

Newsletter July 2013

This newsletter is a summary introduction to the Lord's Supper (aka The Lord's Table or Communion). It contains edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book II, Chapters 15.4, 15.5, and 15.6 wherein this observance is discussed in much greater detail, as well as a few historical references contained in Book III.

Jesus personally instituted the ritual of the Lord's Supper for the benefit of his disciples just prior to his crucifixion, and it is recorded in sufficient detail in Scripture such that there can be no doubt that it was founded by Christ, of what the ritual signifies, or its repetitive exercise as a valid Christian practice. Although founded exclusively by Jesus Christ in its present form, the Lord's Supper has foundations deeply rooted in the old covenant Jewish Passover, which it was predestined to supersede. The last Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples ended in the establishment of the Lord's Supper ritual in which we as Christians engage today (Lu.22:15). We shall examine this relationship as we move forward in this discussion.

In the final years of the people of Israel's sojourn in Egypt, they were held in total bondage and were not free to openly worship God because of the heavy toils inflicted upon them by Pharaoh (Ex.9:1). The Hebrews had also become caught up in Egyptian customs and their way of life including many civil and pagan religious activities, much as was Lot and his family when he unwisely chose to dwell in the city of Sodom (Ge.13:12). Their own iniquities were thus being added to those of the Egyptians. Because of their depraved state of existence, they could not free themselves from bondage and, therefore, needed to be torn free and led from slavery by the hand of God Himself (Ge.19:15,16).

Their release began through ten plagues that were sent down upon the Egyptian nation by God through Moses, as he demanded that Pharaoh let the people go out of Egypt to a land wherein they could freely worship Him (cf. Ex. 5:1; 9:14). In the first nine plagues God favored the Hebrews so that the effects of the plagues did not directly fall upon them. However, the tenth plague, unlike the earlier ones, brought forth death that was specifically isolated to the first-born of all flesh "...from the firstborn of Pharaoh... even unto the firstborn of the maidservant... and all the firstborn of beasts" (Ex.11:5). The "first-born" symbolically represented Adam and all the sons of Adam that were born with his fallen nature. The Hebrew people were sinners by their position in Adam as well as through commission of their own personal sins thus inheriting the same death sentence that was placed upon their captors. Yet God through an act of grace chose to spare them by a very unique means: the blood of a sacrificial lamb (Ex.12:3,4). The lamb was to be "without blemish." It was to be as the sinless Messiah would later be: a "lamb without blemish or spot." It was to be set aside especially for the purpose of sacrifice. In like manner, the coming Messiah would be set aside by the Holy Spirit and "sanctified" by God for the specific purpose of being a pure offering for sin in the final sacrifice of the crucifixion (Ps.91:11).

The blood of the lamb was to be "a token" or "a sign" upon the houses of the Hebrews so that the plague of destruction from the LORD would not destroy them as it "passed over" their house (Ex.12:13). The blood of the slain lamb in the Passover was to be smeared on the "...two side posts and on the upper doorposts of the house..." inside which the Hebrew families were partaking of the sacrificial lamb (Ex.12:7) as a sign to God of their faith and trust in Him. God saw the blood of the lamb and declined to execute judgment upon their house by the destroying angel. The lamb was to be "...roasted with fire..." (Ex.12:8), which represented the judgment of God in his fiery wrath upon its flesh. Symbolically, their sins were to be destroyed by fire in the lamb's flesh as they placed their trust in the full protection of its blood. Much later, the true Lamb of God (Jn.1:29) would suffer God's fiery wrath on our behalf upon an ugly Roman cross. Today, as Christian believers we reckon our own sins destroyed in the fiery wrath of God that was suffered by Christ on our behalf. The purified flesh of the Passover lamb was then to be eaten by the Hebrews such that they would be fully identified with the sacrifice. In eating the lamb, the Hebrew people were actually identifying themselves with the coming Messiah (the Christ) who would be the ultimate deliverer. The lamb was to be eaten with "...unleavened bread, and with bitter herbs..." (Ex.12:8). The unleavened bread represented the humility of Christ and the sinlessness of his flesh. The herbs represented the bitterness of Jesus' soul as He took our sins upon Himself (Mt.26:38,39). We, as Christians, no longer partake of a paschal lamb, since Jesus is that Lamb of whom we vicariously partake when

we eat of the bread that Jesus symbolically identified with his own flesh at the conclusion of the Passover meal in the Lord's Supper.

