

## **What is the Lord's Supper?**

*Using the Westminster Shorter Catechism Question #96 as an Outline*

### **The Lord's Supper is a Sacrament...**

To understand what the Lord's Supper is, first we have to understand what we mean by the word "sacrament", and what are the biblical foundations for the sacraments. Look up the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) questions and answer #92 (which is located in the *Trinity Hymnal*, page 876). *How is a sacrament described here? What do you think the Lord's Supper "signs"; or signifies?*

To say that something is a "seal" means that it authenticates some truth; proclaims the permanent, firm reality of something. *In what sense is "seal" an appropriate description of the Lord's Supper?*

### **...wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine...**

*Why do you suppose God chose to use tangible signs (the bread and the wine)? Isn't the written account of the crucifixion of Christ enough for us to know what He did for us? God, knowing how He created us as whole people (with physical bodies as well as hearts, minds, and souls) fittingly chose to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to us with Words, but also with something that speaks the message to our physical bodies, reminding us that God also took upon Himself our physical body in the incarnation, suffering our pain, and dying the death we deserved on our behalf (see WSC 27).*

### **...according to Christ's appointment...**

Read Matthew's account of the Words of Institution in Matthew 26:26-30 (Parallels are found in Mark 14:22-26 & Luke 22:19-20). Before we can fully appreciate what Jesus was appointing for the church on that fateful night, we first have to understand what He and His disciples were doing in that upper room in the first place; celebrating the Old Testament sacrament of the Passover (See Mark 14:12). *Briefly, what was the Passover, and why did the Israelites observe it (Hint: See Exodus 12:7-19 & 43-49)? What did it signify?*

One theologian wrote, "The Lord's Supper is the Christian Passover Meal... It is the Christian substitute for the Passover."<sup>1</sup> *Why do you think Jesus "hijacked" the Passover to institute the New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper?*

### **...His death is showed forth and the worthy receivers are...**

*What do you think it means to receive the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner? Read Exodus 12:43-49. Who was permitted to observe the Passover? Why? What makes them worthy partakers? If the Lord's Supper is the Christian substitute for the Passover, who then should observe it?*

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Paul implies that the Corinthian church was gathering regularly for the Lord's Supper, but something was majorly wrong with the way they were going about it. *What was the problem? What were Paul's corrective teachings? How might we fall into similar traps as the Corinthians?*

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield. "The Fundamental Significance of the Lord's Supper" in *Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1970), 1:333, quoted in Richard D. Phillips, *What is the Lord's Supper?* Basics of the Reformed Faith Series (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2005), 8.

In our denomination, we have at various times debated the issue of “Paedo-Communion” (children served Communion). The controversy today has to do with the belief that, since our children are members of the covenant by virtue of their baptism, shouldn’t they also be given the Lord’s Supper? *What do you think Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 brings to bear on this question?*

### **...not after a corporal and carnal manner...**

This line in the WSC answer reflects one of the significant challenges the Reformers levied against the practices of the Roman Catholic Church: The Mass. In the Mass, the observance of the Lord’s Supper was understood as a partaking of the actual physical body and blood of Christ (through “transubstantiation”), as though He were being sacrificed again and again on behalf of the people. *Read Hebrews 9:24-26 and comment on why this view is problematic.*

Similarly, Lutherans have taught to this day that the elements in some way have the real, physical presence of Christ in them (through “consubstantiation”) because Lutheran theology holds that Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, is omnipresent. Read Psalm 139:7-12 and Ephesians 1:20. *In what sense is the Triune God omnipresent? What about Jesus?*

### **...but by faith, made partakers of His body and blood...**

The Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, and his German counterpart, Martin Luther, had a sharp disagreement about the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli held that the sacrament was purely a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice, which is the dominant view in Evangelical America today. *As you reflect back on Paul’s warnings to the Corinthians, do you find anything that suggests that something more than a mere memorial is taking place during the Lord’s Supper?*

