

The Lord's Supper

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Introduction: Calls for change in the current practice of the Lord's supper.

A. "Having emasculated the vibrant fellowship meal of the early disciples and reduced it to a little more than an emblematic ritual, we have already made a false start in our worship focus." Smith, p.141

1. "Is it not possible to work *within the system* to bring about any necessary changes? Surely, the early church's weekly memorial meal is Exhibit A in the case for saying, 'no.' To radically restore the centerpiece of New Testament Christian worship would be next to impossible within our current framework." Smith, p.143

2. "For good or ill, it is not a first-century Lord's Supper that we eat today. Our highly ritualized version comes nowhere near capturing the vibrant essence of the Lord's Supper in the model church." Smith, p.132

3. "Can we continue to treat the Lord's Supper as just a superficial Sunday ritual that receives little time or thought without being guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ?" Smith, p.144

a) Smith is firm and clear in his denunciation of the present practice of the Lord's Supper. He believes in "pattern theology" and sees the present practice as a total departure. However, when he explains what he believes the practice should be, he is vague and inexact in the description of the New Testament pattern. For example, "As we've already seen, the disciples in Troas *apparently* met together on the first day of every week. Of course, *it's possible* that the occasion being reported was nothing more than an isolated incident. *For that matter, even if* the disciples in Troas met regularly each week, it *wouldn't necessarily* mean that Christians in other places followed suit. Yes, we are not left without *fairly* compelling reason to believe that such weekly assemblies were common for all first-century disciples." Smith, p.138 (emphasis mine JRA)

B. "The premise of this book is that our practice of the supper as a silent, solemn, individualistic eating of bread and drinking of wine is radically dissimilar from the joyous communal meal that united Christians in the first century house churches." Hicks, pp.9-10

C. Whether we agree with their conclusions or not, we must be constantly open for inspection. We must be ready to leave at any moment our present practices if necessary to conform to the teachings of Christ. Our standard is not how we have been practicing what we believe to be the truth but the truth of God itself.

D. In this lesson, we will first examine what F. LaGard Smith and others believe the observance of the Lord's supper should be. We will then examine the pattern in the word of God to understand the truth.

I. The Varied Reinventions of the Lord's Supper.

A. The denominational world

1. Wolfgang Simson, (member of the Lausanne Movement in Germany)

a) **A common meal** - “Church tradition has managed to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a homeopathic and deeply religious form, characteristically with a few drops of wine, a tasteless cookie, and a sad face. However, the Lord’s Supper was actually more a substantial supper with a symbolic meaning than a symbolic supper with a substantial meaning. God is restoring eating back into our meetings.” Simson, p.xx

2. Steve Atkerson, Editor, (member of the New Testament Reformation Fellowship)

a) **Elements - a common meal** - “The meal is potluck, or as we jokingly say, ‘pot-providence.’ Everyone brings food to share with everyone else. When the weather is nice, all the food is placed on a long folding table outside. A chest full of ice sits beside the drink table. Kids run wildly around. They are having so much fun that they must be rounded up by parents and encouraged to eat. After a prayer of thanksgiving is offered, people line up, talking and laughing as they load their plates with food. In the middle of all the food sits a single loaf of bread next to a large container of fruit of the vine. Each believer partakes of the bread and juice/wine while going through the serving line.

The smaller kids are encouraged to occupy one of the few places at the table to eat. (They sure can be messy!). Chairs for adults (there are not enough for everyone) are clustered in circles, mainly occupied by the women, who eat while discussing home schooling, child training, sewing, an upcoming church social, the new church we hope to start, etc. Most of the men stand to eat, balancing their plates on top of their cups, grouped into small clusters and solving the world’s problems or pondering some interesting topic of theology. The atmosphere is not unlike that of a wedding banquet. It is a great time for fellowship, encouragement, edification, friendship, caring, catching-up, praying, exhorting and maturing. The reason for the event? In case you did not recognize it, this is the Lord’s Supper, New Testament style!” Atkerson p.31

1) “There is general agreement within the scholarly circles of all denominations regarding the fact that the early church celebrated the Lord’s Supper as a full meal.” Atkerson, p. 44.

b) **Purpose**

1) **Reminding Jesus** – “the meal’s function is a constant reminder to God to bring about the Parousia.” Atkerson, p.37

2) **Creating Unity** – “The one loaf not only pictures our unity in Christ, but according to 1 Corinthians 10:17 even creates unity! . . . Partaking of a pile of broken cracker crumbs and multiple cups of juice is a picture of disunity, division, and individuality.”

