

# Issues Over the Lord's Supper

By Raymond C. Faircloth

Different denominational systems have different views on this subject. So what are the issues that one must resolve for Christians to be happy to share in this meal?

## The Issues

1. Is it simply the Passover?
2. Should it be celebrated annually, weekly or some other time?
3. Am I worthy?—1Cor. 11:27-29
4. Are others worthy for me to share this communion with them?

### Q 1. Is the Lord's Supper a Celebration of the Passover?

NOTE: As an aid the following passages taken from the English Standard version (ESV) have retained the sub-headings.

#### THE LAST SUPPER

**Luke 22:14-20:**

#### Institution of the Lord's Supper

"<sup>14</sup>And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. <sup>15</sup>And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat *this Passover* with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup>For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." <sup>17</sup>And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. <sup>18</sup>For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." <sup>19</sup>And he took bread, and when he *had given thanks*, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. *Do this in remembrance of me.*" <sup>20</sup>And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

**Mark 14:16-25:**

#### The Passover with the Disciples

... "<sup>16</sup>And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they *prepared the Passover*. <sup>17</sup>And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. <sup>18</sup>And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." <sup>19</sup>They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" <sup>20</sup>He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. <sup>21</sup>For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

#### Institution of the Lord's Supper

<sup>22</sup>And *as they were eating*, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." <sup>23</sup>And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. <sup>24</sup>And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. <sup>25</sup>Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

**Matthew 26:19-29:**

#### The Passover with the Disciples

... "<sup>19</sup>And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they *prepared the Passover*. <sup>20</sup>When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. <sup>21</sup>And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." <sup>22</sup>And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" <sup>23</sup>He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. <sup>24</sup>The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." <sup>25</sup>Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

#### Institution of the Lord's Supper

<sup>26</sup>*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." <sup>27</sup>And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, <sup>28</sup>for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup>I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

So what of Luke's account? *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* simply says: "Luke has apparently combined his data from various sources to describe both the Passover setting of the supper (vv7-18) and the institution of the Lord's Supper (vv19, 20) instead of following Mark." Volume 8, p. 1026.

#### THE FULFILLMENT OF SEVERAL HEBREW SCRIPTURE SHADOWS

The Lord's Evening Meal is a fulfilment of all the Old Covenant practices:

- a) "eating the sacrifices" (1 Cor.10:18-21; Lev. 7:6) ..... and so **not just the Passover**.
- b) "sprinkling with blood" (Ex. 24:7-11) ..... which is the initiation of one into the New Covenant.

## Q 2. How often should it be celebrated?

### 1 Corinthians 11: 17, 18, 23-26:

<sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>For, in the first place, **when you come together as a church**, I hear that there are divisions among you.

### The Lord's Supper

<sup>23</sup>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, <sup>24</sup>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." <sup>25</sup>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." <sup>26</sup>For **as often as** you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**"

#### NOT ANNUALLY

Once we have established that the Lord's Supper was not the Passover we realize that it is not connected with an annual celebration. However, the key phrase is "**as often as...**" Yet some denominations reckon that almost 2000 years means that an annual celebration fits the phrase "as often as." However, it is almost certain that neither Jesus nor Paul would have imagined that length of time before the return. So "**as often as...**" can hardly be used to refer to an annual celebration

#### FREQUENT FELLOWSHIP HABITS

❖ "...they devoted themselves to the apostles' **teaching** and **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and the **prayers**" (*Acts 2:42*). In the Scriptures "breaking bread" does not generally refer to an ordinary meal and the breaking of bread here is linked with other frequent, but not annual, spiritual habits.

#### INITIALLY DAILY

❖ "And **day by day** attending the temple together and **breaking bread** in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts" (*Acts 2:46*). This seems initially to have been a daily arrangement of the Lord's Supper. This "**breaking of bread**" was in the context of Lord's Supper (verse 20). So "**breaking of bread**" and Lord's Supper were almost synonymous in the practice of the early congregation.

#### LATER WEEKLY

However, this custom of celebrating daily eventually changed to a weekly **custom** on the first day of the week: "**On the first day of the week** when we were gathered together to **break bread**, Paul talked with them..." (*Acts 20:7*).

#### FREQUENT BUT NOT SPECIFIC

1. Yet no specific timing was ever given by Jesus either pre- or post-resurrection. In the absence of any fixed rule as to the frequency this phrase is an inducement to commune frequently.
2. Additionally and similar to the phrase "**as often as you eat this bread...**" (*1 Cor. 11:26*) we find in Revelation 11:6 the 2 witnesses strike the earth "**as often as they wish.**" In this case it means *indefinite frequency*. So this gives the thought that Paul's words also imply **indefinite frequency**.

## Q 3. Am I Worthy?

#### THE PROBLEM IN CORINTH

### 1 Corinthians 11: 20-22:

<sup>20</sup>**When you come together**, it is not the **Lord's supper** that you eat. <sup>21</sup>For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. <sup>22</sup>What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you **despise the church of God** and *humiliate those who have nothing*? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

*THE BACKGROUND—A SINGLE MEAL*

James Dunn, professor emeritus explains:

Paul seems to envisage only one common meal (the Lord's Supper). The practice he rebukes is not that of a meal separate from (preceding) the Lord's Supper, but the abuse of a single meal which **began with the one bread and ended with the cup "after dinner"** (11.25). If indeed members were arriving late for the meal it would add to the offence that the late arrivals were either missing out on the breaking of the bread which opens the meal, or were having to eat it late, not as **a shared act**, or if, alternatively, the well-to-do who arrived early were beginning to eat before the formal beginning of the meal as a whole... The bread and the cup brought to focus the significance of the meal as a whole. This was why the selfish behaviour of various individuals at the whole meal made them "answerable for the body and the blood of the lord" (11.27)...

