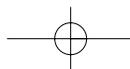
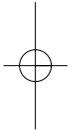




# What Is the Lord's Supper?



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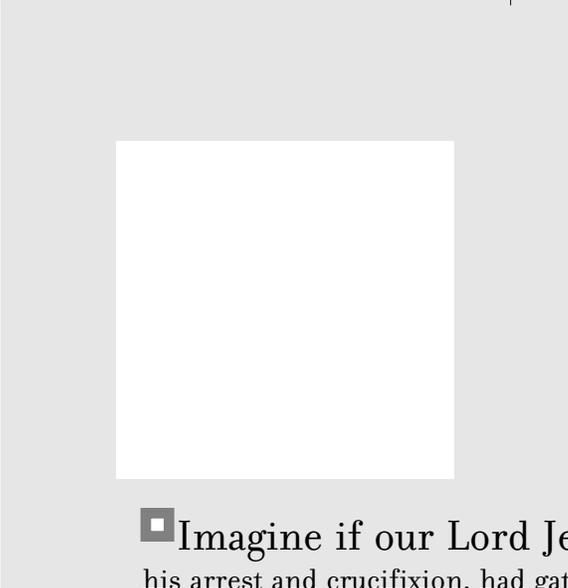
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Imagine if our Lord Jesus, on the night before his arrest and crucifixion, had gathered his closest disciples and shown them a worship practice by which they were to remember him after he was gone. This ordinance would also serve to promote a spiritual bond among the believers and enshrine the meaning of the death Jesus was about to endure. We can only imagine how significant these instructions would be to the disciples in the years to come and how important a role this worship practice would play in the life of the church.

Those familiar with the Gospel accounts will realize that this is not a hypothetical situation. Jesus did, in fact, establish a sacred worship practice—a sacrament—that would center the Christian faith upon his atoning death and unite the believers in their communion with him during all the long years between his death and his second coming. As we would imagine, this sacrament, the Lord's Supper, has indeed occupied a central role in the faith and practice of the church.

All this is to highlight the oddity that so many believers, especially in contemporary evangelical Christianity, think so little of the Lord's Supper. They seldom observe it and assign to it little significance. They are largely ignorant of the theology poured into and out from it. They derive no assurance or comfort, and seek no grace, as they receive from the Lord's

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Table. How remarkable this is among those supposedly devoted to the Bible!

There are, I think, two explanations for this, and both are poor excuses. First, to many evangelicals, lingering in the sacramental air is the specter of Roman Catholicism, with its mystical and ritualistic devotion to the Mass. Evangelicals therefore make the mistake of defining themselves in opposition to Rome instead of in conformity to the Bible. Thus, while unable to reject the Lord's Supper without obviously opposing the Bible, many evangelicals think that the longer the lids are kept on the better.

The second reason is the evangelicals' devotion to the Bible as the principal means of grace. Yes, Jesus established the sacrament on the night of his arrest. But after his resurrection and ascension he sent the apostles into the world as preachers of the gospel. The Book of Acts does not present the apostles as men standing before the world with trays of crackers and goblets of grape juice. Rather, they stood with the Old Testament in their hands and with the message of Christ burning in their hearts and bursting from their lips and pens. Our proper emphasis on believing Bible truth—and our less proper focus on evangelism over Christian growth—produces a coolness to the Bible's idea of sacramental grace.

The challenge before today's evangelicals, and especially those who embrace Reformed Theology, is that we should give the Lord's Supper the place intended for it by our Lord. This will mean affirming a primacy in our ministry of the Word of God, as demonstrated in the example of the apostles. But it also means restoring to our worship and our approach to spiritual growth a grateful and believing partaking of the Supper of our Lord. The goal of this booklet is to provide the understanding we need by considering the biblical institution of this sacrament, followed by a compact treatment of theologi-

cal issues, and concluding with pastoral considerations for administering and receiving this blessed means of grace.

## THE BIBLICAL INSTITUTION

The Lord's Supper receives its name from Paul's usage in 1 Corinthians 11:20. Other common names deriving from Scripture are the *Eucharist* (from 1 Cor. 11:24) and *Holy Communion* (from 1 Cor. 10:16). The Roman Catholic term *Mass* comes from the Latin word *missa*, used for dismissing people at the end of the Latin liturgy. There is no biblical support for this term.

The Reformers emphasized that a sacrament—that is, a sacred mystery prescribed for our worship—must have been instituted immediately by our Lord. In three parallel accounts of the Last Supper, we find Jesus' institution of this sacrament (Matt. 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:19–20), to which Paul adds a fourth account (1 Cor. 11:23–26). This is the basic biblical institution:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:26–28)

Christ's words establish the basic pattern for the Supper, namely, the use of bread to signify his body and wine to signify his blood. As these are respectively broken and poured, testimony is given to Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Participation takes the form of eating and drinking. Paul further

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establishes the perpetual observance of the sacrament until the return of Christ: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). In reflecting on the biblical institution, we should note the Supper's connection to the Jewish Passover meal and consider its meaning as a sign and as a seal of Christ's new covenant.

### **The Lord's Supper and Passover**

Benjamin Warfield wrote, "Nothing can be more certain than that [Jesus] deliberately chose the Passover meal for the institution of the sacrament of his body and blood."<sup>1</sup> Two passages make clear that Jesus and his disciples were gathered in the Upper Room for the Passover meal (Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7-8). Jesus' clear intention was to connect this new sacrament to its Old Covenant foreshadow.

There are a number of continuities between the two rites. Both are religious feasts in which participation takes the form of eating and drinking. Both focus on an atoning death; indeed, the New Testament teaches that the Paschal lamb typified Jesus Christ in his atoning work (John 1:36; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19). Paul says explicitly that the elements of the Lord's Supper "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Warfield thus asserts, "The Lord's Supper is the Christian Passover Meal. It takes, and was intended to take, in the Christian Church, the place which the Passover occupied in the Jewish Church. It is the Christian substitute for the Passover."<sup>2</sup>

The Passover was a memorial to Israel's exodus deliverance. The first Passover meal was eaten in Egypt on the night of the plague on the firstborn. Lambs were brought into the Israelite houses to be cared for, indicating an intimacy between the people and the sacrifice (Ex. 12:3). They were to be