Atkerson, p.38

3) **Fellowship** – “the early church enjoyed the Lord’s Supper as a time of fellowship and gladness, just like one would enjoy at a wedding banquet.” Atkerson, p.40

c) **Frequency**

1) **Weekly** – “Early believers ate the Lord’s Supper weekly, and it was the main purpose for their coming together each Lord’s Day.” Atkerson, p.40

B. Among institutional churches of Christ

1. F. LaGard Smith

a) **Elements - In conjunction with a fellowship meal -**

“perhaps the most universally-overlooked feature of the Lord’s Supper as practiced in the primitive church is that – from all appearances – it was observed in conjunction with a fellowship meal. . . . Hence, Jude’s reference to their ‘love feasts.’” Smith, p.128-129

1) “At whatever time the bread and the cup of the Lord became the moment of focus – whether before, during, or after the meal . . .” Smith, p.133

b) **Thanksgiving meal** - “Apparently, their love feasts were a mirror image of our own Thanksgiving celebrations, with home, family, food, love, prayer and shared memories. Especially the memory of Christ.” Smith, p.146

c) **Women participation** - “In the early church, you can be sure that women ‘served the Supper,’ because it was the women who prepared and served the memorial meal” Smith, p.160

d) **Frequency**

1) “Although these brief fragments are circumstantial, the evidence is compelling that first-century Christians did, in fact, observe the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week.” Smith, p.138

2. John Mark Hicks (professor of theology at Lipscomb University, Nashville, TN)

a) **Elements - a meal** – “It is not simply the bread and wine that fulfill the Passover typology, but eating the meal. The meal, rather than simply bread and wine, is the Lord’s supper as it fulfills the Passover.” Hicks, p.68

1) “The church should revision the supper as a table rather than an altar.”

(a) “The predominant atmosphere of the supper in the contemporary church is an altar mentality. . . We come to the ‘altar’ with our guilt and remorse, or we come to the ‘altar’ with deep introspection. We are encouraged to think about the death of Christ, especially its pain and gore . . . the meaning of Christ’s atonement . . . what Christ did on the cross . . . in silent contemplative prayer or meditation.” Hicks, p.152

(b) “. . . the table metaphor is more than figurative language. It was a real table as Christians gathered for a meal where they shared themselves and their food in the presence of the living host. The table, as a meal, was an interactive event where people talked with each other and ‘fellowshipped’ each other. . . the table was a public, expressive and communal event . . . with joy and peace . . . a celebrative thanksgiving meal.” Hicks, p.153

2) “**The Order**” “First, seat everyone at a table (including children). Second, ask each person to introduce themselves. Third, . . . a few songs. Fourth, stress the significance of this evening as commemoration of Jesus Christ and a communion with him and with each other. Fifth, begin the meal with a prayer. . . Sixth, early in the meal, after about 5 minutes, take the break in your hands and ask the table about the meaning of the bread. . . Allow some discussion . . . Encourage people to take a large piece [of bread] rather than just a small bite - break off enough to chew or eat for a few minutes, even to eat throughout the rest of the meal. Seventh, . . . Go around the table asking for prayer requests. . . Eighth, . . . the leader should take the pitcher of juice and ask about its meaning. Here the emphasis should be on hope and joy. . . ask them to share something God has done in their lives . . . Ninth, serve dessert, and spend the last moments of the meal talking about the experience of the supper as a meal. . . Tenth, . . . a time for songs of praise, or perhaps simply conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for the evening.” Hicks, pp.162-165

b) **Purpose**

1) **Covenantal Memory** – “The spiritual reality of this covenant is actualized for us through our remembering.” Hicks, p.140

