

The Lord's Supper

Old Testament Background

- Is. 25 involves the promise of a future age that includes the coming of divine judgment (v. 2) and the revealing of a salvation that extends to all peoples (v. 3).
 - When the nations turn to God and are reconciled to God, this new and perfect communion with God that God himself brings about is represented as a *banquet* or *feast* (vv. 6-8).
 - Scripture elsewhere describes the Messiah's work of reconciling people to God as a marriage where he binds himself to this new people (just as a husband binds himself to a bride and cares for her and protects her).
 - This new relationship was celebrated afterward by a wedding banquet, where people were not only fed, but also shared in the joy of those who had been joined together.
 - ✚ Cf. Rev. 19:9: "the wedding supper of the lamb"
 - ✚ Mt. 22:2-14: the ruler offers a wedding banquet (v. 4) for his son (v.2)
- Elsewhere in the Old Testament, this picture of communion with God as feasting is combined with the idea of receiving/eating/taking in God's Word and Wisdom and being made well.
 - The Word of the Lord as a food that nourishes and sustains the soul (Dt. 8:3; Jer. 15:16)—eating this and taking it into oneself allows one to share in and derive benefit from God's Word and Wisdom.
 - In Prov. 9:1-6, receiving and coming to share in divine Wisdom is pictured as eating at a banquet.

New Testament

- In the New Testament, Jesus (God's Word and Wisdom) is the host of the banquet and shares with us all that belongs to him and all that he won for us on the Cross.
- Having been brought to the banquet, we share in everything that Jesus, as host, provides for us out of his own resources.
 - Cf. Jn. 6:32-58 (Jesus as the bread of life), where receiving Christ makes one a sharer in Christ's life.
 - See also 1 Cor. 10, where actively sharing in Christ (vv. 3-4) is linked with the Lord's Supper in vv. 16-17 ("the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?").
 - The sharing in Christ that occurs in the Lord's Supper is a thus a communion with that body given over to death "for you" (11:24) and with that blood shed on the Cross. (Are body and blood ever separated except at the violent death of the body?)

Thus, in the Lord's Supper, an analogy is drawn between

- the natural life we have with all human beings
 - (nourished and sustained through drinking and eating) and

- the supernatural life we have by being united with Christ
 - (nourished and sustained by communion with Jesus as Lord and a present savior)
- “In the natural realm, one is first born and afterwards is continually in need of food in order to grow and be strengthened. This is also true in the spiritual realm: A person is first born again, and afterwards he is continually in need of nourishment,” living in and out of Jesus Christ as the one who sustains us” (À Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, v. 2, p. 525)
- “The analogy of bodily functions [i.e. being sustained and nourished by food] is the best way to explain spiritual functions. In the Lord’s Supper we are shown that it is not sufficient merely to trust Christ but there must be something which corresponds to partaking of him, receiving him into the deepest parts of our soul, so that his will and nature become part of us and strengthen us.”

In the Lord’s Supper, Jesus meets us in our weakness and strengthens us.

In our weakness, we are able by faith to feed upon Christ’s presence, his promises and the benefits made available to us by his death and resurrection, so that our weak faith is strengthened. Thus, if one is weak and finds that their faith is weak and wavering, they should not stay away from the Lord’s Supper, but rather *must* come to the table and receive the strength the Lord offers there.

- Compare Augustine (*Tract. In Ioh.*, expounding the words “except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his book, you have no life in you”): “The Lord... said that he is the bread that came down from heaven, exhorting them to believe in him. For to believe in him is to eat the living bread. He who believes eats;” in doing this, “he is nourished invisibly,” just as he was also previously born again invisibly. These are spiritual realities and relationships whose nature and power is hidden from those who do not trust Christ.
- Compare Heidelberg Catechism, answer to Q. 16 (“What is it to eat of the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ?”): “It is not only to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ...so that we, though Christ is in heaven and we on earth, are nevertheless ‘flesh of his flesh’ and ‘bone of his bone.’”

By faith all of one’s being is united to all of Christ.

- When we receive what Christ offers with faith, we partake of the whole of Christ—all that he is, his divinity, his humanity, his life, his benefits—by his Spirit, he extends all these things to those he loves. By this means, he aims to address, affect and transform the whole of us, not just one’s reason or one’s memory. Just as the Spirit formed Christ’s human nature within the virgin’s womb, so now the Spirit forms Christ within us.

This meal shows us our true identity in Christ

- It is a feast prepared for those who are sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus Christ and no longer slaves.
 - Calvin (*Inst.*4.17.1): "Once God has received us into His family, it is to keep us in the place not of servants only but of sons and daughters, so that

he may fill the part of an excellent Father, anxious for the whole course of our lives. Not content with this, having given His pledge He has willed to assure us of this continued good will. To this end...He has given His Church...[this supper] by the hand of His only-begotten Son,...a spiritual feast, at which Christ attests that he is the living bread (Jn. 6:5), on which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality."

