

The Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26–29)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Throughout the many branches of the Christian tradition, the Lord's Supper is one of most significant aspects of our worship. Nevertheless, many of those branches of the Christian tradition were formed precisely because of so many disagreements about how exactly to observe the Lord's Supper, or what exactly the Lord's Supper means. As we study this passage, then, we hope to clarify the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper in light of what the Scriptures teach. More than that, however, we hope to cultivate a greater appreciation of the sense in which *Jesus offers himself to us in the Lord's Supper*.

Christ's Communion (Matt. 26:26)

To transition into the institution of the Lord's Supper, Matthew uses a very simple phrase: “Now as they were eating...” (v. 26a). Many commentators work to situate this moment within what we know about the various parts of the Passover meal; however, neither of the Gospel writers nor Paul (in 1 Cor. 11) puts much emphasis on the specific part of the Passover liturgy. It is possible that we are meant to associate this with the Passover meal generally, and not to limit the connection to some specific part of the meal. Nolland notes an interesting parallelism between the Passover and the Lord's Supper:

Each involves a meal with interpreted elements. In the case of the Passover, the original anticipated the imminent Exodus as the saving event and subsequent celebrations looked back to the saving event and brought the participants freshly into touch with it. In the case of the Last Supper/Lord's Supper, the original anticipated the imminent Passion as the saving event and subsequent celebrations looked back to the Passion and brought the participants freshly into touch with it.¹

Elsewhere, Paul tells us that Christ is our Passover, who has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7).

Jesus begins by taking the “bread” (v. 26b). The “bread” here is described using the common word ἄρτος (*artos*), rather than the more technical word meaning “unleavened bread” (ἄζυμος; *azumos*). Without question, Jesus would have served his disciples unleavened bread (Matt. 26:17), but neither the Gospel writers or Paul put any emphasis on the unleavened nature of the bread (Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23). Although it is difficult to know the precise reasons for this consistent word choice, one effect that this has is to shift the symbolism of the bread away from the

¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1075.

haste of the original Passover (Ex. 12:11, 33–34, 39; Deut. 16:3) to the way that Jesus’ body would be “figuratively broken and literally killed in his upcoming death.”² The lack of emphasis on unleavened bread, however, clarifies that it is a matter of indifference whether the bread we use in the Lord’s Supper today contains leaven.³

Regarding the bread, we read that Jesus *took* it, *blessed* it, *broke* it, and *gave* it to his disciples (v. 26b). To begin, we should observe that Jesus is the one who gives the bread. This means that the pastor is not ultimately the one to *give* the bread to the people, and, much more, no priest today offers Christ as a sacrifice at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.⁴ The minister indeed should follow the example of the actions of Jesus in these steps, but ultimately the minister only represents the work of Jesus, who continues to give bread to his disciples. Further, we must qualify the sense in which Jesus’ body was broken, since the Scriptures insist that Christ’s death fulfilled the details of the Passover regarding care to avoid breaking the bones of the sacrifice: “Not one of this bones will be broken” (John 19:36; Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12; see also Ps. 34:20).

Jesus then says, “Take, eat; this is my body” (v. 26c). The words “take” and “eat” and “give” form a strong allusion to Genesis 3:6: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she *took* of its fruit and *ate*, and she also *gave* some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” As Derek Kidner observed in his commentary on the original sin in Genesis 3, “*She took...and ate*: so simple the act, so hard its undoing. God will taste poverty and death before ‘take and eat’ become verbs of salvation.”⁵ Whereas the woman’s taking, eating, and giving brought death to all humankind, Jesus’ taking, eating, and giving bring life.

Finally, Jesus says, “this is my body.” This statement, along with Jesus’ similar words about his blood in v. 28, have generated extraordinary debate, dissension, and division in the church. On the one hand, we cannot interpret these words as merely symbolic, since Paul elsewhere insists that “the bread that we break” is “a participation in the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 10:16). On the other hand, we cannot think that the bread offers the physical and corporal flesh of Jesus, as both Roman Catholics and Lutherans teach. How, then, should we understand the meaning of these words?

