

How Frequently Should We Take The Lord's Supper?

Perhaps the most controversial decision I ever made as a pastor -- and certainly the one that I spend the most time explaining -- is my conviction that the ordinance known as the Lord's Supper or Communion is a once-a-year activity. I have addressed various aspects of this subject in the yearly teaching that accompanies our communion services. Those messages can be found in our audio archive section. And I have written two previous Q&A articles on the subject, entitled "Communion" and "Taking Communion." It may prove beneficial to read those articles prior to this one.

Let me say (or type) at the outset that I am not looking to pick a fight with others who are committed to weekly, monthly, or quarterly communion services. We all stand before the God we serve and we all answer ultimately to Him alone. But I'm wired the way I'm wired so I am prone to test and challenge the traditions I grew up with. The more deeply I've delved into Scripture, the more troubling I have found the deep-seated traditions that make up the vast majority of modern Christian worship and practice. But, I am also the first to admit that we all have our traditions. And the person who claims to have no traditions is usually the one most entrenched in them. Still, we occasionally need to hold our traditions and practices up to the light and let the bright and revelatory Word of God shine through them to see if they have any holes that need fixing.

I also suffer from a severe case of "systematitits" (don't look it up, it's a word of my own invention). I like a systematic, logical approach to things, especially God's word. And, as with all things, it's good to start at the start and build the foundations one brick at a time. So we start with definitions --

Q –

Is the Lord's Supper synonymous with what we call the Last Supper? And are they both just other names for the Passover?

Jim –

Despite its popularity, the phrase "the last supper" is not found in the Bible. It entered our lexicon via Leonardo daVinci's famous painting. And while the term "the Lord's supper" is found in Scripture, it occurs only once, in the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, where he writes –

“Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper...”
(1 Cor 11:20-21)

Starting in verse 23 of that passage, Paul recounts the events in the upper room on the night that Jesus was betrayed. From the proximity with which Paul refers to “the Lord’s supper” and the Passover meal Jesus shared with His apostles, it is widely accepted that he intended his terminology to relate directly to that meal and event. In other words, “the Lord’s supper” was Paul’s way of referring to the Passover meal observed on the night before Jesus was crucified.

However, in his book “*The Temple; Its Ministry and Services*” Alfred Edersheim argues convincingly for separating the two terms. While it is indisputable that the Lord’s Supper was instituted on the night of Christ’s betrayal, following closely behind the Passover Supper (or at very least while observing the last course), Edersheim concludes that the new memorial, designed to remember Christ’s body and blood, remained unique. I also hold to this view. Still, there are elements of the Passover Supper that are inextricably woven into this New Covenant observance. The bread that Christ identified as His body was unleavened bread, as required by the feast. The cup that He identified as His blood was the third of four cups used in the Passover observance, the cup of blessing or redemption. The entire Passover meal, including the lamb, had already been consumed when Jesus instituted His memorial with the words “this do in remembrance of me.” The unleavened bread (a piece of which was traditionally held until after the meal) and the cup of blessing became the figures or types that were to signify His body and blood, showing the Lord’s death until His return (1 Cor. 11:26).

So, while the two “suppers” – the Passover and the Lord’s Supper – share similar elements, they are not strictly one-and-the-same. They share some common elements, but they also have dramatic differences.

Many churches refer to their Lord’s Supper service as a *Communion* service. This is the language I was most familiar with in my Lutheran upbringing. It is drawn from the King James Version’s rendering of 1 Corinthians 10:15-17, which reads –

“I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.”

Paul’s employment of the word “*koinonia*” -- translated “communion” -- has to do with the participation of the whole church in sharing the cup and bread. In this article I will refer to the observance that Christ instituted at the end of His Passover supper as “the Lord’s Supper” or as “communion.”

In some theological circles, the practice of remembering Christ’s atoning work is referred to as a *sacrament*. In actuality, a sacrament is an oath of allegiance.

Romans soldiers were made to take an oath of fidelity to their generals, which oath was known as “*sacramentum*.” Not only is the term unscriptural, but because it involves the idea of swearing to the Lord, it is not a term we ought to use.

