

The Lord's Supper

Jesus Christ and His gospel stand at the center of all human history. His perfect life of obedience resulting in His execution by Roman crucifixion, His burial into a Jewish tomb in Jerusalem, and His literal, physical resurrection from death three days after His burial comprises what followers of Jesus have heralded as "the gospel of Jesus Christ" for the last 2,000 years. According to John Calvin, one of history's greatest Bible teachers, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the 'Cardo salutis,' or literally, "the hinge on which our salvation turns." The gospel of Jesus Christ, with the cross as its center, is the hinge on which all of history turns and in which all things on heaven and on earth find their fullness. The conviction of this belief is at the core of everything that we desire to be and do at The Village Church.

Each week, as the pivotal point of our weekend services, our church celebrates and remembers Jesus Christ clothed in His glorious gospel in a communal act of worship that we call The Lord's Supper. John Chrysostom, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, said once, "The celebration of the Lord's Supper is the commemoration of the greatest blessing that ever the world enjoyed." For over 2,000 years, The Lord's Supper has been a means by which followers of Jesus Christ have remembered their Lord and Savior, proclaimed His gospel, and been knitted together in unity as a family of faith. The Village Church desires to keep Jesus and His gospel in the forefront of our minds and hearts through this visible sermon. We hope that weekly observance of the historical act of faith might be a means of grace for our church, just as it has been for the last 20 centuries for the disciples of Jesus.

Due to its longevity and widespread practice in churches of all different denominations and theologies, The Lord's Supper has become one of the most widely misunderstood and erroneously practiced acts of worship in the church of Jesus Christ. As Ben Witherington III has observed, "Christians today have widely divergent views of The Lord's Supper and what happens when one takes it. And to some degree this is because we have all moved a considerable distance from what the New Testament actually says about The Lord's Supper." To properly understand The Lord's Supper -- and thus practice it in a way that honors Christ and His gospel -- one must start by understanding another symbolic meal that God's people practiced for over a thousand years before the time of Jesus, the Passover meal.

The Passover meal commemorated for God's people the central storyline in the Hebrew Torah, the first five books of the Christian and Jewish scriptures. The central event of the Old Testament is one of God rescuing His people from slavery

in Egypt. This story of deliverance is known as the Exodus. To help Israel remember and celebrate God's faithfulness in delivering them from slavery, God instituted a meal for the Jews designed to help them worship and remember His saving work. God commanded that each year His covenant people come together in their homes with their families over a meal that symbolized and memorialized the night that He "passed over" the sins of Israel in order to rescue them from the bonds of their oppressors. Every detail about the meal was symbolic, given by God to help His people remember how faithful He had been to them through His rescuing grace. During the Passover meal, Israel also celebrated and remembered that God had promised, through His prophets, that there was coming an even greater rescuing, a day when God would rescue them from their slavery to sin just as He had rescued them from their slavery to Egypt. The people of Israel practiced the Passover meal religiously, observing it every year. They would gather together and celebrate that they were once slaves, yet God had set them free and would eventually set them free in an even greater way. Passover and the Passover meal were both monumental for the Jewish people.

By the time Jesus came onto the religious scene in Israel preaching about the Kingdom of God, the Jewish people had been celebrating the Passover meal for more than a thousand years. Ironically enough, it was during the middle of celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples that Jesus decided to reveal God's greater story. During the meal, Jesus, as the prophets before Him had done, reminded His disciples that the Exodus and the Passover meal that they were celebrating were mere foreshadows of a greater Exodus and a greater meal that God had promised. Then Jesus shared with them one of the greatest revelations in the history of mankind.

Gathered around the meal, Jesus affirmed to His friends that His looming death was inevitable. He had told them this before, but this time He added a twist to His proclamation. He promised them that His death and sacrifice they would witness in a few short hours, was going to be the greater Exodus that the people of God had been longing for. Likewise, He informed them that the very meal they were now sharing with Him would become the example of the greater meal that His people would celebrate to remember this new Exodus. In saying these things to his disciples, Jesus was breaking with the traditional blessing that the head of the house was supposed to speak during the Passover meal. He was offering His own blessings to His disciples, blessings that would henceforth be repeated anytime God's people gathered to remember His sacrifice. The Scriptures record:

He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is My body.' And He took a cup and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many'.... And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Mark 14:22-26

These phrases would forever be etched in His disciples' hearts. Jesus' subsequent death and resurrection initiated the new Exodus, the new covenant that the people of Israel had been expecting for over a millennium. Just as God had rescued Israel from slavery to Egypt, God in the flesh, Jesus, was now rescuing His followers from their deeper slavery and their bondage to sin and death. Just as God had done with Israel after He rescued them, Jesus left His followers a meal to remember and proclaim His work and their deliverance. We call this meal, The Lord's Supper.

God's new people, the Church, has been remembering and worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ through The Lord's Supper for over 2,000 years. It has been the climactic act of worship for the Church since her inception. At The Village Church, we join with thousands of years of Church history by making The Lord's Supper the culmination of our worship services. It is a communal, not an individual, act of worship that we engage in to celebrate the sufficiency of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is our cause for celebration each week. As John Westerhoff has said:

"The Lord's Supper has a victorious redemptive focus more than a somber, funereal penitential one. The early Christians celebrated their sacred meal on Sunday -- the Lord's Day, the day of victorious resurrection. Those who are gathered around The Lord's Table might have been sinners, but they were redeemed sinners."

At The Village Church, we do not believe that the bread or the drink that we use has somehow been magically transformed into the actual body or blood of Christ. In fact, John Wycliffe, the "Morning Star" of the Protestant Reformation, deemed it idolatry to identify the bread and wine with the physical body and blood of Christ. Yet, we do believe that The Lord's Supper involves far more than mere symbolism. For when we, as a church of Christ followers, remember and worship Jesus through The Lord's Supper, we believe that the risen Christ is actually among us during our worship, receiving glory from and giving faith to His covenant people. The way that God receives glory through The Lord's Supper is a beautiful mystery, one which N.T. Wright, the bishop of Durham and renowned New Testament scholar, explains well. He has written:

"The world is coming, symbolically in that bread and wine, to the foot of the cross. The church is a 'Royal Priesthood,' gathering up the praises and pains of creation and turning them into prayer and sacrament. When Paul says that in celebrating this meal, 'we announce the death of the Lord until he returns,' he doesn't mean that it's a good opportunity for preaching. He means that the action itself, the thing Jesus told us to do, announces to principalities and powers, the unseen forces in the world, that Jesus is Lord, and that his cross has won the victory over all evil. And the church, cheered and encouraged by that, can go out to put that victory into practice -- in the City council, in the classroom, in the unemployment bureau, the cancer ward, and the peace negotiations."

After celebrating The Lord's Supper, The Village Church rises to our feet together in song, symbolically recalling Christ's resurrection, as we worship Him. Strengthened and emboldened by our Lord's presence through our church's communal celebration of His gospel, we are now ready to head out into the city of Denton and begin our week as missionaries, men and women called by God to build His city within the city of Denton until He returns.

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