

THE LORD'S SUPPER
THIS RITE EXHIBITS COMMUNION WITH CHRIST
by J.I. Packer

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

The Lord's Supper is an act of worship taking the form of a ceremonial meal, in which Christ's servants share bread and wine in memory of their crucified Lord and in celebration of the new covenant relationship with God through Christ's death.

Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing of all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further encouragement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body. (Westminster Confession XXIX.1)

The passages dealing with the Supper on which the above statement is based are the four institution narratives (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25) and 1 Corinthians 10:16-21; 11:17-34. Jesus' sermon (John 6:35-58) about himself as the Bread of Life, and the need to feed on him by eating his flesh and drinking his blood, was preached before the Supper existed and is better understood as being about what the Supper signifies (i.e., communion with Christ by faith) than about the Supper itself.

At the time of the Reformation, questions about the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper and the relation of the rite to his atoning death were centers of stormy controversy. On the first question, the Roman Catholic church affirmed (as it still affirms) transubstantiation, defined by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Transubstantiation means that the substance of the bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the substance of Christ's body and blood so that they are no longer bread and wine, though

they appear to be. Luther modified this, affirming what was later called “consubstantiation” (a term that Luther did not favor), namely, that Christ’s body and blood come to be present in, with, and under the form of the bread and wine, which thus become more than bread and wine though not less. The Eastern Orthodox churches and some Anglicans say much the same. Zwingli denied that the glorified Christ, now in heaven, is present in any way that the words bodily, physically, or locally would fit. Calvin held that though the bread and wine remained unchanged (he agreed with Zwingli that the is of “this is my body... my blood” means “represents,” not “constitutes”), Christ through the Spirit grants worshippers true enjoyment of his personal presence, drawing them into fellowship with himself in heaven (Heb. 12:22-24) in a way that is glorious and very real, though indescribable.

On the second question, all the Reformers insisted that at the table we give thanks to Christ for his finished and accepted work of atonement, rather than repeat, renew, reoffer, re-present, or reactivate it, as the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass affirms.

The prescribed ritual of the Supper has three levels of meaning for participants. First, it has a past reference to Christ’s death which we remember. Second, it has a present reference to our corporate feeding on him by faith, with implications for how we treat our fellow believers (1 Cor. 11:20-22). Third, it has a future reference as we look ahead to Christ’s return and are encouraged by the thought of it. Preliminary self-examination, to make sure one’s frame of mind is as it should be, is advised (1 Cor. 11:28), and the wisdom of the advice is obvious.

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