

# **The Communion Eucharist Lord's Supper**

**By Dr. David A. DeWitt**

The one thing which we can agree is abundantly clear about the Communion Eucharist Lord's Supper is that there is almost nothing we can agree on as being abundantly clear about Communion Eucharist Lord's Supper. As a matter of fact, some will not agree that my first sentence is abundantly clear. I suppose most of us would agree we should do it. But we, the church, can certainly not agree on what "it" is or what it means to "do" it.

We cannot even agree on what to call it.

We cannot agree on who should take it.

We cannot agree on who should administer it.

We cannot agree on what bread should be used.

We cannot agree on what wine should be used.

We cannot agree on whether it should be just bread and wine.

We cannot agree on where it should be taken.

We cannot agree on when it should be taken.

We cannot agree on how it should be taken.

We cannot agree on why it should be taken.

We cannot agree on what the elements become when we take them.

We cannot agree about its origin. And

We cannot agree about its purpose.

So what does all that mean? Well, at the very least, it means we should not withdraw our fellowship from believers who understand it differently than we do. But, of course, some (make that, many) will not agree with that either. So the odds of my saying anything which everybody will agree with are very small—make that, nonexistent.

My approach to this subject will be based exclusively on the material available in the New Testament. I believe the church is defined by Christ and the apostles—not sacred tradition, church councils, post-apostolic fathers, reformers, creeds, confessions, or doctrinal statements. All those post-New Testament things are historically helpful in that they show us how people have understood this ritual. Nonetheless, they are (in my view) not an inspired-of-God authority. The New Testament is.

## **Communion**

I shall, in this writing, call it Communion for no other reason than I don't want to write all three names every time. (Actually, there are other names for it, as well.) Anyway, the word "Communion" comes from 1 Corinthians 10:16 where the "cup" and "bread" are called a *koinonia*. It's the normal word for "fellowship" but can be translated "communion." *Koinonia* is also the first word used for it (Acts 2:42).

## **The Eucharist**

The word "Eucharist" comes from the post-apostolic church. The church of the 100s and 200s had a gathering which consisted of preaching, prayers, and a meal (called an

agape or love feast). The meal included the ceremonial breaking of bread and taking the cup. The food for the *agape* meal was prepared and brought by the believers and then blessed by a prayer of the bishop. (The church of the 100s and 200s had abandoned the apostles' plurality of leadership model for one powerful bishop over each church and later over each city.) The prayer of the bishop for the food was considered a consecrating prayer called a Eucharistia. Thus it became a sacrament called the Eucharist.

