

The Meal Format of the Communion

By Martin Pickup

As Christians we commemorate the Lord's death every first day of the week. Yet ironically, we may tend to overlook the most significant aspect of the memorial that the Lord instituted: the fact that He designed it to be in the form of a meal.

Human beings have come up with numerous ways to commemorate great heroes and key events of history, and surely there were any number of ways in which God might have structured a commemoration of His Son's death. But He fashioned it in the form of a meal. Paul called this memorial the Lord's *deipnon* (1 Cor. 11:20), a Greek word that referred to a supper or feast, and that normally designated the main meal of the day. Though the Corinthians went to a carnal extreme by turning this memorial into an opportunity to feed their stomachs and foster division, it is clear that Paul did not object to the meal format of their communion itself, for this was the format that Jesus established originally (vv. 20-34). The pinch of bread and the tiny cup that we see most often in our communion services today may have emerged as a way of preventing a reoccurrence of the Corinthians' carnality (certainly a noble goal). But regardless of the size of the portions we consume when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we must not lose sight of the significance of the meal format of the memorial Jesus established.

Jesus even instituted it on the occasion of another commemorative meal: the Passover (Luke 22:14-20). But unlike the Passover, the supper of the Lord does more than mark the anniversary of an historical event. Jesus' new meal consists of two items that He

declared symbolic of himself. Meals are comprised of food and drink, the two elements necessary to sustain life. The supper that Jesus established likewise consists of food and drink, but of a most remarkable kind. He said of the bread, “This is My body”—and of the fruit of the wine, “This is My blood.” Whenever we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we are symbolically consuming the flesh and the blood of our Lord!

Powerful Imagery

Jesus’ imagery is quite graphic—one might even say gruesome. Our Lord was obviously speaking metaphorically, for His apostles surely understood on that occasion that they were not literally consuming the flesh and the blood of the man who sat before them. Yet many people have misunderstood this kind of language. There is evidence that the early Christians were suspected by non-Christians of practicing cannibalism, due in part perhaps to reports that Christians ate flesh and drank blood in their weekly assemblies (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96; Athenagoras, *Leg.* 3.1). A failure to appreciate Jesus’ use of figurative language has caused Catholicism to concoct the false idea of Transubstantiation—a doctrine that claims that when a priest prays over the elements of the Eucharist, the bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus, while still maintaining their original appearance.

In our desire to avoid any appearance of the Catholic misconception in our communion (or perhaps to blunt the gruesome imagery of Jesus’ words a bit?), we tend to avoid the metaphorical language that Jesus used. In communion services today one rarely hears men at the table repeat Jesus’ actual metaphor. Instead, they insert terms like *represents* or *symbolizes*, as in “This bread represents His body” or “This cup symbolizes His

blood.” Now I am not trying to mandate the use of some particular phraseology, but in our reticence to use Jesus’ precise language we may unwittingly be hindering people from appreciating the fact that the Lord designed this memorial to be in the form of a meal, and a meal consisting of the most astonishing of food items. Symbolically, to be sure—but, nevertheless, in a true sense Christians eat the crucified flesh of Jesus and drink His sacrificial blood every first day of the week.

Purpose of the Meal Format

But why? What was the Lord’s purpose in having His disciples engage in such a startling practice? I would suggest several reasons. First of all, metaphor—speaking of one thing as if it were something else—is the strongest possible means of associating two concepts. Jesus wants us to see a connection between bread, the staple of life, and His body that was nailed to the cross as an atonement for sin. He wants us to see a connection between our need to quench physical thirst and our need for the life-sustaining blood that He shed on the cross. Jesus wants us to engage in the physical act of consuming these symbolic elements just as we would consume physical food and drink, so that we will grasp the spiritual significance of His death in a very personal and powerful way.

Observing the Lord’s Supper each week reminds us that Jesus is our spiritual food. Just as our bodies will die without physical sustenance, so our souls will die without the spiritual sustenance of Christ. The Lord taught the same lesson in John 6 when He said, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh ... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have

no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life” (vv. 51-54). Jesus wasn’t talking about the Lord’s Supper in this passage, but He *was* teaching verbally the lesson that the Lord’s Supper teaches non-verbally: He is our one and only spiritual food and our only source of eternal life.

The blood that Jesus shed on the cross is the means by which we receive eternal life. “The life is in the blood,” God declared in the Old Testament (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11). In other words, the life force of an animal or a human being is the blood that runs throughout their bodies. It was for this reason that many ancient cultures associated consuming the blood of an animal with ingesting its power. What more graphic reminder could Jesus give that His blood is the means of our life and strength than in a memorial meal like this one in which we imbibe, so to speak, our Master’s blood?

Another startling thing about this memorial meal is that we are engaging in a figurative action that would be reprehensible in a literal sense. Eating human flesh is unthinkable. Drinking the blood of an animal was condemned by God from the very beginning (Lev. 17:11-14), and certainly the idea of drinking our Savior’s blood is, on the surface, a revolting contemplation. But such is the nature of the actual sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The sacrifice of a human being was always reprehensible to God (Jer. 19:5). Yet it was the sacrifice of a human being—the incarnate Son of God—that was necessary to take away the sin of the world. The unthinkable nature of the acts of communion if performed in real life serves to highlight how extraordinary the sacrifice of Christ really was.

Every Sunday as we partake of the body and the blood of the Lord, it should be a sober reminder of the magnitude of Jesus’ sacrifice and how absolutely vital He is to us.

Partaking of the Lord's Supper should shake us out of our spiritual lethargy and motivate us to renewed dedication and service. What an amazing memorial the Lord established!