



GRACE LIFE  
C H U R C H

# THE LORD'S SUPPER: THE FAMILY SUPPER

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## PRE-INTRODUCTION & SCRIPTURE

This our last message in the series *Recovering the Church*. Many more months could be spent in looking at what the Bible teaches us about the church. The primary goal of this series was to pour the foundation and put up a frame. Truly recovering the church happens during the next weeks and months and years and decades as the church is what Christ says it ought to be and does what Christ says it ought to do. We got a hint of this last week. The church is to fulfill its responsibilities to its members. We ought to encourage the fainthearted, rebuke the rebellious, pray for the weak, pursue the wandering, and we could say much more. As we grow in the Word of God, we will, at the same time, always be growing in our love for one another as a church.

This Sunday, we are speaking of the Lord's Supper again. Last Sunday I said that everything we have talked about in this series is communicated in and by the Lord's Supper. The church is a family, and the family meal brings it all together.

We are going to begin by reading from five passages this morning. We are doing this so that we can get a snapshot of all the major themes related to the Lord's Supper and see how they connect.

1 Corinthians 11:23-27

*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 11:20-21

*When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.*

1 Corinthians 5:11-13

*But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*

2 Corinthians 2:5-8

*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure--not to put it too severely--to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*

1 Corinthians 10:17

*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

## INTRODUCTION

This morning we are going to ask two main questions that are directly connected to each other.

1. What does the Lord Supper *do*? Or another way of asking the same question, what does the Lord's Supper *mean*?
2. Considering our answer in question 1, how then ought the church to practice the Lord's Supper?

What does the Lord's Supper mean in the Bible, and how should we practice it so that it means what the Bible says it means?

I want to put before you an illustration that will help us understand why this matters. This is a real story in a real church, but this story could just as easily happen in another church.

A man began attending a church and he would take the Lord's Supper when he attended. After a few weeks it became known that this man was devoted to a life of serious sexual sin. People in the church believed it was wrong that he was taking the Lord's Supper. Someone living a life of open unrepentant sin shouldn't take the

Lord's Supper. So they asked the leaders of the church to meet with this man and let him know he shouldn't be taking the Lord's Supper.

My guess is that many of us would respond the same way this church did. Why is that? It is because we understand that the Lord's Supper *means* something. It *does* something. When this man comes to the Table with the rest, means he is part of the same body. It identifies him with Christ and the church. But this story reveals something else about the Lord's Supper that we already understand, but probably don't think about very often. It reveals that we believe that the local church has authority over who comes to the Lord's Table in their church and who doesn't. This man wanted to take the Supper, and the church said, "We shouldn't let him take the Supper."

Is this right? Is it biblical? Does the local church have the authority to tell a person that they aren't allowed to come to the Lord's Table? Does the local church have the authority to tell someone that they ARE allowed to come to the Lord's Table? And if so, WHO should the church welcome to the Table? These are important questions.

## **WHAT DOES THE LORD'S SUPPER MEAN?**

So first, what does the Lord's Supper mean? As a sign, what does it signify?

### **AN ILLUSTRATION**

Consider a wedding ring. What does it signify? A wedding ring is a sign of the marriage vows. To the person wearing the ring, it is a reminder that are in a marriage covenant with their spouse. It says they belong to one another and have responsibilities to one another. To everyone else, it also is a sign of the vows they have made to one another. It means they are spoken for; they belong to someone in marriage.

I remember in bible college an engaged couple had a little spat. There was a door separating the men's and women's doors. He was on my side of the door, and she was on the other. And as this spat went on, she went quiet. Suddenly we saw her engagement ring slide under the door from her side to his side. We know the significance of that act! In the end, they got married and are still married.

We understand these things. Signs have meaning. But what does the sign of the Lord's Supper mean? I have 7 things, and they are all related to each other. I'm going to go fast over many of these because we have addressed them before.

### **1. THE LORD'S SUPPER PROCLAIMS CHRIST'S DEATH**

1 Corinthians 11:26

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

The gospel can and must be proclaimed with words. The gospel is that although we were dead in our sins, Christ died for our sins, such that all who repent and believe in him will find forgiveness and be reconciled to God through Christ.

The Lord's Supper proclaims this same gospel in sign form. Behold, the body of Christ broken for sinners. Behold, the blood of Christ, shed for sinners.