*The Theology of Paul the Apostle* pp.610-618.

*IT IS NOT EATING AND DRINKING 'UNWORTHILY' BUT "IN AN UNWORTHY MANNER"*

The word "unworthily" in verse 27 of older translations is incorrect and gives a false impression of personal unworthiness because of one's sins.

**1 Corinthians 11:27-29:**

<sup>27</sup>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*. <sup>28</sup>Let a person *examine himself*, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup>For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning **the body** eats and drinks judgment on himself."

Gordon Fee, professor emeritus in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* explains that:

Partaking of this meal "in an **unworthy manner**" is what the entire section is about. Unfortunately, this adverb was translated "**unworthily**" in the KJV. ... Paul's concern is related directly to vv. 20-22, where some are abusing others at the Lord's Table by going ahead with their own private meals. Such conduct is unworthy of the Table where Jesus' death is being proclaimed until he comes ...

"A man ought to *examine himself* before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."...This is not a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the Table. Rather, it stands in contrast to the "divine examination" to which unworthy participation will lead. ... They should test themselves now as to their attitude toward the Table, especially their behaviour toward others at the table... pp. 560-562.

In other words it was their unworthy conduct, especially toward their poor brothers and sisters that was bringing the Lord's judgment on them. It was not because they were in some way inherently unworthy. So no one should feel that they are unworthy because they are a sinner unless, of course, a person has a disrespectful attitude toward the Lord's Supper in one manner or another.

NOTE: The translations which wrongly render the word as "unworthily" are KJV and all the older Bibles (except Rotherham), the NAB, NJB, REB, and the NLT

**Q 4. Are others Worthy to Join with Me in the Lord's Supper?**

It is often the case among many denominations to decide that those who are not baptized into that particular denomination are not worthy to participate in the Lord's Supper set out for that particular denomination, even though the particular person demonstrates that they soundly have faith in God and Christ and that they completely believe and endeavour to follow the Scriptures, having been baptized. Again James Dunn comments that: "Despite the lack of firm evidence, we should probably assume that the Lord's Supper was a meal **shared by the baptised...**" *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* pp.612

*ILLUSTRATION***Romans 14:1-3, 13-15:**

"As for the one who is *weak in faith*, **welcome him**, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while **the weak person eats only vegetables**. <sup>3</sup>Let not the one who eats [*everything*] despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats [*everything*], **for God has welcomed him.**"

**Do Not Cause Another to Stumble**

<sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. <sup>14</sup>I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that **nothing is**

**unclean in itself**, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. <sup>15</sup>For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”

**Romans 15:1, 7:**

“<sup>1</sup> We who are *strong* have an obligation to bear with the failings of *the weak*, and not to please ourselves ... <sup>7</sup>Therefore **welcome one another** as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Professor James Dunn informs us that:

The first principle from which Paul draws becomes apparent at once—that of faith. This comes out of Paul’s initial description of the different parties. These are quite often denoted summarily as “the weak” (14.1-2) and “the strong” (15.1). But in introducing them Paul takes care to describe the former more fully as “the weak in faith” (14.1) and the latter more fully as one who “has faith to eat everything” (14.2). ... “the strong” were not, then, as we might have expected, those who held strongly to their traditional heritage and identity markers or, as they would no doubt have said, to fundamental elements of their traditional faith and practice. On the contrary, Paul regarded such people, rather **pejoratively**, as “weak,” that is, “weak in faith”. In Paul’s perspective they were trusting in something other than God alone. ....his point is that two believers could have contrasting or even opposing convictions regarding appropriate conduct, and both be acceptable to God. It was not necessary for the one to be wrong for the other to be right... The challenge to go as far as possible in accommodating the different views of the other without compromising the most basic foundation of all— faith in God and in his Christ. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* pp. 684-689.

NOTE: pejoratively = disapprovingly

*APPLICATION*

So the basic principle over this issue can be applied to other differences that one may have in terms of understanding of the Scriptures. This would include our pattern for the Lord’s Supper. But how far do we go? Where does one draw the line? Indeed, this is a very difficult question is perhaps must be left up to each ones conscience. However, from the above illustration it is evident that, as a circle, one must not draw in the line too tightly, but must allow for considerable differences of viewpoint.

## How Do Christians as a Congregation celebrate it?

*“COMING TOGETHER” FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES*

❖ “...**when you come together as a church** (1 Cor. 11:18) and “**When you come together**, it is not **the Lord’s supper** that you eat (1 Cor. 11:20)

Again Dunn comments:

The fact that he seems to specify different purposes for the “**coming together**” probably means that he envisaged **two different comings together**. One would be a gathering primarily for communal worship, as service of the word... The other coming together was specifically for the shared meal, the Lord’s Supper, which presumably was of a more private nature, to which people came or were brought only by invitation.

*The Theology of Paul the Apostle* p. 619.

If Dunn is right then a communal worship/instructional meeting may not be the appropriate setting for celebrating the Lord’s Supper, but rather it should be a private meeting together of a relatively small number (say 20) of Christians **for a meal** would be.

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