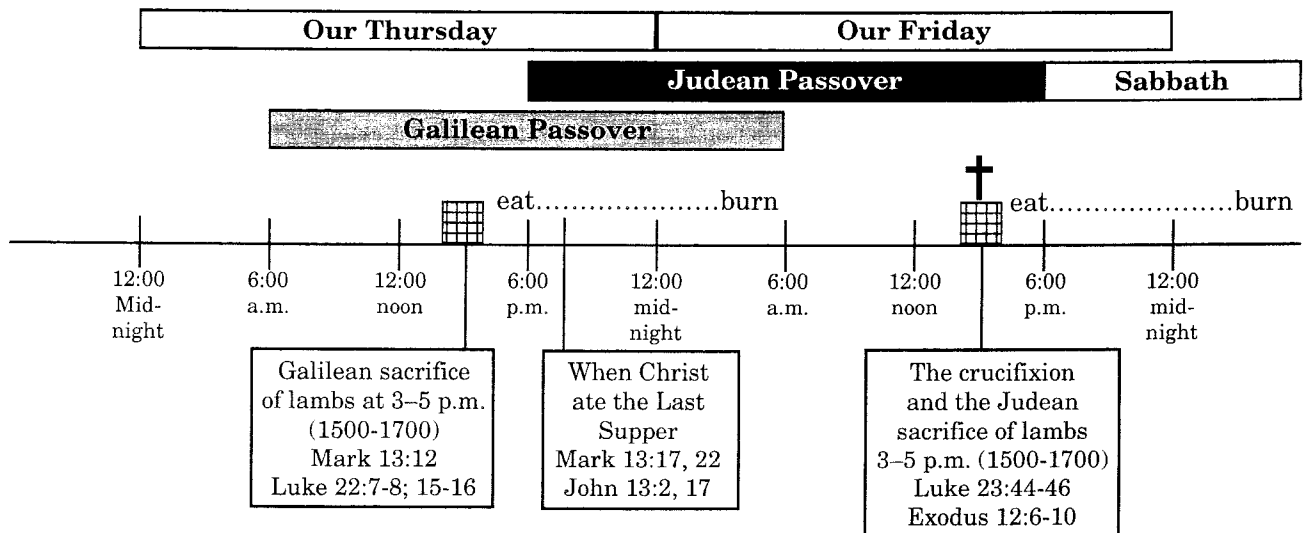
### The Lord's Supper

The term "Lord's Supper" comes from 1 Corinthians 11:20. "When you come together, *kuriakom deiphon phagein* (the "of the Lord" "supper" "to eat"). It's interesting that all three of these most common uses for this ritual come from the meal, not specifically the taking of the bread and wine. "To eat the Lord's Supper" emphasizes this is a meal to be eaten for the Lord. It was not primarily for the church but an act of worship the church did for the Lord.

Anyway, for convenience, I'll just call it Communion.

### Communion and Passover

It would appear that the first Communion meal which Christ took with the 12 was indeed a celebration of the Passover. There is some disagreement about this (surprise! surprise!!). The Communion view the covenant reformers, the Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox requires this because they see the church as a continuation of Israel. So Communion became, for them, a continuation of Passover—not exactly, of course, but in its ceremonial significance. Therefore, it must be administered by a priest in the "house of God." The Brethren say the first Communion was before Passover, based on statements from the Gospel of John, like John 13:1, "Now before the feast of the Passover ...." The synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) seem to see it as on the Passover, John before the Passover. The problem is easily solved, however, because according to Josephus and the Mishna (and other Jewish sources), there were two Passover celebrations. The northern Galilean Jews celebrated Passover from sunrise to sunrise, and the southern Judean Jews celebrated it from sundown to sundown. It graphs like this:



Apparently, Jesus ate the Last Supper on the Galilean Passover (since He and His disciples were Galileans), and He was crucified at the same exact time that the lambs were sacrificed at the Temple for the Judean Passover. Jesus died right after 1500/3 P.M. (Luke 23:44). The Jews interpreted "twilight" (Exodus 12:6) as from 1500 to 1700/3-5 P.M. So the gospel accounts all harmonize perfectly, and Jesus did, indeed, eat the Last Supper which became the first Communion on the (Galilean) Passover.

That does not, however, allow us to treat Communion as a Christianized Passover. Luther saw it that way and used 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Christ our Passover" to prove it. He translated it "we, too, have a Passover, which is Christ, crucified for us." The problem is, that verse says it's Christ Who is our Passover, not the Communion service. There is nothing here which would connect the Passover to the Communion. The Passover lamb is a symbol (a type) of Christ, but the Passover meal is not a type of the Communion meal. Passover is the lamb that was sacrificed by priests at the Temple altar. The Passover meal was served by fathers (or patriarchs) in homes to, by Jewish law, no less than 10 nor more than 20 people.

We must assume that the apostles were led of the Holy Spirit to start the church in the manner in which Christ intended. But the Communion set up by the apostles was certainly not the Passover. The Passover was an annual feast in Jerusalem to celebrate the exodus from Egypt when the angel of death passed over the houses marked with the blood of the lamb. To be sure, there are types of Christ in all that, but it is not what the apostles celebrated with Communion. Communion was, at first, daily (Acts 2:42, 46), then weekly (Acts 20:7), and probably at various times and in various places. Also, it's purpose was to remember Christ and His death until He comes again. This was clearly different from the purpose of Passover. So it seems that we must assume that Christ ate the Passover to fulfill the meaning of the Passover and to launch a new event for the church not connected to the Passover but connected only to Christ Himself.

### **Eating His Flesh and Drinking His Blood in John 6**

The Roman Catholics claim that Communion is eating Christ's body and blood. Their doctrine of transubstantiation says the elements become the physical body and blood of Christ as you eat them. This was established by Pope Innocent III at the Lateran Council of 1215 A.D. The Catholics use John 6 to support their view. John 6:54 reads, *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

There are two significant problems in using John 6 to support a transubstantiation Communion. One, it is given before the upper room meal, and two, it's about salvation not about an act of worship for believers. Christ, in John 6, declares that there is salvation in His body and in His blood. But no church I know of sees Communion as an act which initiates salvation. Quite the opposite. Most churches have taught that one must not only be a believer but a spiritual believer (with sins confessed recently) to be qualified to participate in most Communion rituals. The context of John 6 has nothing at all to do with Communion.