So significant was the time of the Jewish Passover that it would be reckoned as the first month of the year to the Hebrews from that day forward (Ex.12:2). It would be as if time, itself, began anew for the Hebrew people from that date — just like a new birth into a new era. So much so, that they were to remember it from year to year with a repeat of the Passover feast. In similar manner, a new assembly of believers, today's Church consisting of both Jew and Gentile, has been called out of a corrupt generation by God's grace through the sufficiency of the blood of the Eternal Lamb of God to worship and serve Him. For those who are called out of Satan's bondage, it marks the beginning of a new life through a spiritual rebirth. Even as God employed Moses to deliver the Jews from the bondage of Pharaoh and the godless Egyptians to live out a new life in the promised land, much more does Jesus Christ lead us from the bondage of sin, from the power of Satan, and the evil of this world to live in the promise of eternal redemption within a land that is much fairer than day wherein there is no sunset (cf. Re.22:5).

When Jesus and his apostles concluded the Passover meal, Jesus brake the bread and gave it to the apostles saying "take, eat; this is my body" (Mt.26:26). Jesus was saying that his own body is broken into portions allotted for each of us, and unless we partake of his flesh, we will have no part of Him that we should share in his death by fully identifying our old nature in the flesh with his dying body on the cross. Jesus is the true manna sent down from God that brings forth life (Jn.6:51–56). Then Jesus took the cup, He gave thanks, and offered it to them saying, "Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt.26:27,28). Jesus' blood would very soon be shed for the remission of the sins of many, and through his blood, God would make a new covenant of grace with mankind. As we saw in the Passover meal, the blood of the lamb was not ever to be a drink for the communicants, but rather a sign presented to God. The identification with the blood of the lamb was symbolically realized through the "blood of the grape" in the Passover feast. Likewise, in the Lord's Supper, the drinking of the juice of the grape provides an identification of the believer with the shed blood of Christ, as the partaking of bread identifies us with the flesh of his body. The Lord's Supper therefore testifies of the death of Christ and our identification with Him in his death for the remission of our sins. It also testifies of a continual spiritual cleansing of sins past, present, and future in and through his blood as often as we repeat it.

It is very important for us to understand that the simple elements of bread (cf. Book II, page 465) and juice (cf. Book II, page 466) used in the Lord's Table are symbolic only; Christ has no direct presence in the elements either physically or spiritually. Throughout the partaking of the elements, the bread remains bread and the juice remains juice. The supposed transformation of the bread into the actual body of Christ, and the juice into the blood of Christ, commonly practiced through an act of mysticism by Roman Catholics in the Mass, is known as transubstantiation — a grievous error that is discussed thoroughly in Book II, on page 450. Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper is to be found only in the hearts and minds of individual believers who have the Holy Spirit indwelling them; Jesus' spiritual presence is within the communicants not in the elements. There is therefore no saving grace imparted through the elements themselves; they only allow believers to vicariously experience through the physical senses a redemptive grace that we have previously received in the New Birth from above.

The Lord's Supper is, as was the Passover, a communal act with an emphasis placed upon our common relationship with other believers with whom we share unity in the body of Christ. The Passover meal was to be a family oriented ceremony unless the family was very small; then, a group of small families or of individuals participated together under one roof (cf. Ex.12:3,4). It was not something to be undertaken alone, inasmuch as the lamb was to be completely consumed. From this we can conclude that it is quite proper to solemnly partake of the Lord's Supper within individual houses as Christian families or in gatherings as small groups of believers as well as in a larger church setting (cf. Ac.2:46; Book II, page 462). It was only as Sacramentalism began to replace the Pauline doctrine of salvation by grace near the end of the first century AD, that the temporal church falsely claimed institutional authority over both baptism and the Lord's Supper (cf. Book III, page 98; Book II, Chapter 13.2). In biblical times, eating with another signified agreement and identity with that individual. It was