In other traditions, the ritual of commemorating the Lord’s Supper is identified as a *sacrifice*, in and of itself. Rather than memorializing Christ’s body and blood, the taking of the communion elements is regarded as a renewed sacrifice for sin. However, when Christ observed the Passover Supper and changed the focus of the memorial to remembering Him, there was no altar present or an oblation of sacrifice. Since Christ is our once-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 7:27, 10:12), there is no need for repetition. Therefore that language ought also to be rejected.

The Lord’s Supper is also widely known as the “*Eucharist*.” This terminology is responsible for much of the confusion involved in the weekly/monthly/yearly observance debate. It is an Anglicized version of “*eucharistia*,” the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Despite the obvious misnomer, that term is frequently related to the elements themselves, so that the bread and wine used to commemorate Christ’s body and blood are referred to as “the Eucharist.”

We are admonished repeatedly in Scripture to give thanks to God and it was Jesus’ custom to always give thanks prior to eating food. At the Passover Supper, Jesus blessed the bread and gave thanks for the cup prior to distributing them to His apostles. So, giving thanks is an intrinsic part of a Christian’s observance of the Lord’s Supper, as well as part of the normal activity of eating. And there is ample evidence that the earliest Christian church practiced a form of ritual thanksgiving that involved food as part of their regular meetings. Unfortunately, the failure to distinguish between these regular feasts and the yearly Passover-related observance has caused many Christian authors to offer the frequency of the church’s gatherings as evidence of frequent communion services.

Q –

My church used to hold communion services once a month, on the first Sunday of each month. I know that some other churches take communion every week. That seems to be what the majority of the churches are doing; either once a month or each week. Are you saying that they are all wrong?

Jim –

First off --- grace, grace, grace, grace. I assume that most believing church bodies engage their worship services with great sincerity. The best likelihood is that they have continued the traditions that were handed to them and they have grown to love and invest themselves in those rituals. I am not trying to change the whole church-world. I am primarily striving to bring my own convictions and

practices in line with what I am convinced the Bible teaches. Others may – and often do – disagree. I do not fight with them on this point.

This is a topic that engenders a wide range of interpretation and argumentation. Most writers assume that the church has a great deal of latitude when it comes to the frequency of communion. They base their assumption on one of two arguments. Either they say:

- (1) that the Bible is essentially silent on the topic and therefore it is left up to the individual denomination or congregation. Or,
- (2) they argue from a brief set of “proof texts” that the First Century church observed the ordinance every Sunday.

To argument number one I would reply that the Bible is far from silent on the subject, but the language that the Bible uses has been obscured by a combination of playing-down the significance of the Old Testament teaching on “feasts” and covenants, and the constant repetition of deeply-entrenched routines without the necessary and appropriate examination and correction.

With that said, let’s turn our attention to argument number two. In book after book, article after article, defending the weekly or monthly communion service, the same arguments based on the same reading of the same two texts in the book of Acts are repeated again and again –

“And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

“And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight ... And when he had gone back up, and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.” (Acts 20:7, 11)

The tacit assumption behind these verses is that any reference to breaking bread is necessarily a reference to the bread-and-wine communion ordinance. Acts 2:42 is cited to prove that immediately after Pentecost the saints began the practice and the verses from Acts 20 are employed to prove that it was part of their regular Sunday meetings.

For instance, Arthur L. Farstad, editor of *The Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* writes in his article “The Lord’s Supper” –

In the earliest days of the Church, when believers were all together in Jerusalem, the disciples apparently broke bread every day (although some of these events may have been ordinary meals).

By the time the Church had progressed in its spread across the Roman Empire to many Gentile areas, the frequency of celebration would seem to have become weekly: "the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:7).

Similarly, the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia reads, under the heading "Lord's Supper (Eucharist)" –

The celebration of the Eucharist was characteristic of the Pentecostal church (Acts 2:42), especially upon the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7). Its observance was preceded by the agape on the eve (for the circumstances of the institution were closely imitated, and the day was reckoned as beginning at sunset after the Jewish fashion), and thus the Eucharist proper came late into the night, or toward morning (Acts 20:11).