- 2) **Covenantal Renewal** – “It is a moment of rededication and recommitment” Hicks, p.141
- 3) **Covenantal Presence** – “He [Jesus] hosts and serves his table and is thereby present among his people when they eat and drink together.” Hicks, p.141
- 4) **Covenantal Fellowship** – “. . . it is not only a fellowship between God and the community, but it is a communal fellowship within the community.” Hicks, p.142
- 5) **Covenantal Promise** – “. . . a celebration of God’s victory over death through Jesus.” Hicks, p.142
- 6) **Social function** – “The disciples not only shared their material possessions with those in need, but they shared their food as well. The Lord’s supper had a social function. In this way, the church shared food with the poor in their community.” Hicks, p.92
- 7) **Future “Messianic Banquet”** – “The kingdom of God at the table anticipates the coming full reign of God where we will dwell with God on the new earth and eat at the banquet table.” Hicks, p.65

c) **Frequency** –

- 1) “Consequently, ‘breaking bread’ in Acts 2:42 and 2:46 refer to the Lord’s supper which was experienced as a daily meal in the Jerusalem church.” Hicks, p.92
- 2) “While the Jerusalem church did this daily, daily observances were not uniform throughout the whole church as Troas appears to have turned the daily observance into a weekly one.” Hicks, p.95

C. Among conservative churches of Christ

1. It has proved to be difficult to find first-hand accounts of observances (in writing) of the Lord’s supper among these groups.
2. It appears the observance is similar to the ones described above by Smith and Hicks with variations.

II. What is the Biblical Pattern?

A. The Lord’s Supper was established during the Passover meal.

1. **Original** pattern of Passover given through Moses

a) **Frequency**

- 1) Ex.12:2-20 - yearly

b) **Elements**

- 1) Ex. 12:5-5-10 – roasted lamb to be completely eaten
- 2) Ex. 12:8 – unleavened bread
 - (a) Ex. 12:19 – no leaven permitted in their houses.
 - (b) Duet. 15:3 – “the bread of affliction”
- 3) Ex. 12:8 – bitter herbs

4) Ex. 12:11 – to be eaten with a belt on, sandals on and a staff in the hand. To be eaten in haste.

c) **Purpose**

1) Ex. 12:14 – a memorial of deliverance

(a) Ex. 12:7,13 – lamb’s blood on the doorpost was a sign to distinguish Jew from Egyptian so that the angel of death would “pass over”. The death of the firstborn caused Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go free.

(b) Ex. 13:8 –children were to be taught what God had done.

2. **Practice in the time of Christ** according to the Mishnah (Jewish oral tradition accumulated 536 BC to 70AD recorded in 220 AD) as relayed by Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp.490-512 and *The Temple – Its Ministry and Services*, pp.143-150

a) First cup of fruit of the vine with the giving of thanks.

b) Washing of hands by the leader at the table.

c) Bitter herbs dipped in salt-water and eaten by all.

d) Part of the unleavened bread broken and saved for after the supper.

e) Second cup filled and, when raised, a young boy was to ask about the purpose of the supper. An explanation was given about God delivering His people from Egypt. The cup would then be raised two more times with prayers and thanksgiving before drinking.

f) Everyone would wash their hands.

g) The meal: lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs wrapped together and dipped in the sop.

h) The third cup filled and a “special blessing” pronounced over it.

i) Giving of thanks after the meal.

j) Washing of hands.

k) Remainder of unleavened bread eaten.

l) Luke 22:7-20 gives us somewhat of a feel for the process of the meal. It is impossible to know which parts if any of the additional tradition Jesus and His apostles followed since the gospel accounts do not record the full detail of the supper.

B. Jesus established His supper to be observed in His kingdom by giving new significance to specific items of the Passover supper.

1. Luke 22:15-18 - This new significance looked forward to a new feast to be observed in His kingdom, the church.

2. **Elements and their significance**

a) Luke 22:19 – The bread is the body of Christ which was sacrificed for mankind the following day.