## **2. THE LORD'S SUPPER IS A SIGN OF OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST**

1 Corinthians 10:16: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*

In the Supper, if received by faith, we have true communion with Christ. The Supper is true food for our souls, it is a true means through which we grow in the grace of our Lord Jesus.

In the modern church today, this is likely where it ends. The Lord's Supper is only about me and Jesus. It is like doing my own private devotions, but at church with other people. But we have five other points.

## **3. THE LORD'S SUPPER IS A PLEDGE TO FULLFIL OUR COVNEANT RESPONSIBILITIES TO ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST'S BODY THE CHURCH**

1 Corinthians 11:17-18: *But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.*

11:20: *When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.*

11:29: *For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.*

11:33: *So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.*

We looked at this at length last Sunday but let's catch the central point. If our understanding of the Lord's Supper doesn't include a commitment to our covenant responsibilities to one another, it isn't the Lord's Supper at all.

What do I mean by covenant responsibilities? I mean the commands that Christ has given to us in Scripture that pertain to how we ought to love one another in the church. There are general commands that can apply to all Christians, but many of the commands in the Bible come to us in the context of life in the local church. Right here in 1 Corinthians 11, we are to wait for one another. That sounds like a family to me. When you get in the van after church and go home, we ask, "Is everyone here?" We don't mean everyone in the world. We mean the members of our family. That's what we mean by covenant responsibilities.

The Lord's Supper is a pledge to fulfill our covenant responsibilities to the church.

#### **4. THE LORD'S SUPPER MAKES THE MANY MEMBERS INTO ONE BODY**

1 Corinthians 10:17

*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

When we eat the bread, we become one body. We receive the Supper as individuals, but as we do, the individual members become one body.

We know this is true because of that illustration we looked at earlier. If this man in open immorality eats from the same bread that we do as a church, he will be saying he is part of our one body. And we will be saying he is one of us. We will be saying he belongs to the body of Christ. We believe he shouldn't be welcome to the Lord's Table because his life tells us that he doesn't belong to the body of Christ.

Or, to say this another way, we can ask a question: Where is the church? The church isn't known by certain building or that we all have the same T-shirt. So how do we know where the church is, where the body of Christ is? The Biblical answer is this: the church is seated at the Lord's Table.

*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*

The Lord's Supper makes the many members into one body.

#### **5. THE LORD'S SUPPER DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN FAITHFUL AND UNFAITHFUL MEMBERS OF THE BODY**

In 1 Corinthians 5, a member of the church is living in unrepentant sexual immorality and the church is proud of themselves that they aren't judging their members. Paul rebukes them strongly and says that when they assemble as a church, they are to remove this man from their body. They are to judge those inside the church.

And how is this judgment to be demonstrated in their life together?

1 Corinthians 5:11: *But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one.*

In the context of vv. 7-8, we see that this eating is in reference to the Lord's Supper. We are to celebrate the festival with unleavened bread. We are not to permit those who persist in sin to the Lord's Table. Therefore, church discipline is often called excommunication. That word literally means "out of communion". We are not to share the communion Supper with those members of the church who have disqualified themselves through persist unrepentance.

The idea isn't that we are constantly trying to find sins in one another. We are supposed to assume the best of one another, and we are to overlook minor offenses. But it also means that when someone is walking in sin, we love them enough to tell them about their sin and urge them to repent. If the sinner simply refuses to listen, after the biblical process, he is to be excommunicated, removed from the Lord's Table.

This means that the church is to use the Lord's Supper to distinguish between those who are qualified and those who have become disqualified to take the Supper. The Supper itself communicates that distinction. Here in 1 Corinthians 5, this distinction is called judgment. We often think of judgment only in terms of a negative judgment. But judgment is to make a distinction between two things. When we receive someone into membership, we are judging them as being in Christ and we now treat them as a member of the family. It's a positive thing! When someone is in sin like this man in 1 Corinthians 5, we are to judge them as being unfaithful, and we are to *not* treat them as a member of the family.

But in 1 Corinthians 11:9-13, Paul makes clear that the church doesn't have the authority to judge everybody:

*For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*

This is a crucial piece of the puzzle. The Lord's Supper is the sign of the church's judgment between the faithful and unfaithful members of the body. But the church is only allowed to judge those inside the church.

There are three categories of people in 1 Corinthians 5. First, there are those who are *qualified*. They are inside the church and are affirmed by the church as being faithful. Second, there is this man who is to be *dis-qualified*. He was previously qualified, but

the church has judged him disqualified because of his persistent rebellion. Third, there are others who are *un-qualified*. Paul says they are outside the church. The church has not authority to declare whether they are faithful or not, because they are outside the church.

