



The Lord's Supper

Bondi
ANGLICAN
Church

A teaching paper from the Anglican Parish of Bondi and Waverley

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Most Christian people have as a part of their heritage the practice of drinking wine or grape-juice and eating bread or its equivalent in a symbolic way. These symbolic meals refer somehow to a meal Christ had with his disciples as recorded in the New Testament. Just before his oncoming arrest and death, Jesus had a Passover meal with his twelve disciples. Jewish people had been having Passover meals ever since they were rescued by Yahweh from Egypt thousand of years before Christ came. Jesus modified the meal so that it became a way of pointing to what he does in giving his life, as an atoning sacrifice. Over the centuries since then, different Christian traditions have developed around the meal and how it is practiced. This paper reflects on the Lords Supper and healthy ways of incorporating it into church life.

Jesus and The Supper

Jesus makes a remarkable claim when he says his followers must feed on him if they are to have eternal life (John 6:53-57). Whether or not Jesus is referring to a meal with bread and wine here is not certain, the point is that Christians get sustenance from Christ. There are four passages in the New Testament which clearly describe the symbolic meal: Matthew 26:26-30, Mark 14:22-26, Luke 22:14-20 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. These four all share many elements in common.

Jesus utilised the already established symbolic meal of Passover to explain his mission. In Passover, the people of Israel remembered the events of their deliverance from Egypt under the sign of the sacrificed Passover Lamb. Every year each Jewish household had passover as if they themselves were part of the original exodus events (Exodus 12). Jesus explains his intentions about the meal to his disciples this way: "*I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples*". (Matthew 26:18) In the meal, Jesus is described as giving the bread and the wine saying "do this in remembrance of me". Jesus is actually pointing to himself as the true substitute for those he delivers. It is Jesus' blood which is the sign of having God's anger pass over them, just as the Passover Lamb's blood on door frames was a sign for Israel. The messenger of Death passed over the households that had passover lamb blood on the door-frame.

The "New Covenant" language Jesus uses to describe the meal he has, refers to the practice of having a meal after a covenant was made. He refers to the cup of wine he drinks with them as "*the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you*" (Luke 22:20) and the bread as his body transfers the meaning of the Passover meal from the "Old" to the "New" covenant prophesied and described in the Old Testament, (eg Jeremiah 31:1-34).

Early Church Practice

There are no clear passages which explain the detailed dynamics of how the first Christians organised and shaped their meals. There are many texts that indicate they did have meals together, and that they were important. For example Acts 2:42-46; 20:7 talks about gathering together to "break bread" which is probably a more general description of eating together that also included The Lords Supper.

In the New Testament letter of 1 Corinthians 11: 23-27 we have the clearest indication that the early Churches continued the practice of having a "Christian Passover meal". They gathered to eat this special supper to focus on the new covenant established by Christ's body and blood. Paul is writing to correct a lack of order in their meetings and wants to encourage a more appropriate way of having "The Lord's Supper". Paul even says what they are currently doing was "not The Lord's Supper" and then goes on to give a warning that those who take part in the meal in an unworthy manner were actually "*eating and drinking judgment on themselves.*" (1 Corinthians 11:27). This passage has all sorts of implications, but if Christians are going to have a symbolic meal to remember the Lord Jesus giving his body and blood, it must be done with the right approach and attitude, not haphazardly.

The Supper in Church History

It is clear that Christian churches continued to celebrate the Lords Supper as they spread from Jerusalem through the world. Different cultural practices and ways of having the meal naturally developed. By the ninth century there was a widely held belief that the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Jesus. This was not based on the Biblical texts but local philosophical influences. It was thought that as the bread and wine was prayed over by a priest, their substance was -transformed, even though they still appeared to be bread and wine, they actually literally became the body and blood of Jesus. This is called *Transubstantiation*.

Because of belief in this mystical change in substance, it was thought that the actual body and blood of Christ was present at the supper. That meant in this system, that each time the Lord's Supper was celebrated, Christ's Body was re-sacrificed. It also meant that the bread and wine were venerated and even worshipped. In this way of thinking, they kept any wine or bread left over after the supper and attributed special powers and importance to them. This viewpoint was one of those that was rejected as without foundation by the original reformation leaders in the 16th century, including the writers of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. They rejected transubstantiation, but agreed that Christ was really present as Christians had the meal and related with him. That is the meal is an extremely helpful way of seeing God's action through Christ in our lives today. His body and blood is just as relevant today as they were as he anticipated his crucifixion at the meal he had with his disciples. Jesus is really present as we prayerfully have this supper together.

Church Practice Now

Some denominational heritages see the Lord's Supper as valid only if it is run by a person officially ordained into the ministry of that denomination. This comes from an attempt to maintain a proper practice of the Lord's Supper. However there is no biblical requirement for this, as there is no biblical requirement for either ordination or denominations. The Salvation Army has as their solution not practicing the Lord's Supper at all. Perhaps the most obvious assumption is that many churches tend to assume that the Lord's Supper only happens in the larger more formal gatherings (usually in Sunday services). The original Passover meals were held in the evening, only once a year and in household groupings.

There is nothing to stop Christians having a memorial meal in smaller groups or as families. There is no requirement made in scripture as to how regularly to have this meal. The essential requirement is that there is the right attitude; that of belief. It is for people who trust Jesus as the one who established the new Covenant in his death. That may also be used as an invitation to begin to trust and believe in Jesus.

How to do the Lord's Supper

The practical organisational details are important only inasmuch as they don't detract from what is being remembered. The elements used and the order of the supper can change. There can be wine or grape-juice or large or small cups or one or many cups. The variety of bread is not centrally important. As long as people can helpfully focus on what Jesus has done and bring attention to his sacrificial death which brings atonement. Then it is the Lord's Supper.

There is value in having a variety of options in celebrating and remembering Jesus' new covenant in his sacrificial death on our behalf in a meal. Sometimes in a smaller group in a home with an actual meal before the supper, sometimes in a larger group in a larger church gathering, sometimes with a large common cup, sometimes with smaller cups, with differing prayers, bible readings and other elements. We can draw on different historical liturgical patterns that have evolved in Christian churches. Obviously at Bondi Anglican, in our traditional services, we will use the liturgy developed in the prayerbook during the English reformation, but we encourage other ways of celebrating Jesus' body and blood given for us in different contexts.

That will avoid us thinking there is "magic" in a certain order of words or particular style, and keep the supper fresh. It also will allow Christians to more readily join other Christians who do the Lord's Supper in a different way. At the congregations of Bondi and Waverley, we have a variety of ways to have meals which celebrate Christ's instructions. We want to have a helpful flexibility in different congregational and small group contexts, while keeping the point of the Lord's Supper as explained above.

Feel free to contact Martin Morgan if you have any questions or want to talk further about this. martin@bondichurch.org