The key concept is that of “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.”⁶ It is not that the

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 390.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1420, §4.17.43. For more on this point, see Jacob D. Gerber, “Bread, Wine, and the Lord’s Supper,” March 18, 2018. <<https://harvestpca.org/bread-wine-and-the-lords-supper/>>

⁴ “He bids his disciples *take*; and therefore it is himself alone that offers. What the Papists contrive, as to Christ’s offering himself in the Supper, proceeded from an opposite author. And certainly it is a strange inversion...when a mortal man, who is commanded to take the body of Christ, claims the office of offering it; and thus a priest, who has been appointed by himself, sacrifices to God his own Son.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:205–06.)

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 1 (1967; repr., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008) 73.

⁶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 27.2.

bread *is* the body of Jesus, but that there is a real union *between* the bread and the body of Jesus. Furthermore, the bread functions as a metonymy, where the part is named to represent the whole (e.g., a “hired *hand*” to represent a whole worker, or “a *suit*” to represent a whole businessman). In this case, the metonymy connects the “body” of Jesus with Christ himself and all the benefits of his death and resurrection for us.⁷ Even though Jesus calls the bread his body and the cup his blood, “in substance and nature, they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before.”⁸ By this, we are still saying more than to affirm that the bread serves as a bare symbol of of the body of Jesus, since the bread is really united to Christ in a way that a symbol is not.

On this point, the union of Jesus’ divine and human natures supplies a helpful analogy.⁹ We do not believe that divine nature of God the Son was *converted* (i.e., *transformed*) into the human nature. Further, we do not believe that the the divine and human natures were Jesus were merely joined by *composition*, as though the person of the divine Christ were utterly separated from the person of the human Christ (Nestorianism). Finally, we do not believe that those two natures are *confused*, as though the attributes of what is proper to each nature were mingled with the other (Eutychianism). Thus, we do not think that Christ suffered on the cross according to his divine nature, and we do not think that Christ’s human nature gained divine attributes, such as immortality, invisibility, omniscience, or omnipresence.

Even so, theologians speak of the “communication of attributes,” in which the Bible sometimes speaks of something that Christ did in the language of one nature, even though that action is proper only to the other nature. Thus, Elizabeth confesses Mary as the “mother of my [divine] Lord” (Luke 1:43), even though Mary was the mother of Christ’s humanity. Or, Paul writes that “they...crucified the [divine] Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:7), even though Christ suffered according to his humanity. Alternately, John insists that, because “the Word became flesh [human] and dwelt among us,...we have seen his glory, glory as of the only [divine] Son from the Father” (John 1:14). To gaze upon the man Jesus is to see the glory of God (John 14:9)—even though we can only see the human nature of Jesus. This communication of attributes is possible because of the divine nature and the human nature are perfectly united in a single person.

In the same way, we do not believe that the bread is converted into the body of Christ (Roman Catholic transubstantiation). Nor do we believe that the bread is utterly separated from the body of Christ (composition), as though one were merely a symbol of the other (Zwinglian/Baptist symbolic view). Further, we also do not believe that the bread is mingled or confused with the body of Christ, as though the body of Christ were “in, with, and under” the bread (Lutheran). Rather, we believe in a sacramental union that sees the bread as so spiritually united to Christ that we can *call* the bread “the body of Christ,” but that we can still distinguish between the bread and the body. The point is not that the bread *is* Christ’s body in a physical sense, but that the bread *gives us* Christ’s body, and “all benefits thereof.”¹⁰

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:207–08. See also *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.1.

⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.5.

⁹ On these points, see the Christological definition established at the Council of Chalcedon from AD 451. The terms here are from *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 8.2.

¹⁰ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.1.

Christ’s Covenant (Matt. 26:27–28)

Next, we read that Jesus took a cup, gave thanks, and then gave it to his disciples, instructing them all to drink of it (v. 27). Then, he explains why they should drink: “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). Jesus chooses these words carefully to indicate both continuity and discontinuity with the Old Testament. To begin, the phrase “blood of the covenant” echoes the language that Moses used in Exodus 24:8, as a part of the Lord’s confirming a covenant bond with his people at Sinai after leading them out of Egypt.¹¹ Although Luke 22:20 records this as a “new covenant,” and while some manuscripts of Matthew included the word “new,” the textual evidence strongly suggests that the word “new” was not in Matthew’s original composition.¹² Further, the language that Christ’s blood “is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” is an echo to the suffering servant prophecy in Isaiah 52:13–53:12.¹³

Both Luke’s Gospel, as well as the clear sense of Matthew’s Gospel, establish that this covenant is, indeed, *new*. Building on the Passover, Jesus transforms the original exodus as a “type” of a new and greater deliverance; and as the people of God in the OT prospectively celebrated in the first Passover their escape from Egypt, anticipating their arrival in the Promised Land, so the people of God here prospectively celebrate their deliverance from sin and bondage, anticipating the coming kingdom.¹⁴ The great act of deliverance of the Old Testament pales in comparison to what Jesus will do for his people by giving up his life for them.