In our illustration, that man was outside the church. He never joined the church. He never entered into covenant with the church. So how is the church to deal with this? Not so simple, is it?

The Lord's Supper distinguishes between faithful and unfaithful members of the body.

## **6. THE LORD'S SUPPER RE-AFFIRMS THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY**

Let's look quickly at 2 Corinthians 4:5-8. We can't be sure if this is about the man in sin from 1 Corinthians 5, but it is at least about a similar situation. We see that this person has repented, and it is time to restore them.

1 Corinthians 4:5-8

*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure--not to put it too severely--to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*

They are to reaffirm their love for him. This doesn't mean they didn't love him in any sense before. It means they are to restore fellowship with him. They are to bring him back into the family. And given what we saw in 1 Corinthians 5, this would mean also that he will now be welcome again to the Table.

Imagine the joy that this man would experience coming to the Lord's Table. He has seen the danger of his disobedience to God and has repented. And now the church is to welcome him back as a brother at the Table. If this were you, can you not imagine how good the bread would taste? How sweet the cup would be on your lips? These people loved me well when it was hard, they are Christ's gift to me to watch over my soul, and now they are affirming me in my repentance. They are saying that I am qualified once more to receive this family meal. That's amazing!

But the good news is that this re-affirmation is to be true for us all every time we take the Lord's Supper! The one bread makes the many into one body. Each time we take the Supper, it is to be a sign that the body is once again affirming us in the Lord. The other members are watching over my soul. The elders are watching over my soul. And they see the grace of God at work in me! Despite my many failings and sins and weaknesses, the body of Christ sees my repentance and sees the growth of grace that the Holy Spirit is doing in my life. We can have that same joy that this man would have

experienced every single time we do the Lord's Supper! The Lord's Supper re-affirms the members of the body.

## **7. THE LORD'S SUPPER IDENTIFIES THE BODY AS THE BODY**

This is not really a separate point but a summary of the others.

The Lord's Supper is a participation in Christ the head, and precisely because of that, it is also an act of the church, in the church, and as a church.

Those who are under corrective discipline of the church are not given the Supper and are marked off as not belonging to the body. Those who are in the church and are *affirmed* by the body as faithful, despite the weakness we all have, are given the Supper and marked off as belonging to the body. The Supper is the mark of the church's judgment, both in affirmation or in dis-affirmation.

This is the picture we get in the New Testament. The covenant community of the local church comes to the Table. Its members are re-affirmed in the Lord, and the church testifies that those who participate belong to the Lord and to his body, the church. That is what the Lord's Supper *is* in the New Testament. That is what the Lord's Supper *does* in the New Testament. It is not merely a personal act of private devotions that we happen to do together. It is a sign for the members and the body because the members together *are* the body.

## **HOW THEN SHOULD WE PRACTICE THE LORD'S SUPPER?**

### **INTRODUCTION: THE SUPPER IS FOR MEMBERS OF LOCAL CHURCHES**

So then how ought we to practice the Lord's Supper so that our practice matches the meaning?

After extensive study and thought on the Scriptures, the elders believe this church should change how we practice the Lord's Supper. Specifically, we believe that we should change how we fence the Table. Fencing the table means how we say who is welcome to the Table and who isn't.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It might be helpful here to describe the various ways in which churches have decided to fence the Lord's Table.

- *Open Communion*. In this view, the individual coming can decide if they should take or not. Normally, churches that practice open communion say it is for professing believers, and some also state that baptism is a requirement. This has essentially been practice until now.
- *Closed Communion*. In this view, only members of that particular local church are welcomed to the Table. They are not saying that all others are outside the faith, only that they don't have the authority to serve the Lord's Supper to those who are not under the authority of that particular local church.
- *Close Communion*. This is similar to closed communion, but in this view, members of other faithful churches are also allowed to the Table. The idea is that because the person is another church is watching over that person's soul, they are then qualified to take the Supper. This view seeks to recognize the legitimacy of other churches and the true fellowship we share with them in Christ.



This is how we have fenced the Table in the past. We say:

*The Lord's Supper is for you if you have repented of your sins and put your faith in Christ alone, and if you have been baptized into union with Christ and the church.*

This is how we are proposing that we begin to fence the Table:

*The Lord's Supper is for you if you have repented of your sins and put your faith in Christ alone, and if you have been baptized into union with Christ and the church, and if you are a member in good standing of a local church that preaches the gospel faithfully.*

The change is that only members in good standing of this church or another faithful church would be invited to participate in the Lord's Supper. Why should we make this change? It is because of everything we have seen, because of the picture of the church we find in the New Testament.

