

Worship through the Lord's Supper

Lisa Scheffler, author

God has given us freedom in our worship gatherings. You will find great differences in the way Christians throughout the centuries and around the globe “do church.” Yet the Lord’s Supper is something that is regularly observed in worship gatherings.

On the night before he was arrested, Jesus had his last meal with his disciples before his crucifixion. Most scholars believe that the group was observing the Passover. Jesus deviated from the traditional Passover observance by associating elements of the meal with himself — the bread with his body and the cup with his blood. He instructed the disciples to remember him when they ate this meal. Depending on the church tradition, we now call this meal the Lord’s Supper, Communion, or the Eucharist.

God is present and active in our worship gatherings and the Lord’s Supper provides us an opportunity to encounter God.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts Jesus’ words to the disciples during the last supper and helps us understand their significance. If you’ve attended church services for a while, these words may be so familiar to you, so let’s try to look at this passage with fresh eyes.

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵In 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.” ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Look closely at what Jesus said. What is the bread? What is the cup?

What phrase does Jesus repeat?

What does the Lord’s supper proclaim?

The Passover celebration had been instituted by God to commemorate Israel's liberation from Egypt. It was to remind the Israelites of God's grace, power and mercy and transmit the story of the Exodus to future generations. (Exodus 12:24–28).

By infusing the Passover meal with new associations, Jesus was instituting a new ordinance that would commemorate an even greater exodus where people would be liberated from sin and death. By tying his body to the bread and the cup to his blood, Jesus was explicitly connecting the observance of the Lord's Supper to his atoning work on the cross. Jesus' blood was spilled and his body was sacrificed to provide salvation and redemption.

Jesus' statement "This is the new covenant in my blood" looks back to the blood of the sacrifices that Moses sprinkled on the people to establish the old covenant with Israel. The blood Jesus shed in his death for us established the new covenant God had promised through Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31–34). Jesus is the mediator of this new covenant that promises complete forgiveness of sins, eternal redemption and an eternal inheritance (see Hebrews 8–10).

Jesus asked his disciples to observe this meal as a remembrance. With a few exceptions, Christians throughout the centuries have done so. The Lord's Supper "directs our attention to Jesus' crucifixion and the future fulfillment of his Kingdom."¹ Embedded in the Lord's Supper is the expectation that Jesus will return. We observe the meal until he comes again. The Gospel writers include Jesus' declaration that "I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29).

Also, because it is a communal meal, it expresses our unity as the body of Christ. "At the Lord's table, we come together as equals, as persons who are given the gift of God's Spirit—unconditionally and impartially."² We share the Lord's Supper with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Protestant reformer John Calvin believed that while Christ's body and blood are not physically present when we take the Lord's Supper, they are spiritually present. What is happening on the earthly plane by eating the bread and drinking the cup, the Holy Spirit accomplishes on the spiritual plane. In other words, "those who partake of the bread and wine in faith are also, by the power of the Holy Spirit, being nourished by the body and blood of Christ." Calvin considered the Lord's Supper to be a "divine gift given by Christ himself to his people to nourish and strengthen their faith."³

We should come to a worship gathering expecting to encounter God. Though we perform ordinary acts of hearing and singing, sitting and standing, eating and drinking, are we aware of the activity of the Spirit who moves in, through and among us?

The Renaissance painter Tintoretto has given us an image worth contemplating as we consider the possibility of God's presence and activity through the Lord's Supper. The scene

¹ John H. Armstrong, "Table Manners: Why We Take Communion Every Week," ChristianityToday.com, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september/table-manners-why-we-take-communion-every-week.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

is Christ's final meal with his disciples before his crucifixion.



Jesus is shown serving one of the disciples. It is a dark painting and the only light sources come from Jesus himself and a single lamp. Jesus glows from within and a halo of bright light emanates from him, illuminating the otherwise shadowy scene. From the lamp comes a secondary source of light, but also tendrils of smoke that curl into the forms of angels. The heavenly host float above the scene keeping watch. Light is shown surrounding some of the disciples, the reflection Jesus' shining glory.

Seemingly oblivious to these supernatural elements are the servants who are preparing the meal and the disciples themselves. A woman ladles grain out of a basket and hands it to the cook, while a hungry cat looks on. Most of disciples are turned away from Jesus and talking among themselves. It's as if only the viewer of the painting can appreciate what is really going on because the supernatural activity is completely unrealized by the those in the scene.

It is worth considering whether we are like the disciples and the servants in this painting. Are we missing the activity of God in the Lord's Supper because we are oblivious to even the possibility? We should come to worship with the expectation that we will encounter the living God.