

The Lord's Supper and Covenant

Turn to Matthew 26 please. There are four Last Supper texts in the New Testament. We will not be looking at any one of them in particular, but we will read Matthew 26 in a few minutes.

In the email I sent on Wednesday, I suggested that you try to read the words of the Last Supper as if you'd not heard them before. I have been trying to do that for many years, and did that again several times this last week.

Eat Jesus and Drink Jesus "This bread is my body. Take it and eat it. This cup has my blood. Drink from it, all of you." The words are bizarre. They are almost grotesque, close to cannibalism. The 12 do not reach across the table and start chewing in Jesus' hands, but the next thing to it.

"This is my body. Take it and eat it. This cup has my covenant blood. Drink from it, all of you." No wonder we try to back away from these preposterous words. But let's not back away today. Let's try to understand, let's consider these basic words.

Is it just a remembrance? It is a remembrance, but not *just* a remembrance. It is food, it is a meal. How is it possible that we are *not* eating and drinking Jesus in some way? In some way, we must be taking the real Jesus into ourselves. "This bread is my body. Take it and eat it. This cup has my covenant blood. Drink it." When we eat and drink, we feed off the real Jesus, we take him in.

And now that you are just a little nervous about where this might go, let's read from Matthew 26 and begin more properly. Matthew 26:26.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Matthew 26:26f

Four Accounts. The Last Supper story happens in four places in the Bible, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians. If you compared the four to each other, it would not take you long to figure out that we have two pairs of accounts: Matthew and Mark are similar to each other, and Luke and 1 Corinthians are similar to each other.

Matthew has a fuller version of Mark's account, and Paul has a fuller version of Luke's account. So, if we read Matthew 26 and 1 Corinthians 11, we have two complete accounts that are a bit different from each other.

Passover Meal. The Gospels are all clear that, at the Last Supper, Jesus and the 12 were celebrating the Jewish Passover meal, and that's where Jesus introduces his body and blood. In the original Passover in Exodus, they ate the lamb and painted the blood on the doorposts.

In this way, the Israelites in Egypt protected themselves from the judgement God brought on the Egyptians. Jesus and the 12 were eating the lamb, the Passover lamb. In that meal, with the bread and cup Jesus introduced himself as another Passover lamb, a second Passover lamb. His sacrifice also will protect God's people from judgement.

The Lord's Supper is a teaching meal. Jesus was about to die. In 24 hours from that meal, he would be cold and dead and buried. The Last Supper taught the 12 and us what his death means.

Is it a meal of remembering? Not at the core. Of our four accounts, two of the four make no mention of remembering, of doing this "as a remembrance": Matthew and Mark. Luke mentions "remembrance" once, and Paul two times, but Matthew and Mark not at all.

I do not question that Jesus said to eat and drink to remember him. But two of the four writers, guided by the Holy Spirit, were free to leave out "remembering." That means something. If "remembering" were the core of the Lord's Supper, "remembering" would be in all four accounts. The only explanation in all four accounts is "covenant." We'll come back to covenant.

Jesus is teaching what his death means. The lamb they are eating stays as the Passover lamb. The lamb is the lamb's body. But the bread is *his* body, and the cup is *his* blood.

(In the OT, "cup" often meant not the actual cup, but whatever was *in* the cup. When Isaiah speaks of the "cup of the Lord's anger," Isaiah means that what's *in* the cup is the Lord's anger, and rebellious people will drink what is *in* the cup, they will "taste" the Lord's anger.

"Cup" is not always like this in the Bible, sometimes just an empty cup, but often enough it means what's in the cup. So when Jesus says "This 'cup' is my blood" he is using a common biblical way of describing what's *in* the cup to drink.)

So Jesus is teaching about his death. The bread is *his* body, the cup has *his* blood. He will submit to death. He was teaching them, and now teaches us, "I submit to death for you. Like the first Passover lamb was sacrificed to protect you, I also submit to death to protect you from God's judgement and lead you into freedom." That is what he hoped the disciples would learn.

Body and Blood Simply by dividing himself into body and blood, bread is my body and cup is my blood, Jesus makes his death a sacrifice. In the levitical offerings, the animal's body and blood were always separated from each other. So also Jesus.

Jesus said before this that he will give his life as a ransom, and as a shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. But Jesus does not describe his death as a sacrifice until the Last Supper. Then he does. They are already eating a sacrificed lamb, and Jesus separated his body and blood from each other as bread and cup. In this way, Jesus told his disciples that his death was a sacrifice.