The church is a family. We belong to each other; we know who belongs to the family. We have family rules, which are the commands of Christ in the Bible and which we summarize in our membership covenant. And in the Bible, the Lord's Supper is the family meal that is all about this family reality. In it we proclaim that we belong to the Father in Christ. In it we also proclaim that we belong to one another. We re-commit ourselves to our covenant responsibilities when we eat. We are identified as one body with many members when we eat. We affirm one another in the Lord when we eat, and we can do this because we have entered into a covenant relationship with one another.

This is the picture we get in the New Testament. In the Bible, the Lord's Supper is a sign that is directly connected with church membership and our covenant responsibilities to that body.

### **WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO PROFESS CHRIST WHO AREN'T MEMBERS?**

What about those who profess Christ who attend we see they love Christ but aren't members of churches? Shouldn't they come to the Table too?

This is maybe a hard answer, but I don't think we see this happening in the Bible. All the teaching on the Lord's Supper in the Bible assumes that those who are receiving it belong to a local church. They are covenant members in a local church.

In 1 Corinthians 11, we saw that some members were not fulfilling their covenant responsibilities to the other members. They weren't waiting for their brothers and sisters. And Paul rebukes them sharply and says if they won't fulfill their responsibilities, it isn't even the Lord's Supper at all anymore! But they had clear responsibilities to specific people. They knew who they were to wait for.

In 1 Corinthians 5, this man is living in open sin and he is to be excommunicated or excluded from the Supper because of his open sin. But he was inside the church to begin with. The church isn't allowed to judge those outside the church.

Remember the illustration from the beginning. The church isn't allowed to judge that man as being disqualified from the table because he wasn't inside the church to begin with. And neither were they allowed to judge him as being qualified for the table. They shouldn't have given him the Supper in the first place. 1 Corinthians 5 assumes that everyone taking the Supper belongs to the church and is therefore under the authority of the church in this way.

Well, we might say that the Bible never says that people who profess faith in Christ aren't allowed to come to the Table. True enough. But the Bible really doesn't really have a category for Christians who don't belong to a local church.

This is what Sinclair Ferguson says. I quote him to show you that this isn't just me or our elders that think belonging to a church is what the Bible tells us to do:

*One of the questions that keeps cropping up is, "If I'm a Christian, do I need to belong to the church?" I think to be honest if you had asked a Christian in the New Testament that question, they would have wondered where you had come from because they understood that to be a Christian and to belong to the church are not two different things; they're simply two sides of the same coin.<sup>2</sup>*

The pattern in the Bible is that Christians belong to local churches as covenant members.

## **THIS IS THE PATTERN OF THE HISTORICAL CHURCH**

Why do other churches not do this if it is biblical?

Church tradition is an interesting thing. It is true that in recent church tradition in Canada, especially evangelical churches, this hasn't been widely practiced. But neither has church discipline. Neither has biblical eldership. Neither has biblical church membership. The modern man doesn't want a church to oversee their faith and so church's have just stopped doing it. But maybe this is partly why so many churches are weak and dying these days.

It was not so long ago that most evangelical churches assumed that professing Christians should all belong to a local church *and* that the Lord's Supper was a sign for the members of a local church. You may not have heard of the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* (NHC), but it was written 188 years ago which historically speaking,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/basics-of-the-christian-life/belonging-to-the-church>

is quite recent. And a slightly modified form of this statement unites the 47,000 churches of the Southern Baptist convention, which is the largest evangelical denomination in America.

This is the definition of the church in the NHC:

*We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word.*

The church is a congregation of believers associated in covenant. In 1833, and today in the tens of thousands of churches that continue to affirm this statement, the local church IS its members, those who have entered into covenant with the church. Now listen to the statement on Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

*We believe that baptism it is prerequisite to the privileges of a church relation, and to the Lord's Supper; in which the members of the church by the sacred use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ; preceded always by solemn self-examination.*

Until very recently, the church has believed and practiced that the Lord's Supper belong to the members of local churches. This isn't reason alone to do it this way, but we have made the biblical case. In case we are tempted to believe this is a brand new idea, the church from the past would remind us that *not* doing it this way is a new idea.