Even John Calvin defended the weekly Lord's Supper ritual by writing in his Institutes (4.17.44) –

That such was the practice of the Apostolic Church, we are informed by Luke in the Acts, when he says that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers," (Acts 2: 42.) Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper, and alms.

The notion that references to "breaking bread" in the book of Acts necessarily refer to observing the Lord's Supper are replete in the standard literature on the subject. And, as we might expect, Church of Christ literature is utterly reliant on it. For instance, on their official website, under the heading "How often is the Lord's Supper eaten?" we read –

It is expected that every member of the church will assemble for worship on each Lord's Day. A central part of the worship is the eating of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7). Unless providentially hindered, each member considers this weekly appointment as binding. In many instances, as in the case of illness, the Lord's supper is carried to those who are hindered from attending the worship.

These are the bedrock texts on which the advocates of the weekly/monthly Lord's Supper service build their case. Other than an occasional reference to 1 Corinthians 11:26, there are typically no other texts they point to in order to bolster their assertions. It all stands or falls on Luke's writing in the book of Acts.

So, what if it can be proven that their assumption is incorrect? What happens to the necessity of the weekly/monthly schedule if their reading of Luke is based on a presumed outcome rather than rigorous exegesis? The simple fact is that the evidence for defining "breaking bread" as "observing the Lord's Supper" is tenuous, at best.

Acts 2:42 is not an orphan verse. It sits in the middle of a sweeping narrative describing the events that occurred on the heels of Pentecost –

“And with many other words he (Peter) solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation!’ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”
(Acts 2:40-47)

The term “breaking bread” appears twice in this passage. The context has to do with community and sharing among the newly converted Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. In the first reference to breaking bread (v. 42) it was part of their fellowship. No reference to commemorating Christ's body and blood is mentioned. But, the second reference to breaking bread (v. 46) includes the parallel phrase “taking their meals together.” And that is precisely what Luke is intending to convey when he employs the term “breaking bread” – eating regular meals. This is not uncommon parlance even today. We often speak of breaking bread with family and friends without any reference to the Lord's Supper. Luke's emphasis in this entire passage is on the unity and sharing that marked the Pentecost church; not a word is spoken of commemorating Christ's death.

I fear that the reason that the vast majority of the books, articles and sermons arguing for weekly/monthly communion services limit their reference of this passage to verse 42 is that the balance of the passage undermines their argument. Were they to be consistent, they would have to admit that the bread-breaking in verse 46 took place “day by day.” It was not weekly or monthly – it was daily! Yet, virtually none of the advocates of the weekly/monthly scheme argue that the primitive church observed the Lord's Supper daily. So, the text is summarily limited in order to preserve the tradition.

Now let's look at Acts 20:11 in its context.

“And we sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break

bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. And there were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And there was a certain young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor, and was picked up dead. But Paul went down and fell upon him and after embracing him, he said, ‘Do not be troubled, for his life is in him.’ And when he had gone back up, and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.” (Acts 20:6-12)

The events of this story are unambiguous. The fact that they occurred “after the days of Unleavened Bread” make them even more fascinating. During that feast, Paul would have observed Passover, as was his custom –

“But (Paul) bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus.” (Acts 18:21 KJV, NKJV. *Some early manuscripts omit the phrase “I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem.”*)

More than likely, he would have observed it in a Jewish fashion (1 Cor. 9:20), but with an emphasis on remembering Christ’s body and blood, in keeping with the Lord’s command.

This all stands in stark contrast to the first day of the week when they gathered with the saints at Troas “to break bread.” Here we find Paul talking into the night and a young fellow falling out of a window to his death. After Paul revived Eutychus, they went back up and ate. That makes sense, considering Paul’s long-winded sermon. It was past midnight and the whole group must have been hungry. After the meal, they were refreshed and Paul continued until daylight. It’s tremendously difficult to gather from that straightforward narrative that Paul was actually establishing the weekly Sunday observance of the Lord’s Supper. There’s simply no language in this text from which we could draw such a conclusion. But again, if we start with a tradition and are searching for proof-texts to support our foregone conclusions, context is less important than implication and assumption.