John Calvin, who came to the theological discussion a little later, taught that Jesus was present in the Lord’s Supper, *spiritually*. This idea is based upon the fact that believers are in *union* with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Read John 14:18-21 & 26 and Ephesians 1:13. *In what sense does this passage teach that we are in union with Christ? Read Ephesians 2:6 and answer the same question.*

Christ’s spiritual presence becomes more apparent and real to us when we, by faith, receive the means of grace He has given us. Just as He speaks to us in His Word by His Spirit, He also speaks to us through His Table (a tangible expression of His Word), where He feeds us on Himself spiritually (see 1 Corinthians 2:12-16).

### **With all His benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace.**

Many believe that the Lord’s Supper is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Read Luke 23:39-43 and John 3:16-17. *How would you respond to this idea from Scripture? Read WSC 91. Here, the sacraments are described as an “effectual means of salvation”. How so?*

This final line of WSC 96 elaborates the teaching that the sacraments are a “means of grace”. *What do you suppose this means?* The means of grace are God’s ways of communicating His grace to sinners, who are in constant need of reminder and spiritual nourishment.

## **Common questions regarding who should partake of the Lord's Supper:**

*"I feel distant from God."*

In what sense? Do you believe that Christ died on the cross for your sins and, being the Son of God, was able to purchase your total and complete pardon, but at the same time feel as though you are going through a dry spell in your walk?

If this is the case, trust that God will use this sacrament to draw you nearer to Himself. It doesn't make sense to push Him away because you feel like you're pushing Him away.

On the other hand, if you are not sure that you believe what the Bible teaches about Jesus and His atoning work, it would be ill-advised to come to His Table, based on the warnings of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

*"I sinned this week...bad..."*

Does this mean you're repentant? A humble and repentant heart is the right heart to bring to the Lord's Table. Was there someone else in particular that you needed to be reconciled to? If possible, it would be best to seek forgiveness from others you've hurt before coming to the Lord's Table.

Another question to consider: Have you forgiven yourself? Let the Sacrament be an encouragement to you to remember that your sins are forgiven by God, and that Christ has made you His own. Believe that God will really use this sacrament to strengthen you in your faith. Also, talk with an elder/pastor and let him pray with you for strength.

*"I keep repeating the same sin time and again, even after asking for forgiveness."*

If you're being eaten up with shame over your sin, keep bringing that to the Lord in prayer. Speak with an elder/pastor about your struggles. We also have resources we can get you to help you in breaking from the shackles of sinful addictions.

Even still, as you humble yourself before the Lord, recognizing your need for Christ's atonement and confessing to Him, trust that God will use the sacrament to continue to build your faith as you reflect on what Christ has done to free you from the judgment of your sin.

*“There’s something in my lifestyle that I know is wrong (against God’s Word), but I’m not willing to give it up.”*

We know that none of us are *able* to fight against our sin apart from God. But there is a difference when we are *unwilling* to repent to God and give ourselves over to Him that He might work in our hearts to free us from a particular sin. In the latter case, the individual should not partake of the Lord’s Supper since he or she is not in a place where they are appreciating the severity of sin and, especially, the price that had to be paid for our redemption. Such an individual should really consider speaking with an elder/pastor to discuss the Bible’s teachings regarding this particular sin.

*“What about church discipline?”*

When the session has determined that an individual should have the sacrament withheld from them as a measure of church discipline, this is only because the individual who fell has been willfully unrepentant concerning their sin. This might mean that they do not believe this particular sin is something that Christ had to die for or that they are unwilling to let go of that particular sin and turn to God under the strength of the Holy Spirit. In such a case, the individual may actually bring harm upon themselves by partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Thus the session withholds the sacrament in order to show the unrepentant brother or sister the severity of their situation in hopes that it will spur them on to repentance, and to protect them from eating “in an unworthy manner” before the Lord.