

## **THE LORD'S SUPPER**

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The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, along with the reading and proclamation of the Word, has stood at the center of Christian worship since the beginning of the church's life. Our Lord gave us the gift of communion when, in his Last Supper with his disciples, he invited them to eat bread and drink wine with a new meaning and significance. While the supper is recorded in the Gospels, it is St. Paul, writing to the Christians at Corinth, who gives us the words instituting the Lord's Supper: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

#### IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In the earliest church the Lord's Supper (or the Eucharist) was celebrated as a part of each Lord's Day service. It was a joyful celebration of God's redemptive love through the Passion of Christ our Savior. Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (second century AD) describes the Lord's Day service: "On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities of the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president [the one presiding] in a discourse urges and invites [all] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation asserts, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated [elements] by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons."

#### THE NEED FOR REFORM

As the church entered its second millennium, the proclamation of the Word in the sermon fell by the wayside, and the participation of the people in the liturgy became more and more restricted. By the late middle ages, the low Mass (or private Mass) had become the normal way to celebrate the Mass. The Mass was "said" by a priest and a server, and the people, if present, simply watched the action. The service was conducted in Latin, so even if they people could hear what the priest was saying, they could not understand it. With growing scruples about the possibility of the people accidentally spilling the "blood of Christ," the cup was increasingly denied them. The people's superstitious fear of the elements of the Mass kept more and more of them from communing at all, so that in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that the faithful must commune at least once a year, even if it were a frightful thing for them to do, but in bread only. The meal which was at the beginning of the church's life a celebration of thanksgiving for God's redemptive love

in Jesus Christ had come to be seen as a sacrifice by those who participated through which they hoped to gain God's forgiveness and grace.

#### REFORMATION

At the time of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation of the church both principal reformers—Martin Luther and John Calvin—sought to restore to the church's worship the reading and proclamation of the Word and the full participation of the people in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Luther was more successful in his efforts than Calvin. As far as the celebration of the Eucharist was concerned, while the people of Calvin's Geneva eagerly embraced preaching each weekday and in the Lord's Day service, the idea of a weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper by people who were accustomed to observing it as rarely as once a year was too much to accept. The leaders of the church in Geneva agreed to four celebrations annually: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Harvest-tide. So began in most Presbyterian and Reformed Churches the practice of the quarterly celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the latter part of the twentieth century, many Reformed and Presbyterian churches began to move to a more frequent celebration—some with a monthly observance, a few with an alternate early morning weekly Eucharistic service. The liturgical renewal in the church led us to rediscover both the practice of the early church and our own Reformed emphasis upon the two-fold foundation of Christian worship—Word and Sacrament.

#### MORE THAN BREAD AND WINE

In this sacrament we remember and give thanks for Christ's suffering and death upon the cross for the redemption of the world. The *Second Helvetic Confession* states: "By this sacred rite the Lord wishes to keep in fresh remembrance that greatest benefit which he showed to mortal men, namely, that by having given his body and shed his blood he has pardoned all our sins, and redeemed us from eternal death and the power of the devil." But this is more than a mere memorial. The confession also assures us that in the Supper the Lord "now feeds us with his flesh, and gives us his blood to drink, which, being received spiritually by true faith, nourish us to eternal life." The bread and wine, however, do not change in substance. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* explains it this way: "There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other." While the bread and the wine of communion do not become anything other than bread and wine, by the work of the Holy Spirit as they are received in faith, they become for us a spiritual feeding upon the very life of Christ. We are drawn into a communion with the living Christ that reaches beyond the power of words alone to describe. Ultimately this is mystery—simple bread and wine, and yet more, much more. This is the food and drink that "nourish us to eternal life." As the water of baptism marks the beginning of the journey of Christian life and discipleship, the bread and wine of Holy Communion are the food and drink that sustain us on the journey. Without it our souls are impoverished and our life diminished.

#### UNTIL CHRIST COMES AGAIN

The Lord's Supper is also an expression of our faith in the fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth. St. Paul reminds us: "As long as you eat this bread and drink this cup you show forth the Lord's death until he comes again." What God has begun in Jesus Christ, God will bring to completion. Our *Directory for Worship* tells us: "Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ's presence, the Church eagerly expects and prays for the day when Christ shall come in glory and God be all in all. Nourished by this hope, the Church rises from the Table and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission to the world, to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace until Christ's Kingdom shall come at last."