A necessary tool in Bible study is comparing how words or phrases are used in various contexts. It is especially helpful to compare how a single author uses particular words. If we can establish that a phrase such “breaking bread” has a common, regular meaning in the New Testament, then arguments that suppose it is tantamount to the Lord’s Supper must prove that in some particular instances the common meaning has changed. That can only be proven by exegesis of the pertinent texts and clear, indisputable evidence must be put forward proving the

assertion. But, given the two popularly-used texts cited above, it's clear that there is nothing in the text itself that calls for a greater-than-ordinary reading.

So, let's compare other uses of the phrase and concept of bread-breaking to see if we can establish a common meaning. Later in the book of Acts, Luke tells of Paul's shipwreck along with his captors. The shipmen and soldiers fasted for two weeks and finally Paul adjured them to eat –

“Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat, and let it fall away. And until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation; for not a hair from the head of any of you shall perish.’ And having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all; and he broke it and began to eat. And all of them were encouraged, and they themselves also took food. And all of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.” (Acts 27:32-37)

The reason that this passage is an integral part of our study is that it was written by Luke, included in the same book as the earlier references, and it tells of Paul giving thanks and breaking bread. But the context is inarguable. Paul was insisting that starving men should take some food and eat. It had nothing to do with observing the Lord's Supper and the event included believers and heathens.

Now let's look at one other reference to bread-breaking from Luke's pen, in his gospel, and see if we can draw a parallel to the Lord's Supper from it. Because if we can comfortably conclude that the Bible writers used the phrase “breaking bread” as little more than a colloquialism for eating a meal, the primary basis on which the weekly/monthly advocates build their argument tumbles down like the proverbial house of cards. In Luke 24 we read of Christ joining his disciples as they walked the Emmaus road. He hid His identity from them as He taught about Himself from Moses and the prophets.

“And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He would go farther. And they urged Him, saying, ‘Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over.’ And He went in to stay with them. And it came about that when He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’ And they arose that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, saying, ‘The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon.’ And they began to relate their experiences on

the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.” (Luke 24:28-35)

Despite the fact that this passage includes two references to Jesus blessing and breaking bread, no weekly/monthly advocate uses it to argue that Jesus was performing a version of the Lord’s Supper. This event occurred during the 50 days between the feast of Unleavened Bread and Pentecost. The Holy Spirit had not yet been given and the Church as a body of believers had not yet been formed. Jesus had just participated in the Passover meal, been crucified, and resurrected. The two apostles walking with him had participated in that Passover supper. There is no indication that Jesus took advantage of His apostles’ invitation to stay in order to share His supper with them again. Yet, Luke (the same man who authored the book of Acts) utilized the “breaking bread” language.

What this teaches us grammatically and contextually is that Luke’s “bread breaking” meant merely the eating of a meal. That is consistent with every context where he employed that language. That being the case, the argument for weekly/monthly communion services is left without a textual platform. There is simply no textual reason or imperative to assume that any of Luke’s references to breaking bread are describing a communion service or memorial to the death of Christ.

Q –

Isn’t it true that early church writers and historians record that the saints gathered weekly in order to share in the Lord’s Supper?

Jim –

The most-often cited bit of church history in this regard comes from the *Didache*. A typical example is found in the article “*On the Weekly Celebration of Holy Communion*” written by the Consistory of the Oceanside United Reformed Church. On page 10, under the heading “*Historically Speaking, Weekly Communion is the Norm*” we read –

Weekly communion follows the pattern of the most ancient churches. According to the *Didache*, a text written for Christian instruction probably between 60 and 80 A.D., we see instructions on how to perform communion, which was done every week, “On the Lord’s own day, gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure”

In a similar vein, in an article entitled “*Why Weekly Communion?*” John D. Chitty cites a brochure written by Dr. Tom Browning that was circulated in his church to make the case for weekly communion. Under the heading “*Evidence from Church History*” we read –

There are very clear and early (second century) allusions to the practice in the *Didache* and Justin Martyr's *The First Apology*. While the history of the Church does not have the authority of God's Word, it at least ought to interest us that the Christian community observed this practice, apparently without much discussion, so shortly after the time of the Apostles.