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper may be received by an individual, but it is fundamentally connected with Jesus' building up the whole body of the Church, so that the Church is both united in love and united in mission.

- When we participate in the Lord's Supper with faith, the believers who are gathered together in faith are together made one with Christ and in Christ.
- The meal, received with faith, also looks forward to our full and perfect union with Christ, that we all may become one body with him.
- The Supper always has in view the whole Body of Christ (of which our own body is a part; cf. 1 Cor. 6:15) and therefore should be seen as a public celebration of the community, rather than just a purely private experience.

Why the Need for Bread and Wine?

- Today faith is often treated as a wholly spiritual thing which is inside us and exists with or without external symbols or helps.
- There are also groups (such as the Salvation Army and the Quakers), which have given up the use of water, bread and wine and say that those things are no longer needed but that the spiritual reality can be given invisibly, with no need for any outward elements.
- This should lead us to ask ourselves the question:
 - What (if anything) would be lost if one did not partake of bread and wine at all, but simply used the time to reread what the Gospels say about the Last Supper and Jesus' death?

Without claiming to provide any final answer to this question, it is worth noting that the Lord *did* ask us to use tangible things (things that could be touched and tasted) and that he did this knowing of our weakness and wanting to help us in our weakness.

- We are physical creatures and so are used to looking at and using tangible things. It is therefore not surprising that we need tangible things to help us to see and to believe. God knows this and adapts himself to meet us where we are.
- Without the anchor of something tangible, we are capable of endless doubting and uncertainty, all of which erodes faith.

The physical elements make visible the invisible life and grace which Jesus extends to us, placing before our eyes and senses a tangible picture of God's promise to save and help us through Jesus Christ.

- In spite of our doubts and daily fears and anxieties, when we hold and eat these tangible elements, we are reminded (and must wholeheartedly believe) that Christ is in us and for us and that he is coming again.
- Physical eating is thus connected with and points to spiritual partaking. Christ uses this tangible picture of bread and wine to impress upon the hearts of believers that he was not ashamed to give up his own life for them; therefore, they may have confidence that he is for them and nothing can stand against his grace.
 - The elements of bread and wine and Christ's life are bound together not by human action or imagination, but rather by Christ's command in giving us the Lord's Supper and the promises he made to us there. By this command and promise, we believe that Christ's body has been broken for *us* and that his blood has been shed for *us*.
 - ✚ Through this, we are able more deeply to experience our union with Christ and better understand and be grateful for what we have received from Christ.
 - ✚ Here trust, by handling visible things, can also hold on to things that are not visible to the senses and find comfort and reassurance in them.
- That God should act in this way (commanding his people to use physical things to remember and enter into what he had done) is hardly surprising. Compare the identification of the past event and the present element (allowing present partaking in a past event and in the things God has won for us there) in the words of the Jewish Passover service, "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in Egypt." Both in the Passover and in the Lord's Supper, one looks back to an event where God, by his grace, is bringing people into a covenant relationship with himself and promises of help and salvation are given.
- On the command to use a physical means to experience a spiritual grace, compare also Lev. 6:26-27, where the priest must eat the sin offering for the people (himself included) to experience the benefits of God's continuing offer to forgive sins through the sacrifice made. Note also that the sacrifice (body and blood) makes holy all that it touches (v. 27).

Who Should Receive the Lord's Supper? :

Only Persons Who

- *Have Placed Their Trust in Christ*
 - *Recognize The Lord's Presence at the Table*
 - *Before Coming to the Table Have Examined Themselves and Repented of the Wrongs Done to God and to Others*
- The Lord's Supper requires that those who participate should
 - recognize the Lord's presence (1 Cor. 11:24,30; cf. Lk. 24:31)
 - show forth the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26)
 - examine themselves to see whether they have faith and repentance or not (1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5-6).
 - Infants and those who have never placed their trust in Christ should therefore not partake.

- Since the Lord's Supper presupposes faith and union with Christ, it is no help to the unconverted but rather points out their hardheartedness, which makes them liable to divine judgment.
 - Compare Augustine *Tract. In Joh.* 26.18 on Jn. 6:56 (“he that eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him”):
“Therefore this is what it means to eat that food and drink that drink; to abide in Christ and to have him abiding within. But he who does not abide in Christ through this, and in whom Christ does not abide, beyond doubt neither eats his flesh nor drinks his blood.”
 - The real presence of Jesus in and through the meal is why the person who approaches this communion meal in an unfit state (without trust in Christ and/or wronging others through a lack of love) is reproached in 1 Cor. 11:24. The person reproached does not discern the Lord's body (=presence) there (v. 29b) and, entering into the Lord's presence in an unworthy state, is judged by the Lord (v. 32a) in a way that may have physical consequences (v.30) but is intended to teach and correct (v. 32a: *paideuometha*) one, so that one might not be condemned together with the world (=godless) (v. 32b) when the final judgment is rendered.