1) Heb. 10:5-10 – The body of Jesus was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

b) Luke 22:20 – The cup is the new covenant. This also looked to the imminent shedding of His blood on the cross for mankind.

1) Heb. 9:16-26 – The blood of Jesus put the new covenant in force and cleansed all things in the new covenant system.

3. Purpose

a) Luke 22:19 - “in remembrance of Me” (only time mentioned in the gospels)

1) 1 Cor. 11:23-26 – (2x) “in remembrance of Me”

b) Individual aspect

1) 1 Cor. 11:27-30 – self-examination to insure those partaking are thinking of the body and blood of the Lord while eating and drinking.

c) Church/communal aspect.

1) 1 Cor. 11:18-20, 33-34 – Lord’s supper to be observed during the worship service.

2) 1 Cor. 10:14-22 –

(a) Partaking of the Lord’s supper is a reflection of the Christians exclusive covenant relationship with Jesus.

(b) Partaking of the Lord’s supper is a reflection of our unity/oneness as the body of Christ.

4. Frequency

a) Acts 2:42 – a reoccurring action – “continued steadfastly”

1) “breaking of bread” by synecdoche refers to the Lord’s supper.

b) Acts 20:7 – first day of the week.

1) Paul waited for this specific day.

2) “to break bread” – purpose of meeting together

3) Significance of the first day of the week

(a) Luke 24:1 – the day of Jesus’ resurrection

(b) Acts 2:1 – the day of the establishment of the church

(c) 1 Cor. 16:2 - the day for individuals in a church to give to a common treasury, necessarily implies a day of worship.

(d) Rev. 1:10 – “the Lord’s day”. All days are the Lord’s but one was set apart (for specific items of worship).

III. Questions

A. Are we commanded/instructed about which emotions we should have during the feast?

1. Those who want to “revision” the Lord’s supper want to include some emotions felt and exclude others. “Rather than a private introspection, the table was a public, expressive and communal event.

Rather than approached in penance, sorrow and remorse, people experienced the table with joy and peace. Rather than feeling remorse for what Christ had to do on the cross because of our sin, the table was a celebrative thanksgiving meal for what God did in Christ. It expressed commitment more than penance. Table was more about eating and drinking with the risen Lord than it was a gruesome remembrance of the death of Christ.” Hicks, p.153

- a) The Bible does not specify which emotions are to be felt while partaking of the Lord’s supper.
 - b) Why do Hicks and others divorce the sorrow from the joy? Can’t we feel both?
2. When we observe the supper as the Lord intends (with proper elements and meaning), it will produce a variety of emotions:
- a) Sorrow for the death of Jesus.
 - b) Pain/guilt for the reason of His death – our sins.
 - c) Relief, gratitude, joy for the effects of His death on our behalf.
 - d) Comfort, support knowing that those eating the supper with us are bought with the same blood. We are members of His body.
 - e) Joy, hope, peace knowing that His death was not the end. He is risen and eats the feast with us.
- B. Are we to partake of it as part of a meal, a full meal or a memorial?
1. Jesus instituted the Lord’s supper while eating the Passover meal.
 - a) If any meal were authorized, it would resemble the Passover meal not a “pot-luck” or “fellowship” meal.
 2. We must determine which parts of the example are authorized/binding and which are not.
 - a) As with any example we must ask:
 - 1) Is anything specifically distinguished as approved of by God in the text?
 - 2) What is incidental and what is given significance?
 - 3) What is consistent and constant in all accounts?
 - b) Luke 22:13; Acts 20:9 - the upper room is not binding because there is no significance placed on it.
 - c) Luke 22:8 - the entire meal with the Passover lamb, bitter herbs is not binding because there is no significance given to it.
 - d) Luke 22:19-20 - the unleavened bread and cup are given significance, are consistent and constant in all of the accounts and are therefore binding.
 3. Some point to the abuse of the Lord’s supper by the Corinthians as proof that it is to be a meal or part of a meal.
 - a) 1 Cor. 11:17-22 – The church in Corinth appeared to have made the Lord’s supper into a common meal. Divisions existed within the church (We are not told why. Perhaps the cause is the same condemned in 1 Cor.1:11). These divisions were

manifested in the eating of the meal in that some were eating, others were drinking and others were neglected.

