

GRACE AND PEACE

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Feeding on Jesus: Why We Take the Lord's Supper Every Week

If you come to Grace and Peace for awhile, you will notice that we take the Lord's Supper almost every week. Unless we are celebrating a baptism or hearing new member testimonies, part of our weekly gathering involves taking bread and wine, just as Jesus and his followers did 2,000 years ago. In fact, some may wonder why we take the Lord's Supper so often. After all, other churches only celebrate it monthly or quarterly. And if the Supper is just a means of remembering Jesus, can't we do that by singing another song or uttering a prayer?

The frequency with which we celebrate the Lord's Supper will inevitably relate to what we believe occurs as we take the bread and wine. At Grace and Peace, we take the Supper every week because we believe it is one of the most precious gifts that Jesus has given his people. In the Supper, our Lord assures us that he truly paid for our sins, nourishes us with his body and blood, unites us through a family meal, and proclaims the gospel to those outside the family. When we understand the importance of what happens during the Lord's Supper, we come to realize that we should take it as often as the word is preached.¹

Assurance

God uses the Lord's Supper to assure us that Jesus really cleansed us from sin. Throughout the Bible, God provides his people with covenant signs to assure them of his covenant promises. God promises Noah that he will never flood the earth again (Genesis 9:11), and then he gives Noah the rainbow to attest to the truth of this promise (Genesis 9:12-13). Likewise, he promises Abraham an offspring and a land (Genesis 17:4-8) and then gives Abraham the sign of circumcision² to confirm that promise (Genesis 17:10-15).

¹ Some local churches who agree that the Supper provides assurance, nourishment, unity, and gospel proclamation nonetheless celebrate it less than weekly. We do not think that all churches *must* take the Supper every week, but given its great benefits, we do think that they *should* do so as often as possible.

² The Bible's teaching on circumcision also reminds us that communion and other covenant signs do not save us, but rather assure us that we have been saved. As the Apostle Paul writes, Abraham was made righteous by grace through faith before he was circumcised (see Romans 4:11). Circumcision did not make Abraham righteous, but rather assured him that he was righteous, much like a seal on a document assures us of its authenticity.

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In the same way, Jesus established his Supper to assure us of the truth of his deepest promise: that the cross fully pays for all our sins. He promised that on the cross his blood would be “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28), and on that same night he established the Lord’s Supper to confirm the certainty of that promise. As we take the bread and wine “in remembrance” of Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:24-25), he assures us that he truly paid the penalty and bore the wrath that we deserve. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.”

Nourishment

Second, the Holy Spirit nourishes and refreshes us every time we take the Supper by feeding us the body and blood of Jesus. This teaching does not mean that God transforms bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood. After all, Paul writes that the Supper involves the breaking of “bread,” rather than the breaking of the actual body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). Moreover, Christians believe that Jesus is not only fully God, but fully human. The eternal Son of God “became flesh” (John 1:14), and he “is of the same reality as we are ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; [he is] like us in all respects, sin only excepted” (Council of Chalcedon). And since Jesus is fully human, his body is finite and remains in one particular place, “seated at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1).

Yet even as the Bible teaches Jesus’ full humanity, it also tells us that the Supper involves a participation in the very body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). Moreover, when Jesus instituted his Supper, he said that “this is my body” and “this is my blood” (Mark 14:22, 24). Such words imply that when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we feed on the actual body and blood of Christ.

Over the centuries, many have responded to these seemingly contradictory teachings by emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other. For instance, Roman Catholics argue that the bread and wine of communion are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ, while Lutherans contend that his body and blood are “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. Neither view adheres to the Biblical teaching that Christ is fully human with a finite body. Conversely, many evangelicals treat the Lord’s Supper as a mere memorial that reminds us of the cross, rather than an actual participation in the body and blood of Christ.

The Reformed tradition approaches the Supper by accepting all the Bible’s teachings: Christ is fully human with a finite body that remains in heaven, **and** we feed by faith on his actual body and blood when we take his Supper. Both these teachings are true, not just because they are both in the Bible, but because the Holy Spirit dwells in us and unites us to Jesus (see Galatians 4:6). As John Calvin wrote, the Spirit “is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us.” When we take the Supper, our mouths receive bread and wine, but the Spirit feeds us the very body and blood of Christ. Jesus “refresh[es] us by the

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eating of his flesh, and the drinking of his blood. Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space."³

Once we understand how the Spirit nourishes us through the Lord's Supper, we recognize the goodness of celebrating this meal every week. The Christian life is hard. We tire as we suffer, toil, witness injustice, and continually battle our indwelling sin. Yet even as we take up our cross to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit nourishes and refreshes us through the Supper by feeding us the very body and blood of Christ. In the midst of all our sorrows and trials, why would we not want to receive such sustenance every week?

Community

Third, the Lord's Supper builds community by uniting believers around a family meal. We live in a culture beset by loneliness. 54% of Americans sometimes or always feel that no one knows them well – a number that rises to nearly 70% among those born after 1996. Yet as we eat the Supper with our brothers and sisters, God reminds us that “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17). Every week, the Lord's Supper shows us that although we live in an age of loneliness, God has given us a family in our local church, a family with whom we can share a common meal.

Evangelism

Finally, in taking the Supper we “proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). As the minister fences the table by inviting believers to take the bread and wine and asking nonbelievers to refrain from doing so, everyone in the assembly is taught that there are only two kinds of people: those in Adam who are bound for eternal conscious torment, and those in Christ who are bound for an eternity with their risen treasure. Christ will separate

³ These words of Calvin are echoed in the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards – the two major confessional statements of Reformed Christianity. The Belgic Confession teaches that “what is eaten is Christ's own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood—but the manner in which we eat it is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith. In that way Jesus Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven—but he never refrains on that account to communicate himself to us through faith...[Jesus] nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood.” Likewise, the Westminster Larger Catechism tells us that in the Supper we “feed upon [Christ's] body and blood, to [our] spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.”

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the sheep from the goats at his second coming (Matthew 25:31-46), and in the Supper nonbelievers see a preview of this separation, even as we implore them to trust in Jesus and thereby join us in taking the family meal.

Conclusion

We take the Lord's Supper every week because we want to enjoy its rich blessings as often as possible. When sin rises up within us and causes us to doubt our salvation, the Supper assures us that Jesus paid it all. When life fills us with sorrows and wears us down, the Spirit uses the Supper to nourish and refresh us with the very body and blood of Christ. And when we feel isolated from others, the Supper reminds us that we are part of a local church family as we come together to eat the family meal. We all need assurance, nourishment, and community, so we celebrate the Lord's Supper every week.