I certainly agree with Dr. Browning that the history of the Church does not have the authority of God's word. And, to be perspicuous, church history is cluttered with opinions from every side of every issue. So it's necessary to make sure the sources we read and cite are not being interpreted anachronistically and that we are honest about the original author's leanings and commitment to Biblical veracity.

So, back to the *Didache* -- its name is derived from the Greek word for "teaching." It is a brief early Christian treatise that formed an early catechism, or instruction. Some scholars date it as early as 60 A.D. while others place it in the early second century. Either way, it is an important portal through which we can view the practices of the ancient church. Here is the section of the *Didache* from which the above-cited authors (and those like them) have drawn their conclusions –

Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks this way. First, concerning the cup:

We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever..

And concerning the broken bread:

We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which You madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever..

But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, unless they have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord has said, "Give not that which is holy to the dogs."

But after you are filled, give thanks this way:

We thank Thee, holy Father, for Thy holy name which You didst cause to tabernacle in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality, which You modest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever. Thou, Master almighty, didst create all things for Thy name's sake; You gavest food and drink to men for enjoyment, that they might give thanks to Thee;

but to us You didst freely give spiritual food and drink and life eternal through Thy Servant. Before all things we thank Thee that You are mighty; to Thee be the glory for ever. Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Thy love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Thy kingdom which Thou have prepared for it; for Thine is the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come, and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God (Son) of David! If any one is holy, let him come; if any one is not so, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen.

But permit the prophets to make Thanksgiving as much as they desire.

This section of the *Didache* concerns “thanksgiving.” Because the word “Eucharist” has migrated into a synonym for the Lord’s Supper, contemporary commentators leap to the assumption that the Lord’s Supper is the focus of this section of the early church’s instruction.

It does mention both the cup (presumably of wine or a mixture of wine and water) and breaking bread, both of which were staples of every Middle Eastern feast. But, notice that the language of thanksgiving nowhere mentions Christ’s blood atonement. Rather, the participants are to pronounce thanksgiving for the holy vine of David when they lift the cup. On the matter of the blood of the New Covenant (which was Jesus’ focus at the Passover Supper) shed for His church, the *Didache* is utterly silent.

There is equally no mention of Christ’s body being broken on behalf of His people. Rather, the language of the *Didache* gives thanks for life and the knowledge of Christ. Then, rather than the broken bread symbolizing Christ’s broken body (which was Jesus’ focus at the Passover Supper), the bread is a symbol of the body of the church, scattered over the hills and gathered together as one.

The prayer that follows this time of food and thanksgiving is introduced with the words “But after you are filled.,” A bit of broken bread and a sip from a communal cup would hardly fill anyone. But importantly, the closing prayer includes the phrase “You gave food and drink to men for enjoyment, that they might give thanks to Thee.” No mention is made of Christ’s body or blood, the atonement, remembering His sacrifice, the New Covenant, or looking forward to participating with Him in the Supper on the occasion of His return.

So, whatever else we may say about this ancient instruction to the Church, and regardless of how frequently this practice took place, it has nothing at all to do with the Lord’s Supper, by which memorial the Apostle Paul said, “Ye do show the Lord’s death until He comes.” (1 Cor. 11:26) No mention of such a show or memorial is mentioned in the *Didache*.

Yet, in their determination to find ancient credibility for their modern practice, contemporary authors ignore the actual language of the text of the *Didache* and draw sweeping conclusions like “There are very clear and early (second century) allusions to the practice (of weekly communion) in the *Didache*.” Such statements simply are not true.

As concerns the assembly of the church on the Lord’s Day, the *Didache* does instruct –

But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure. But let no one who is at odds with his fellow come together with you, until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be profaned. For this is that which was spoken by the Lord: "In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice; for I am a great King, says the Lord, and my name is wonderful among the nations."