b) 1 Cor. 11:20 – Paul identified these problems as so severe that the church was no longer partaking of the Lord’s supper in the proper manner.

c) The solution

1) 1 Cor. 11:22,34 – If they wanted to eat a meal to satisfy physical hunger, eat it at home. The Lord’s supper was not designed to satisfy physical hunger or thirst. The quantity of food was too small. The purpose was to remember Jesus’ body and blood.

2) 1 Cor. 11:23-32 – follow the pattern of the Lord for the Lord’s supper.

3) 1 Cor. 11:33 – wait for each other. Don’t ignore the fellowship aspect of the meal (emphasized in 1 Cor. 10:16-17).

d) Rather than supporting the concept of a common meal, this passage argues against it.

4. There are no “Lord’s supper is a common meal” passages in the New Testament. Some, however, twist Jude 12 and 2 Peter 2:13 to support their teaching.

a) Jude 12 – “in your *love feasts*, while they *feast* with you”

b) 2 Peter 2:13 – “while they *feast* with you”

c) Both of these contexts use highly figurative language. To make this “feast” a common meal is out of harmony with the texts.

d) The specific meaning of these “feasts” are not defined for us in the text.

1) They could be referring to the Lord’s supper as described in the New Testament. It is a feast of love. This interpretation would connect these somewhat vague terms with something known in Scripture.

2) They could refer to the entire worship service to God as described elsewhere in the New Testament. It is a feast of love. This interpretation would connect these somewhat vague terms with something known in Scripture.

e) Barnes summarizes his view of the claims of some in his day that the “love feasts” referred to the Lord’s supper eaten as a common meal. “The reference is probably to the Lord’s Supper, called a feast or festival of love . . . It has been supposed by many, that the reference here is to festivals which were subsequently called “Agapae,” and which are now known as “love-feasts” - meaning a festival immediately “preceding” the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. But there are strong objections to the supposition that there is reference here to such a festival. (1) There is no evidence, unless it be found in

this passage, that such celebrations had the sanction of the apostles. . . (3) There can be no doubt that such a custom early existed in the Christian church, and extensively prevailed; but it can readily be accounted for without supposing that it had the sanction of the apostles, or that it existed in their time.”
Barnes pp.397-398

C. Are we merely following the traditions of the Catholics in our observance of the Lord’s supper?

1. Yes, there are some similarities. The reason for these similarities is that they are in harmony with the Biblical pattern.
2. But there are substantial differences. The reason for these differences is that they are not in harmony with the Biblical pattern.
 - a) Catholicism – Only certain ones can preside - the priests
 - 1) Biblical pattern – All Christians are priests.
 - b) Catholicism – the “mass” is a re-sacrifice of Christ each time.
 - 1) Biblical pattern – Jesus only died once, we are to remember in the supper.
 - c) Catholicism – Transubstantiation.
 - 1) Biblical pattern – memorial, symbols.
 - d) Catholicism – Infuses grace with each observance.
 - 1) Biblical pattern – a memorial/proclamation of His death.
 - e) Catholicism – can be observed any day, every day.
 - 1) Biblical pattern – on the first day of the week.

D. Do we have to do the exact same thing each time?

1. Variations are allowed in the observance but all must be within the pattern.
2. We can sing together before, during or after the supper.
3. One could lead our thoughts by speaking before, during or after the supper.
 - a) Focusing on the death of Christ.
 - b) Focusing on the meaning of the death.
 - c) Focusing on the praise/ thanksgiving/ joy/ pain/ guilt/ sorrow/ hope we feel.
4. One could lead additional prayers before or after the supper.
5. All the members could eat and/or drink in unison or separately as the emblems are passed.
6. Etc.

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