integral part of the Sunday meetings from a church's inception. Existing churches might consider gradually phasing in the Lord's Supper as a meal. One approach could be to make the meal optional initially. The elements could be served as usual, followed by a meal in the fellowship hall for those who wish to participate. Members of the congregation should be given time to grow excited and tell others. Furthermore, unless they are persuaded of the Scriptural basis for the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper as a fellowship meal, there will be resistance to going to the trouble of preparing food to share. It is important that everyone understand the holy nature of the meal. It is not an inconvenient lunch. It is a sacred covenant meal before the Lord and with His children.

Wednesday Night Suppers: Many churches offer Wednesday night fellowship meals. The introduction of the Lord's Supper as a meal in conjunction with the existing Wednesday-night meal is a creative option, but should be only a transitional step. Two thousand years of Western Christianity have rightly ingrained in believers the notion that what happens on Sundays is what is really important. The Lord's Supper, *Agapé*, was the main reason that the early church gathered each Lord's Day. Thus, the goal should be to celebrate it on Sundays in order for it to have the same prominence accorded by the apostles. Grace unto unity comes when the entire congregation, not just the minority who attend on Wednesday night, partakes of the cup and loaf. The entire congregation needs to experience the weekly fellowship of the *Agapé*.

Integration: The bread and wine were given in the context of a dinner. To avoid the impression that the Lord's Supper is the cup and loaf and everything else is merely a meal, care should be taken not to separate the elements from the meal. The food should be ready before the elements are presented so the meal can be eaten immediately afterwards. One approach is to call attention to the significance of the elements and lead in prayer. Then, the head of each household should come forward to take the elements back to his family. After partaking of the elements, each family could then go immediately through the food serving line to begin the banquet aspect of the holy meal. This is an issue of freedom; adaptations can be made to suit the needs of each church.

Leaven: Should the bread be unleavened? During Passover, the Jews ate unleavened bread to symbolize the speed with which God brought them out of Egypt. No doubt, Jesus used unleavened bread during the Last Supper. However, the New Testament is silent on the use of unleavened bread in Gentile churches. In the New Testament, yeast is sometimes associated with evil (**1Co 5:6–8**). It is also used to represent God's kingdom (**Mt 13:33**). The real symbolism is the bread itself, leavened or unleavened, as Jesus' body.

Should the fruit of the vine be alcoholic? It is clear from **1 Corinthians 11** that wine was used in the Lord's Supper. Some became drunk. However, no clear theological reason is given in the New Testament for its being alcoholic (consider **Gn 27:28**, **Isa 25:6–9**, and **Ro 14:21**). Jesus called it simply the fruit of the vine. The object lesson is that red wine looks like blood. As is the case with leavened or unleavened bread, the use of wine or grape juice would

⁴² The alcohol in wine kills the germs.

seem to be a matter of freedom. Thus, each local church can make decisions with spiritual sensitivity for one another.

Unbelievers: Most churches restrict access to the elements. For example, the *Baptist Faith and Message* of 2000 deemed baptism the prerequisite for enjoying the privileges of the Lord's Supper. However, the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a meal could change the perspective on the presence of unbelievers. That the bread and wine are only for believers should be announced. The Lord's Supper, as an actual meal, has spiritual significance to believers only. To nonbelievers, it is merely another meal. As is the case with believers, unbelieving adults and children who are too young to believe also experience hunger. They can be invited to enjoy the meal. We can love them to the Lord! The danger in taking the Lord's Supper in an "unworthy manner" applies only to believers (**1Co 11:27–32**).

Where Did It Go? Greg Mamula's research led him to conclude that the transition from full meal to token ritual was gradual, taking place during the mid-second century in some places to mid-third century in others: "The key to transition was connected to the size of the congregation. The larger ones transitioned earlier. They needed a more efficient way to gather people and distribute the most significant symbols of the meal.... The smaller congregations continued to use meals until the mid-third century when the standard practice became the more recognizable Eucharist officiated by key leaders such as bishops and their approved leaders.... Researchers have difficulty precisely understanding why this transition took place. By the fourth century, it is clear the tradition of full meals held in homes is gone. The Eucharistic rite inside of a basilica or other large church becomes the new norm."⁴³