These words are easily understood in light of what’s gone before. The breaking of bread by the church every Lord’s day is a feast of thanksgiving, the bread symbolizing the unity, gathering, and common body of the church. These meetings came to be known as “agape” or “love feasts.” If indeed the *Didache* were instructing the church to take the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day, then it equally describes that ordinance as “your sacrifice.” A whole variety of theological luggage accompanies that notion. The Lord’s Supper is a memorial to Christ’s sacrifice, not our own. And, as mentioned earlier, traditions such as the Roman Catholic notion of perpetual sacrifice must be summarily rejected.

But, if we understand the *Didache* to be describing a church service that includes sharing, thanksgiving and praise, then there is no conflict between this early instruction and the words of the New Testament –

“Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”
(Heb 13:15-16)

This seems like a good juncture to make one more thing plain. References to “bread and wine” were common in Jesus’ day. Being part of the standard Middle Eastern diet, they described the simple act of eating and drinking. For instance, when defending John the Baptist before the Pharisees, Jesus said –

"To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another; and they say, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, ‘He has a

demon!' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children." (Luke 7:31-35)

John the Baptist ate no bread nor drank wine. That phrase is contrasted with Jesus' behavior of "eating and drinking," which caused His enemies to call Him a glutton and a drunkard. So, the parallel is beyond dispute. The simple presence or mention of bread and wine in the *Didache* or any Biblical text does not necessitate the inclusion of the Lord's Supper. Only on those occasions where the telltale signs and specific language of the Lord's Supper are employed should we conclude that it is the focus of the text before us.

Q –

But, didn't John Calvin advocate weekly Eucharist (Lord's Supper) observances? I mean, you're Reformed and a Calvinist. Shouldn't you be following his teaching?

Jim –

I do refer to the theology I teach as "Reformed Theology." By that I mean that we align our thinking with the doctrine that resulted from the Protestant Reformation. And it is true that some of the Reformers, notably John Calvin, argued in favor of weekly Lord's Supper services. On the other hand, the followers of Calvin's contemporary, Ulrich Zwingli argued that weekly communion was "too popish."

We would also do well to remember that Calvin's oft-quoted admonitions concerning the weekly Eucharist (which was his common term for the Lord's Supper) were a reaction to Rome's dogma as much as they were a defense of Scripture. In the Middle Ages it became standard practice in Roman Catholic masses that only the priests partook of the elements of the Eucharist. The laity became onlookers. The fourth Lateran Council in 1215 passed legislation suggesting that communicants should receive the sacrament at least once a year, at Easter. Calvin argued that the decision of that Council led to people becoming careless and sluggish the rest of the year. So, his arguments in favor of frequent Eucharist observances, as found in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, were based on his ethical convictions more so than from a firm exegesis of the Biblical text.

Various questions surrounding the Lord's Supper were hotly debated among the Reformers, with no real unanimity. Remembering that they were attempting to reform the 1000-year-old entrenched exercises of Rome, it's not surprising that they differed on things like frequency and Christ's presence in the elements. In opposition to Rome's doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby the bread and water became the literal body and blood of Christ, Martin Luther argued for "sacramental union" – Christ was present in, with, and under the elements. In

other words, His presence was added to the elements. On the other hand, Calvin stated that Christ is only spiritually present in the elements. Zwingli took the position that Christ is present neither spiritually nor physically in the elements. It should not surprise us then that they also disagreed about the frequency with which the ordinance should be observed.

It is far-too-commonly assumed that the early church partook of the Lord's Supper weekly, based on the evidence cited above. Then, when the historical record recounts yearly observances in the centuries immediately following our Lord's incarnation, it is argued that this was an aberration brought about by Rome or Gnostic influences. But that whole argument is based on the assumption that the early church actually did participate in weekly communion services.