a form of communion since the word “communion” means “having or holding something in common.” As a result, meals in those days represented unity of purpose. To eat with another was to symbolically share a part of one's life with the other through the physical food and, therefore, to be identified with them. The Apostle Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians that the Lord's Supper represents communion with Christ. Communion is an act of sharing that which is held in common in complete unity (1Co.10:16). We all have the blood of Christ in common and the body of Christ in common. “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1Co.10:17). The physical ritual testifies to an existing Spiritual unity with Christ and with other believers. Paul goes on to say that the Hebrew priests that ate of the sacrifices of the altar were partakers of the altar; even so, we as a priesthood of believers (cf. 1Pe.2:5) are partakers of the body and blood of Christ (1Co.10:18). We indirectly partake of Christ in mind and spirit as we remember Him in our flesh.

It is blasphemous for an unbeliever to partake of the elements inasmuch as doing so willfully demonstrates the Lord's death at his or her own hands without redemption through the shed blood of Christ, thus bringing forth additional condemnation upon them (cf. Book II, page 451). This has led some churches to go to the improper extreme of restricting communion exclusively to their immediate membership (cf. Book II, page 452), thus turning a ritual of grace into a restrictive ordinance that is strictly governed by the temporal church and presided over by its ordained clergy (cf. Book III, page 453). However, it is essential that each person first examine themselves as to the validity of their individual faith and their standing with the Lord before partaking of the elements. If a believer is harboring any un-confessed sin, it is imperative that he forsakes that sin and asks forgiveness by placing it under the blood of Christ before participating. (We discuss participation by the uncertain, young children, and the mentally deficient in Book II, on page 456 and following where the ability to properly examine oneself is in question).

The Apostle Paul reiterated that which he had told the Corinthians before regarding what he had received concerning the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus: “. . . That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, ‘Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.’ After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, ‘This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1Co.11:23–25). Paul twice used the phrase “in remembrance of me” emphasizing the true significance and purpose of the Lord's Supper observance. “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come” (1Co.11:26; cf. Lu.22.19). Paul reveals in this statement that the observance is an act of remembrance that is appropriate to repeat until Jesus comes again. There is no specific Scriptural mandate for the frequency of this ritual. Inasmuch as the Jewish Passover is celebrated only once each year, some would also conclude that the Lord's Table should only be observed yearly. Still others celebrate it quarterly, monthly or weekly. We examine the frequency of observance in Book II, page 459 and following concluding only that we should not repeat the observance so often that it becomes a mindless habit that lacks true meaning running a risk of its corruption (cf. 1Co.11:20-22; *The Love Feast*, Book II, page 447), or conversely so infrequently that we neglect the specific means that the Lord gave us to remember Him and his atoning work on our behalf.

The Lord's Supper parallels the purpose of the Passover in that it also was to be kept as a memorial of an event of deliverance (Ex.12:14). The apostles could not have fully grasped the significance of this act at the time it was first established by Jesus inasmuch as it was instituted before the cross. It was not until after the crucifixion and the victorious resurrection of Christ that this practice would prove to have profound significance for them. The Old Covenant shadow of eternal redemption found within the Mosaic Passover was soon to fade away in the presence of brilliant reality as the Old Covenant was fulfilled in Jesus' own body on the cross — his own blood replacing the blood of the sacrificial lamb that the destroying angel had passed over. How much more significant is it that we remember the time of our release from the horrible bondage of sin and the deliverer that was one far greater than Moses (Jn.1:17)! Now, two-thousand years after the cross, our response to this practice should stem from a regenerated spiritual nature in an act of thankful remembrance of all that Christ has done for us. Let us therefore patiently wait for the day of his return for us who are his body, the true Church, by remembering Him in all that we say or do. © Arthur J. Smith, July 2013