There has been a resurgence recently of churches coming to the Scriptures and asking, "How ought we to be structuring our churches?" And in conversation with other pastors of like churches in Manitoba this week, two pastors told me they are moving this same direction right now.

## **THIS IS NOT A JUDGMENT ON NON-MEMBERS**

Now I think the biggest objection we might have to this change is an emotional objection. I want to be clear that this doesn't mean the objection is not important. Quite to the contrary. The meaning of the Lord's Supper has a lot to do with our emotions because the Supper is designed to affirm believers in the Lord, and to disaffirm those who have forsaken the covenant in rebellion.

The objection of course is that if we do this, we are saying that non-members aren't saved and we are pushing them away from the church.

First, we are not at all saying non-members aren't saved. Just like we don't say someone who isn't baptized yet isn't saved. There are people who regularly attend here who I personally believe are truly saved. There are people who regularly attend here who I

personally believe are not yet saved. But the Lord's Supper isn't just about our personal beliefs about who is saved and who isn't. It isn't even about whether we *ourselves* believe we are saved or not. The man in 1 Corinthians 5 believed he was saved but the church was to tell him he wasn't.

But in the case of those *outside* the church, we are not at all saying that they are not saved. We are only saying that Christ has not given us the authority to judge those outside the church.

Think of it like a judge in a court today. We think of the judge as being able to say "guilty" or "not guilty". But even before the judge hears the arguments, he may decide that this case is outside of his jurisdiction. And so he says, "This is beyond my authority. I cannot judge it."

That is what the church is to do with those who are still outside the church. We don't have the authority to judge anyone outside the church at all. We do not have ability to watch over the souls of those outside the church in this way.

This is *not* meant to push people away from the church. Now sadly, it may happen. Someone may consider these things and decide they will not now or ever join a local church and so if this church won't give them the Lord's Supper anyway, they will just go to another church. But hear me clearly. This is *not* what we want. This is the opposite of what I want. This is not what the elders want. We want every believer to move *into* the life of the church, not out of it. We do not believe that this new practice would truly exclude any Christians from anything because the doors to this family are wide open. Any true believer in Christ who is willing to commit to the family responsibilities as laid out in Scripture is not only welcomed to come in, but we would plead with you to do so.

I'm not a perfect pastor by any means, but I bear witness about myself in this issue. If you are a Christian and are not a member here or anywhere and have been around a while, you know that I love you. You know that I care for you. Many of you have sat in my living room and at my dining room table. I've walked with you through challenges in your life as best I can. I have prayed for you. In spite of multiple services in multiple places, I have been absolutely committed to make sure every single person who wants to attend a gathering of this church is able to do it, members and non-members alike. I love you, as a human being and now, as I've gotten to know you, as a friend. You know in your heart I'm not trying to push you away. I'm trying to welcome you all the way in.

## CONCLUSION

Why would we pursue this change?

Because we see it in the Bible. Maybe you don't see it there yet. That's ok. We will walk together in this. We as elders aren't going to ram this into the practice of the church. When we practice the Supper next week, we will do it the same as the week before. Ramming things through isn't faithfulness at all. And we need to consider these things carefully. Members need time to think about this. Future members need time to think about this. But as elders, we do believe it is what the Bible teaches, which is why we are pursuing this.

We also believe that the Bible does it this way to increase the benefit of the Lord's Supper to members. The Lord's Supper truly becomes an affirmation of the church when participation isn't just based on self-affirmation.

We believe this helps keep the witness of the church pure. When the Supper is for members of faithful churches, we can truly say that everyone who takes the Supper is accountable to a local church, and that local church has judged them worthy.

To some of you, this is something you've thought of and already hold this same position. To others, this may be completely shocking. If that is you, I'd like to say just a few things.

First, process this slowly. Please respond slowly. Think about it. Consider it. If you missed a bunch of sermons in this series in the past months, go back and listen to them. I will put this sermon online in audio form as well as in text form. Go and review it, evaluate the arguments to see if they are biblical.

Second, if you want to express support for this change or a concern, please talk to one of the elders about it. We welcome conversation. Maybe we have overlooked something too!

Third, we will discuss this at our member meeting on October 17. It will be a fairly open discussion, and we will try to answer questions that may have come to us even before the meeting so that all can benefit.

I love this church. I love the members of this church. I love the children of the members of this church. I love those who have been gathering with this church who are not yet members.

May the Lord be gracious and merciful to us as we grow in his grace.