#### IN COMMUNION WITH ONE ANOTHER

Holy Communion is not only a communion with Christ, but also a communion with one another. We share the bread and the cup *together*. The sacrament is never an individual act, but an act of the whole community. Together we *are* the body of Christ in the world. Through this communion our life together is strengthened and our shared hope in Christ secured. All who are baptized are invited to participate in the Sacrament. From the earliest days of the church's life, only the baptized have been permitted to partake of the Eucharistic meal, for baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into the body of Christ. But *all* the baptized were and are included. "The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. In preparing to receive Christ in this Sacrament, the believer is to confess sin and brokenness, to seek reconciliation with God and neighbor, and to trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus." (*The Directory for Worship*) This invitation to the Table is extended to baptized adults and children of all ages. It is the responsibility of parents to nurture and teach their children about the meaning of this gift of grace, yet no particular level of understanding is to be considered a prerequisite for admission to the Table.

#### THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY

In keeping with the most ancient tradition of the church, the celebration of our Eucharist (thanksgiving) begins with the offering of our gifts. As the people's gifts are received, the Holy Table is set with the bread and wine of communion. We are invited to the Lord's Table with an invitation drawn from Holy Scripture. Additional words of welcome may also be added. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, which follows, has its roots in the earliest liturgical practice of the Christian church. It is both thanksgiving and theology rolled into one. Since the third century this prayer has begun with the same invitation to give thanks. The ancient Christian greeting: "The Lord be with you. *And also with you*" is exchanged between the liturgist and the people. The congregation is then invited to lift their hearts to God, and they respond that they are prepared so to do. "Lift up your hearts. *We lift them to the Lord.*" Finally the liturgist exhorts: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," and the congregation replies, "*It is right to give our thanks and praise.*"

The prayer that follows is clearly Trinitarian in form. In the first part God is praised and thanked for the work of creation, the deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery, and other acts of divine creation, sustenance, and deliverance. This part of the prayer is called the “preface,” from the Latin word *praefactio*, which means “preliminary” or “proclamation.” Though it falls at the beginning of the prayer, its meaning here refers not to its placement but to its content. This is proclamation. This is what God has done! At its conclusion the preface unites the praise of the people with the praise of the whole company of heaven: “Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with choirs of angels, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all the faithful of every time and place, who forever sing to the glory of your name.” The Sanctus that follows is composed of the hymn of the heavenly court of Isaiah’s vision (6:3) and Psalm 118:26, with which the crowd greeted Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem.

The second section of the Eucharistic prayer focuses on the life and saving work of Jesus Christ. In most traditions the Words of Institution are recited as a part of this prayer. Presbyterians have historically separated the words from the prayer to be recited at the time of the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup as warrant for the sacrament. This is why we do this: because “the Lord Jesus, on the night before he died, took bread . . .” The *anamnesis* (sung or spoken) concludes this section of the prayer. The term is derived from Jesus’ command: “do this for my *anamnesis*.” The Greek word means remembrance, but it also means more. In a sense it is to bring what is past into a present experience. Christ is not sacrificed anew, but the redemption wrought through his death and resurrection become for us not simply a matter of historical remembrance, but of contemporary experience in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

The third and final section of the Great Thanksgiving, known as the *epiclesis*, invokes the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit that “the bread we break and the cup we bless may be for us the communion of the body and blood of Christ.” Apart from the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, what we do is little more than a matter of human ceremony. It is the Spirit’s work that makes the sacramental experience effective in our lives. Prayers of intercession, as well as a prayer of self-offering, may be included in this portion of the Great Thanksgiving. The whole prayer then concludes with a joyful doxology and the congregation’s audible *Amen*. In saying the *Amen*, we claim the prayer as our own. A recitation of the Lord’s Prayer follows.

#### SHARING THE MEAL

The bread is broken, the cup is poured, and the elements are distributed to the people. The people may come and stand around the Table in small groups to receive the elements. They may come to one or more stations where the bread and wine are offered, or the elements may be brought to them in the pews. Sometimes the bread is served in small cut pieces and the wine or grape juice in individual cups. Occasionally wafers to be dipped into the cup are used. The common cup is a powerful symbol of our unity with Christ and in Christ. However, health concerns, especially when juice rather than wine is used, make intinction (dipping of the wafer) a more acceptable means of communing. When the

elements are passed along the pews, you are encouraged to serve your neighbor saying as you pass the bread “the bread of life,” and as you pass the cup, “the cup of salvation.” When being served at a station, you may place both hands together, palms up, to receive the wafer. Then, as the cup is offered you, dip the wafer in the cup before communing. Holy Communion is never a self-serve meal, but one in which we are served and are graced to serve one another.

Music may be played; hymns or anthems may be sung; or a silence may be kept as the elements are distributed. Worshippers may choose to utilize the time for quiet reflection, thanksgiving to God for God’s abundant mercy and grace in Christ and for the blessings that fill their lives, or for reading scripture.

The Communion service concludes with a brief prayer of thanksgiving. As we rise from the pews to sing the concluding hymn and to receive the blessing, we go forth renewed by Word and Sacrament to live our faith in the world.

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