Eat and Drink But they eat and they drink, they take his body and his blood to themselves as food. The 12 eat and drink the sacrifice. We eat and drink the sacrifice. Bread and wine. It is basic food, the kind of stuff people live on, food that we need and want, again and again.

That is why just remembering, as mentally recalling, a purely rational approach, is not enough. Then we'd *look* at the bread and *think* about his body given for us, and *look* at the cup and *think* about his blood poured out for us, and that would be remembering.

But we don't just look and recall his death for us. We eat him and we drink him. "This bread is my body, given for you, take it and eat it; this cup is my covenant blood, drink it." It is a way of taking Jesus to ourselves, of living off the sacrifice of Jesus.

Remembering. "Eat this bread in remembrance of me, drink this cup in remembrance of me." In the Bible, "remember" often means more than just recalling an event.

When Moses says to God, "*Remember* your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," Moses doesn't mean "recall them" he means "keep them, act on them." When God says, "*remember* the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," he means "*obey* the Sabbath instructions, *act* on them."

So, to eat and drink "in remembrance" does not mean just "recite to yourself an old story," though includes that. It means, "*Take me to yourself* again, *feed on me* again, *bring the real me into yourself* again."

Personal Story. In my formative years, I was taught a rationalist view of baptism and the Lord's Supper. "Baptism was just a sign to the world," they said. But the Scriptures did not say that, ever; the Bible often treated baptism as essential. Why did we worry about it meaning too much?

I don't assume that is your story. But it is my story, and it shapes how I teach about these things. I can't help it. I kept reading the Bible, and found writers who took Scripture more at face value.

And I was also taught a rationalist view of the Lord's Supper. It was "just a remembrance." It is a remembrance, it says so, but we eat his body! We drink his blood! How can we not be feeding off Jesus in some way, taking the real Jesus into ourselves?

To me, the basic words require that we are taking the real Jesus to ourselves, the Lord's Supper is not the only way to do that, but it is one important way, and nothing else brings Jesus to us in the same way as the bread and the cup.

My conclusions. My first question: what does it say? It says, "this bread is my body, this cup is my covenant blood." My second question: what does it *not* say? It does not say, "this bread *represents* my body, this cup *symbolizes* my blood." We have to be careful here; it still could mean "represents" or "symbolizes" without actually saying so.

But I don't think it means "symbolize" here because they are eating the Passover lamb. The meat is there on the table, the meat did not "represent" or "symbolize" the Passover lamb, it was the real lamb. In that meal, eating the real lamb, Jesus said, "this bread is my body, this cup is my blood." That's why I don't think he means represent or symbolize.

My third question: could it mean what it says? "This is my body, this is my blood." If the bread tasted like meat, or the cup like blood, I would be a Catholic. But it does not taste like that.

But the Passover context, and the words of Jesus, both make it sound like he means something real. Not just symbol, but real. Not physical or material body or blood, but spiritual, nevertheless still real. We take the real spiritual essence of Jesus into ourselves.

I think we are more afraid of being Catholic than of watering down the words of Jesus.

Church Positions on the Lord's Supper. The Roman Catholic church teaches that the bread and cup actually become the physical body of Christ and blood of Christ. The Lutheran church teaches almost the same thing, not quite as strong. That is not me.

Zwingli and the Anabaptists held more or less a rationalist view of the Lord's Supper. A bit more than that. Zwingli agreed that we feed off the Lord in a spiritual way, but no more in the Lord's Supper than in other ways, by faith responding to the word of God. The Rationalists believed the bread and cup were just to mentally recall the Lord's death.

I like where John Calvin landed. He did *not* believe the bread and cup were physically changed into the body and blood of Jesus. It was spiritual food. But Calvin believed that we were feeding off the real Jesus, we were taking the real Jesus, the actual essence of Jesus, into ourselves, by eating this bread and drinking this cup. We were bringing Jesus into ourselves in a unique way, feeding on Jesus in a way we could not get him by baptism or by the word of God.

When I was being ordained, I explained my views on this to the committee there. I was afraid they would not like it. But they were fine with it, and one old gentleman came to be after and said John Calvin believed the same things. So, I went to read Calvin, and that is true.

Our Existential Faith. Bread and cup are so physical, so material. We have inherited a mystical view of the Christian faith. We've been taught that what matters is how we *feel* and what we *experience* when we pray, when we sing songs of worship, when the Scriptures are taught.

This works for some believers, but not as well for others. How are the believers who *don't* feel or experience God in these ways supposed get in touch with Christ, and bring Christ to themselves? Eat him! Drink him! Real physical bread, real physical fruit of the vine.