## **"This is My body ... this is My blood" in the Upper Room**

Another major discussion throughout church history has been centered around Christ's statements about His body and blood during the Last Supper. Let's read it. *And when He had taken {some} bread {and} given thanks, He broke {it,} and gave {it} to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And in the same way {He took} the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood (Luke 22:19-20).*

Luther, the Roman Catholic church, and the Eastern Orthodox church emphasizes that Christ said the bread *is* My body and the wine *is* My blood. Luther said, "Scripture must be understood in its proper and native sense, unless a plain and urgent reason compels the adoption of a figurative interpretation" (*Luther's Position Summary* by I.S.B.E., p. 1927). But this is a poor hermeneutical principle. Scripture is to be interpreted according to the author's intended meaning. There is no reason to pre-spin the author in a certain direction. Some of the Psalms, some of the Song of Solomon, and several poems, like Deborah and Barak in Judges, are mostly figurative.

True interpretation comes only from the mind of the author. Christ also called Himself a vine, living water, a bridegroom, and a shepherd. He is also called a cornerstone and a high priest. These are clearly figures which describe Him not physical things that define Him.

We should also notice that Christ didn't exactly say the cup is His blood. He said, "this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." So the cup is not His blood but the new covenant in His blood. It seems (well, to me, at least) that He was using the cup to symbolize the blood as it was poured out for them (and us) on the cross. As such, it established a new covenant, one where both Jews and Gentiles could come to God through faith in Him (Ephesians 3:1-10). I cannot see that He was setting up a ceremony where He was somehow bodily or spiritually present in the elements.

## **The Frequency of Communion**

Notice in the above passage, Jesus said, "... do this in remembrance of Me." According to Paul, He said (meant), "... do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

"Do this" seems to be a command to reproduce something, and what the apostles reproduced was, apparently, a whole meal with a ceremonial taking of the bread and cup. But the apostles varied the time from daily to weekly. So there does not seem to be a specified frequency to Communion.

## **The Significance of Communion**

Christ gives the significance clearly as "do this in remembrance of Me." Paul adds, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). So the purpose seems to have three facets, all centered in remembering Christ: (1) remember Him (His life), (2) remember His death, and (3) remember His coming again. It seems, therefore, that the point of Communion is to glorify God. It is a form of worship, centered in remembrance. [By the way, when Paul says it's a proclamation of the significance of Christ's death until He comes again, I

take it he means until Christ comes for the church at the Rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50f.]

Communion is, therefore, an act of glorifying Christ. To glorify is to proclaim the greatness of someone. A capitalistic term would be “to advertise.” Communion glorifies, i.e., proclaims, Christ. So it is not something Christ does for the church, it is something the church does for Christ.

So I’m afraid I must disagree here with the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, and the Lutherans since they all see it as being *for* the church. For example, Luther said, “The sacrament is instituted for us Christians.” The Orthodox and Roman Catholics believe this is a ceremony through which God imparts grace to the believer, who takes it. So according to them, it is God serving the believer. But if I read the Scripture rightly, it is just the opposite. It’s the believer serving God. Certainly that has eternal value for the believer, but that’s not the point of the passages about Communion. Communion points up not down. It’s to worship and glorify God by remembering and proclaiming Christ and the significance of His death until He comes. It’s nowhere in Scripture described as a ceremony by which God imparts grace to the church.

### **Communion Is the Gatherings of the New Testament Church**

Actually, we have quite a bit of information on this from Acts and the epistles. Christ’s Last Supper in the upper room seems to be the first supper for the church. His statement, “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19) gave the church a format for their regular worship gatherings.

This was established very early when the physical needs of the believer converted in Jerusalem were primarily met by gatherings for worshipful meals. One of their basic reasons for gathering was “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42, 46) and the breaking of bread was a meal (*see* Matthew 14:19, Luke 24:30, Acts 20:11). These meals were one of the ways they shared all things in common. It was a way to feed the large number of people who came to Jerusalem for Passover and then became believers in Christ, primarily through the preaching of Peter and John (Acts 2–5). This meal worship format also gave opportunity for fellowship, prayer, and for the apostles to teach them more about the Jesus they had just received.

When the persecution scattered them all over Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1), most of them went home to the many places they were from (Acts 2:8-11). When they arrived, they apparently set up the same sort of worship meal that they had learned in Jerusalem. They called it “the Lord’s Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:20) and the “love feast” (Jude 12).

The most common gathering for this worship meal was in homes (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15-16; and Philemon 2). These were usually small gatherings hosted by some mature Christian couple who exercised a gift of hospitality by opening their home to believers for the love feast on some regular basis. In Jerusalem, it was daily (Acts 2:42, 46). In Troas, it was weekly (Acts 20:1-11). But the frequency of the meal meeting was never prescribed. It was always “as often as” you do it (1 Corinthians 11:25; *see also* Romans 14:5).