In his role as bishop, **Eusebius** consecrated a church building in Tyre. At the dedication, he spoke of the most holy altar as the center of the building. The Synod of Laodicea later forbade the celebration of the Lord's Supper in private homes (late 300s). **Peter Davids** and **Siegfried Grossman** offered this comment: "Once you have an altar with 'holy food,' mixing it with the common food of a communal meal appears profane. Thus, the focus on the table as altar brings about the forbidding of celebrating the Lord's Supper in houses. The irony is that in the tabernacle and temple the central act of worship was a family meal in the presence of the deity, the temple being part slaughterhouse and part bar-b-que, as well as being the place where animal fat was burned and incense was offered."⁴⁴

Logistics: Sandra Atkerson contributed the following practical ideas on logistics: "Ask each family to prepare food at home and bring it to share with everyone else. Many churches have had great success with the potluck (or pot providence) method. The Lord's Supper is a feast of good and bountiful food with fellowship centered around Christ, a picture of the marriage banquet of the Lamb. It is a time to give and share liberally with our brothers and sisters in Christ. As for how much to bring, if you were having one more family over for dinner with your family, how much of one dish would you prepare? If church were cancelled for some reason, could you satisfy your own family with what you prepared to take to the Lord's Supper? Encourage each family to bring a main dish and a side dish. Desserts should be considered optional and brought as a third dish but never as the only dish by a family. At least enough food should be brought by every family to feed themselves and have more left over to share with others. The singles, especially those not inclined to cook, might bring drinks, peanuts, dessert, chips and dip, or a prepared deli item such as potato salad or rotisserie chicken. The congregation should see this as a giving expense, a ministry, an offering to the Lord.

⁴³ Greg Mamula, "Early Christian Table Fellowship Becomes Eucharistic Rite", unpublished paper, 2015, 16–18.

⁴⁴ Peter Davids and Siegfried Grossmann, "The Church in the House", paper, 1982.

Confusion is minimized at the time of serving if your dish is ready when you arrive. Cook it before you come. Consider investing in a Pyrex Portables insulated hot/cold carrier that will keep your food at the temperature at which it was prepared. Hot plates can be plugged in to keep dishes warm. Others could bring crock pots. The oven can be put on warm and dishes stored there. Wool blankets or beach towels work well for hot/cold insulation during transport. Coolers in the summer months are great for icing down cold dishes.

The main point to remember for food safety is to keep hot foods hot at 150 degrees and cold foods cold at 40 degrees. Once the food is out for serving, it should sit out no longer than 2–3 hours before it is refrigerated. Dispose of any food left out longer than four hours.

Parents should consider helping their children prepare plates. Little ones often have eyes bigger than their stomachs and much food can go to waste. Many churches prefer to buy smaller 12 or 16 ounce cups. Most folks tend to fill their cups full, often not drinking it all. Smaller cups make less waste. It is better to go back for refills than to throw away unwanted drink.

A word about hygiene might be appropriate—there can never be enough hand washing among friends! Be sensitive to germs. All folks going through the serving line should wash before touching serving utensils. Put out a pump jar of hand sanitizer right by the plates at the beginning of the line. To help with cleanup, consider using paper plates and plastic cups and forks.⁴⁵

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the scholarly consensus on the early church's celebration of the Lord's Supper? Why does this consensus matter?
2. How is the focus of the Lord's Supper both backward and forward?
3. If Acts 2:42–47 refers to the Lord's Supper, how would you describe its mood (funeral or festive)?
4. What theological reason did Paul give for using a single loaf for the Lord's Supper?
5. What are the indicators in 1 Corinthians 11:17–22 that the Lord's Supper was eaten as an actual meal?
6. Why does the word "until" in 1 Corinthians 11:26 indicate purpose (why) and not merely duration (how long)?
7. Describe the "unworthy manner" that made some in Corinth guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord (1Co 11:27)? How should this influence us today?
8. According to 1 Corinthians 11:33–34, what was the inspired solution for abuse of the Lord's Supper?
9. What is the only reason given in the New Testament for the early church's gathering each Lord's Day?
10. What blessings might a church miss by not celebrating the Lord's Supper as an actual holy meal?

NTRF.org has audio, video, and a teacher's discussion guide on communion.

Revised 05/12/21

⁴⁵ Sandra Atkerson, "Hints for Hosting the Lord's Supper", NTRF.org. Accessed March 31, 2015.