“This bread is my body, given for you. Take it and eat it. This cup has my new covenant blood. Take it and drink it.” I am a reluctant existentialist. This is why I break down our family offering into small weekly amounts. I write the cheque at home, and love to do it, because I am preparing our household gift to our King. I put it in my pocket, and walk here with our gift for the King.

And later I will feed off the King's body and his covenant blood, we will together take him in. Christ was raised with a material physical body. The tomb was empty. How can we make contact with the material Jesus, crucified and buried and risen? We can eat him and drink him, and I love that. I am a reluctant existentialist, a frustrated mystic. That part of my soul is stunted.

I cannot afford to let my feelings and intuitions about Jesus steer me. But here together we can eat him and drink him, bring him into ourselves, to live off him.

Eating and Drinking Unworthily A month or two ago the elders had some careful conversations, asking ourselves if we should warn some people against joining us for the Lord's Supper. We have always left that open to people, and we eventually decided to stay with that. That's not everyone's view of the Lord's Supper, but that is what seemed best to us at this time.

About 2 ½ years ago I preached on “The Lord's Supper and Eating Unworthily” from 1 Corinthians 11. I am not going to cover that here at. But I checked and it is still there. Listen to the words, or read the notes. That topic is what the other elders and I talked about again.

Covenant But we did decide to make as clear as possible what the Lord's Supper actually meant. We want it to be nearly impossible for people to miss the significance of this meal. That's when I began to read these Last Supper Scriptures again.

“Covenant” is the only word of explanation that occurs in all four accounts. As I mentioned, Luke and Paul have “do this in remembrance,” but Matthew and Mark omit it. Matthew has “for the forgiveness of sins,” but he's the only one.

But all four accounts have the word “covenant,” either “this cup is my blood of the covenant” or “this cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Because it is in all four Last Supper stories, I take this to be at the core of what the Lord's Supper means.

In the OT, when there was a covenant, a solemn promise between two people or two groups to be loyal to each other, it was not sealed until the two had together sacrificed an animal. The sacrifice was like everyone signing their name.

In the OT, God make a covenant with Israel. God: "If you will be my people, I will be your God." People: "We will be your people, you will be our God." Moses offered covenant sacrifices, and the covenant was sealed. Jesus understood his death as sealing and confirming that kind of promise between his followers and his God.

Long ago, I read in story books about two boys who wanted to be friends for life, they wanted to be blood brothers, so they each cut their hand a bit with a pocket knife, so that their hands would bleed, and then they pressed their hands together so that their blood would mix, and then they were blood brothers, loyal for life. Cool, I thought, though I never did it. Covenant blood.

Jesus died to provide the blood for that kind of covenant between God and us. The God of Israel is our God, we are his people, the blood of Jesus (which we drink) seals it.

So we added this prayer to regular Sunday morning Lord's Supper. We did this to make clearer what this meal means. The prayer goes in three parts, and I will briefly explain:

ONE: Father, God of Israel, who led Jesus to the cross and raised him from the dead,

This line shows who we are talking to. "God" is a pretty wide term these days. "God of Israel" narrows down a lot, we want it clear which "God." That line makes the God of Israel responsible for leading Jesus to crucifixion, and for raising him again.

TWO: these lines middle describe covenant, patterned after Exodus - You have said to us, 'If you will be my people, I will be your God.' And we have said to You, 'You are the only God, and we will be your people.' The blood of your Son Jesus, poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins, binds us to You, our God.

So the Lord's Supper is for people who believe in that God, and are in that kind of covenant with that God. The blood of Jesus binds us to God, and binds God to us. That's covenant blood.

THREE: we talk to the Lord himself. We are his guests, he is the host, he arranges the meal and invites us, to his table. And, in this meal, he is not only the host, he himself is the food and drink!

We look back at his death for us, and we look forward to the next time he will drink the fruit of the vine, and we will be at his table in the kingdom so see that happen.

Lord Jesus, feed us with Yourself, as we eat this bread and drink this cup - Your body and Your blood. We receive you with grateful praise, and we look for your return. Amen.

Epilogue: In the response time after the sermon, it was clear that most people did not buy what I was saying. They are still rationalists. I was disappointed. My understanding of Communion began as a \$20 meal, and it has developed to a \$80 meal, and I wanted the people to enjoy the \$80 meal. I am comforted to know that even if they do not believe what I said, every time they have the Lord's Supper they are nevertheless feeding off the real Jesus, taking him to themselves again and benefiting from him in that way. That's good to know.