The size of the group was usually those who could fit in a home—possibly at first following the Passover formula of from 10 to 20 people, although I get the picture the numbers exceeded that. There may also have been larger gatherings of all the believers in a city (1 Corinthians 11:18). Of course, in many cities, all the believers could fit in one home early on. But since they used various homes for these meals in Jerusalem, it seems most reasonable to conclude that when their numbers exceeded those who could meet in one home, they met in different homes—as they had in Jerusalem. (This seems to be what is described in Romans 16, for example.)

Nonetheless, even with growing numbers of believers, they continued to meet in homes (Acts 17:24) around a love feast meal. As late as 75 A.D., some 40 years after the church began in Acts 2 at Jerusalem, the regular meeting of the church was a love feast (Jude 12—Jude was written about 75 A.D.). The apostles never discouraged this practice but rather taught it and participated in it (1 Corinthians 11:23).

What the apostles objected to was not the use of it but the misuse of it. The apostles objected to: (1) faction and divisions in the gathering, (2) drunkenness and gluttony during the feast, (3) ignoring the poor in the distribution of food, (4) unconfessed sin being overlooked, and (5) not excommunicating openly unrepentant sinners and false teachers from the feast (1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 27-34; and Jude 12). The modern discussions about who should take Communion was not an issue in the early church because the whole gathering was Communion. The question was who should be allowed or not allowed to gather with us for the love feast (Jude 12-16).

When we understand that Communion was a whole meal brought by everybody, or at least the wealthier believers, and hosted by some mature couple in their house, the modern question of who should administer the elements is not very relevant. The focus was on the meal, the fellowship, the teaching, and the prayer, not who administered the elements. It is safe to assume some elders were in charge of it, but since it is never mentioned (after Christ doing it in the upper room), we must conclude it is not particularly important. Any mature brother could do so.

Some were sick and others had died as a punishment of God in Corinth. But notice that this was not because they assigned the wrong significance to the bread and wine. Nor was it because they had the wrong kind of bread or wine or because there was some mystical significance to the bread or wine or because there was some unusual presence of Christ in the bread or wine. It had nothing to do with the bread or wine at all. It was because they were involved in factions, divisions, drunkenness, and gluttony while ignoring the poor and not confessing these or other sins. The apostles objected to their conduct at the love feasts for reasons very much like God's objections to Israel's religious activity as stated, say, in Isaiah 1:10-18. They maintained a ceremony while continuing in unrepentant sin. It was not that they got the particulars of the ceremony wrong. It was that they were ignoring their sin while focusing on the particulars of the ceremony.

## **Conclusions and Applications**

Here are a few conclusions and applications from this study. I realize an example is not

a command, and the only command we have is Christ's "do this in remembrance of Me" and the apostles' warnings about its misuses. But examples are examples. I assume God didn't just put them in the New Testament to fill up space but to guide our thinking. With that in mind, here are a few thoughts.

### Conclusions

- (1) Communion is not a continuation of Passover.
- (2) We do not eat Christ's body and drink His blood, physically or spiritually.
- (3) "This is My body and ... blood" is to be taken figuratively, like when Jesus said He is the bread of life, the living water, a vine, a shepherd, and a bridegroom.
- (4) No frequency is specified for Communion beyond "as often as you do it."
- (5) Communion was a meal with an emphasis upon taking of the bread and cup.
- (6) Communion was always a meal—a Lord's Supper love feast. It was the regular meeting of the church. [Synagogues were used for evangelism (Acts 17:2-4) but not to gather for worship. Neither did they build buildings for worship (Acts 17:24).]
- (7) The bread of the Passover was unleavened, and the wine was always connected to grapes. But the Communion of the church was a meal and what the elements were was never mentioned or emphasized.
- (8) There were other not meal gatherings of the church (Acts 13:1; 15:1-24; 14:40; and 19:9-10).

### Applications

- (1) Communion is for the church not a connection between the church and Israel.
- (2) The significance of Communion is in the attitude of the believer. It is not a sacrament with mystical significance.
- (3) The significance of Communion is to remember Christ's life, death, and Second Coming, not to mystically, spiritually, or physically eat His flesh and blood.
- (4) The frequency of Communion is up to the believers—but it should not be avoided.
- (5) Our bread and cup ceremony is without biblical support. But neither is it condemned.
- (6) We should gather together with other believers in homes to eat a meal as a Communion regularly. Around the meal should be prayer, teaching, fellowship, singing—and the separate taking of the bread and cup to remember Christ's death until He comes.
- (7) The type of bread or wine used is not important, since it should be accompanied by a meal anyway.
- (8) Not every meeting of believers needs to be a Communion service, but it should be our regular gathering, and it should be around a full meal.