If, as I contend, the Lord's Supper was intended to be a yearly memorial in commemoration of our Lord's death, then the following bits of history are consistent with what has gone before. In "*A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*" published in London in 1880, under the heading "*The Lord's Supper*" (pg. 1057), while establishing that Paul's reference to the Lord's Supper is synonymous with Christ's final Passover Supper with His apostles, we find the following pericope –

Tertullian in 198 describes the agape under the name of a supper: "Our supper shews its nature by its name. It is called that which love is among the Greeks" (*Apol.* 39). At a later period when the agape was celebrated with the Eucharist on one day of the year only, *viz.*, Maundy Thursday, in commemoration of the institution of the sacrament on that day, it was still called the Lord's Supper. E.g. the council of Carthage A.D. 397, decrees that the "sacraments of the altar be celebrated only by men fasting excepting on that one day in every year on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated" (*Can.* 29). Three years later St. Augustine, speaking of the custom of bathing at the end of Lent, says that "for this purpose that day was rather chosen in which the Lord's Supper is yearly celebrated" (*Epist.* 54, vii, 10).

The point of citing these ancient quotes is that the yearly celebration of the Lord's Supper was not abnormal to the early church. I am not ignoring the work of men like Justin Martyr, whose First Apology certainly gives the impression that the Eucharist celebration, or love feast, had also come to include the elements and commemoration of our Lord's death on a weekly basis. But, that was not the universal norm. Like I said at the beginning of this brief excursions into church history, every side of this argument can find someone in the 2000 year history of the Christian Church who appears to support their view. So we must be careful to stabilize our doctrine according to the word of Scripture, as even John Calvin concurs –

They call it restraining the people by religion, when, stupid and infatuated, they are drawn hither and thither by superstition. Should anyone choose to defend such

inventions by antiquity, I am not unaware how ancient is the use of Christ and exorcism in baptism, and how, not long after the age of the apostles, the Supper was tainted with adulteration; such, indeed, is the forwardness of human confidence, which cannot restrain itself, but is always sporting and wantoning in the mysteries of God. But let us remember that God sets so much value on obedience to his word, that, by it, he would have us to judge his angels and the whole world (I Cor. 6:2-3; Gal. 1:8). (*Institutes* 4.17.43)

Summing Up

So, where does that leave us? Is it true that the Bible says nothing at all about the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper, making it genuinely a matter of every group's opinion?

I think not.

In previous Q&A articles on this subject, I've recited the historic connection between the Feast of Passover and the supper in the upper room where Jesus changed the focus of that memorial from Israel's deliverance out of Egypt to His body and blood, given for the remission of sin, leading to our ultimate deliverance. That feast was a once-a-year memorial. Based on Jesus' refocusing of the meaning of the memorial, Paul concluded –

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.” (1 Cor. 11:26)

It is a memorial recalling the Lord's death. As a memorial of a specific event, it is meant to occur on the date of His last Passover Supper, betrayal, and crucifixion.

In our modern lives we memorialize all sorts of days – from birthdays to anniversaries to New Year's Day to ... well, *Memorial Day*! We understand the concept of observing events according to the day they happened. And that is precisely what Jesus instituted by aligning the memorial of His death with the most important Feast on the Jewish calendar, one that had been observed annually for the better part of 1400 years. There is nothing in the text of Scripture anywhere that adjusts that yearly memorial in such a way that it could be observed according to the whim or tradition of later generations of believers. It was instituted by God as a blood covenant in Egypt and it was established as a memorial to the death of Christ by the blood of the New Covenant. That's specific, it's textual, it's historic, it's consistent, and it makes no assumptions based on man-made tradition.

So, there I stand. It makes me the odd-man-out in most churches. But, that just sort of seems to go with the gig. I cannot be convinced by the typical argumentation that the weekly or monthly scheme is genuinely biblical. I do see a tremendous weight of biblical material that argues for the continual annual

memorial, at the time of Passover, in remembrance of the body and blood of Christ, who became our Passover Lamb, who was our unleavened bread, who is the focus and fullness of the Christian faith, and whose sacrifice will be remembered and celebrated until He returns and we join Him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

And *that*, to put a fine point on it, will be a mighty fine day.

Equally, however, I have no argument at all against churches feasting and eating together on a regular basis and giving thanks for the manifold blessing of the Christian faith. God has been gracious to us beyond comprehension and our thanksgiving should be ceaseless. That, I am convinced, is perfectly in keeping with the earliest practices and traditions of the Christian Church.

Yours for His sake,

Jim Mc.

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