Moreover, this covenant is *new* as Jesus explains that his blood must be poured out in order to establish this covenant. On this point, we are reminded of the way in which Hebrews 9:15–17 clarifies that God’s covenant with his people is rightly considered a “will” (ESV) or a “testament” (KJV): “For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive” (Heb. 9:17). Whereas we use the word “covenant” typically to describe an agreement that stays in effect throughout the duration of one’s life, to be terminated only by death (e.g., the marriage covenant; Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14; see Rom. 7:1–3), God’s covenant with his people is, in a real sense, a *testament*. In order for us to gain the blessings that God had promised in his covenant, he must die to bequeath them to us. Thus, it is accurate to translate this as, “This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28 KJV).¹⁵

Christ’s Crown (Matt. 26:29)

The last words in this passage emphasize that the communion Christ shares with his disciples will

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 994.

¹² “Here is the inauguration of Jeremiah’s new covenant (Jer 31:31–34). ‘New’ does not appear in many of the best manuscripts of Matthew (ⲡ37, Ⲭ, B, L, Ⲟ, 33, and some Middle Egyptian and Moharic mss.) but does in Luke 22:20, from which it was probably borrowed by later copyists and inserted here. Nevertheless the newness is clear from the Old Testament allusions.” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 391.)

¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 391.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 603.

¹⁵ While we would not necessarily follow the KJV’s textual tradition in seeing “new” in this passage, the term “new” is certainly implied.

endure beyond his impending death:¹⁶ “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (v. 29). Although Jesus must soon drink a cup of suffering and death (Matt. 20:22; 26:39, 42), nevertheless the “wine which is a symbol of death will also be the focus of future rejoicing. New wine is a powerful OT symbol of joyful well-being (e.g., Gen 27:28; Deut 33:28; Prov 3:10; Amos 9:13).”¹⁷

This promise of future communion defines how we should understand both this initial observance of the Lord’s Supper, as well as all subsequent celebrations. Importantly, Nolland observes that this passage of the institution of the Lord’s Supper is “framed by the announcement of betrayal in vv. 20–25 and the announcement of desertion in vv. 30–35....It is Jesus, as about to be betrayed, abandoned, and struck down, who gives what is to be achieved by his dying to precisely those whose loyalty is about to fail.”¹⁸ In the midst of betrayal and abandonment, Jesus will lay down his life as he pursues “the joy set before him” (Heb. 12:2), a joy that is symbolized by new wine in his Father’s kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the Lord’s Supper connect with the Passover (v. 26)? What is similar about the Passover, and what is different? Why do you think that none of the biblical authors ever use the word for “unleavened bread” to describe the bread used in the Lord’s Supper? How (and why) does the language of taking, giving, and eating allude to Genesis 3:6? How should we understand Jesus’ words, “This is my body”?
2. What does Jesus signify by the cup (v. 28)? How does the cup relate to Jesus’ blood? What is in view when Jesus speaks of the “covenant”? In what sense is Jesus establishing a “testament” by this statement? How does this covenant/testament procure for us the covenantal blessing of the forgiveness of sins? How does the Lord’s Supper build upon and transform Passover? How does this covenant build upon and transform the blood of the old covenant (Ex. 24:8)?
3. How does the concept of sacramental union explain Jesus’ identification of his body and blood with the bread and the cup? How does the concept of metonymy connect the body to Christ and him crucified, and the blood to all Christ’s saving, covenantal benefits? How does the concept of the communication of attributes help us to understand the meaning of “is” in these disputed passages?
4. How does Jesus’ promise of drinking new wine in his Father’s kingdom hold forth the hope of glory (v. 29)? How does this promise relate to Paul’s statement about proclaiming the Lord’s death until Christ comes in 1 Corinthians 11:26? How does this passage help to clarify how we should relate to Christ in the Lord’s Supper when we receive the meal today? What will change about the way that you approach the Table next time?

¹⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 662.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 995.

¹⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1071.