

THINKING ABOUT THE LORD'S SUPPER

BACKGROUND

This fall, Trinity will be making three changes in the way we practice the Lord's Supper: we'll be increasing the frequency from once to twice a month, and we'll be offering wine as well as grape juice, and we'll be taking bread from one loaf. Although none of these changes are drastic, they provide us with an occasion to think more deeply about communion.

CENTRAL QUESTION: WHAT IS HAPPENING?

The most important question for us to consider relates to what is actually taking place when we celebrate the Lord's Supper: why do we celebrate it, and what does it do for us?

Here's my attempt at a succinct answer to this: *in the Lord's Supper, Jesus is nourishing our faith in him and drawing us together by declaring his gospel promises to us in a powerfully tangible manner.*

GOD IS DECLARING HIS GOSPEL PROMISES.

From the earliest times, bread and wine were associated with God's blessings (see Genesis 27:28): they were identified with life, fullness, and joy. When the prophets looked forward to a time when God would pour out his kindness upon his people, they spoke of God making a feast for his people, including "aged wine" (Isaiah 25:6).

Even before the night of the Lord's Supper, Jesus already had taken hold of this imagery to show that he was the one who would bring his people this promised life and joy. Through him the waters of purification become the wine of wedding celebration (John 2); he is the "bread of life," and life comes by "feeding on him" (John 6).

These themes came fully into focus during the Passover meal before his death. He declared on that night that the fullness of life that we associate with bread comes through Jesus' body being broken for us, dying our death for us. The joy and celebration that we associate with wine comes through him shedding his blood so that our sins might be forgiven. Perhaps the most important and the most remarkable words in his explanation was "for you." He said to his disciples, "I have given my body *for you*. My blood has been poured out *for you*."

Jesus is saying those same words to us whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper: "I have died *for you*, to give you life, and fullness, and joy." He is inviting us, in a personal, tangible way, to receive all that he has accomplished for us—forgiveness, eternal life, even membership in his family, and he is promising that if we do "feed on him" in our hearts by faith, all of that is ours.

The Lord's Supper is a God-given gospel proclamation to you and to me.

GOD IS NOURISHING OUR FAITH BY DECLARING HIS GOSPEL IN A POWERFULLY TANGIBLE MANNER

Perhaps this raises for some a question: “If the Lord’s Supper is simply a gospel proclamation, why do we need it? I already hear the gospel in the preaching of the Word and in my own study of Scripture.” John Calvin’s reflections on this are helpful here. God’s spoken promises could not possibly be more certain: because he has said it, it is true. Yet our faith in these promises is “slender and weak,” so that, “unless it be propped up by all sorts of means,” it will waver, and even fail (Calvin’s *Institutes* 4.14.3). We need more than just words. We need something we can see and touch and even taste that proclaims to us that Jesus has accomplished all of these things, not just for the world, or for his church, but *for me*.

And that is what we have in the bread and the wine: each of us is given, at the instructions of Jesus himself, tangible signs of the reality that Jesus gives himself to each of us. When we receive these things, Jesus is personally declaring to us, “All that I have is yours,” and as we eat, we are declaring to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe: all that you offer I desire and I find my joy and strength in.” This divinely ordained spiritual “feast” props up our feeble faith.

GOD IS DRAWING US TOGETHER

Scripture teaches us that communion not only draws us nearer to God; it also draws us nearer to each other. This is especially a focal point for Paul. He writes in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” The fact that we all partake of the same loaf of bread reminds us that each of us are those who are utterly dependent upon Jesus; each of us are part of the one body of which he is the head. We are meant to see during the Lord’s Supper that Jesus did more than die *for me*—he died *for us*. Each of us is loved by God, recipients of his grace. And that knowledge enables us to love each other more.

Because Paul finds such significance in the symbolism of eating from the one bread, we will be sharing of one loaf on those occasions when people come forward to take communion.

HOW OFTEN ARE WE TO HAVE THE LORD’S SUPPER?

In the last couple of decades, there has been a trend among churches to move to a more frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper, often to once per week. It is argued that the early church seems to have celebrated communion weekly, and therefore so should we.

It does indeed seem likely, although not certain, that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated weekly. Both Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 11:20 seem to imply that when a church comes together, they will celebrate communion. Yet it is also significant that Scripture never specifically regulates how often people are to partake. The commandments are directed to *how* communion is to be celebrated, not *how often*: we are to partake in remembrance of Christ; we are to partake together, in unity with our congregation; we are to partake in a manner in which we are recognizing the body of Christ. Even by the time of Augustine in the 4th century, churches differed as to how often they would celebrate communion. Similarly, today the churches in our presbytery differ in their practice, some celebrating once per month, some twice per month, and others every week. This is in line with our denomination’s instructions: that we are to observe the Lord’s Supper frequently, “at stated times to be determined by the Session of each congregation, as it may judge most for edification” (*PCA Book of Church Order* 58-1).

Really, the question of how often we *must* celebrate the Lord’s Supper misses the point; it’s rather like us asking how often we have to kiss our spouse or hug our family members. This is a gift given to us to strengthen our faith in Christ and our church unity; why wouldn’t we want to celebrate it as regularly as we are able?

Until this point, Trinity has celebrated the Lord's Supper once a month, which is perhaps the most common practice amongst churches similar to us, and which fits within the parameters of the above reasoning. Yet, because of our desire to increasingly be shaped by the gospel, we as a Session desire that communion become even more a part of our church life, and so we will be increasing the frequency to twice per month. We recognize that some have concerns that if we celebrate the Lord's Supper too frequently, it might become too familiar, losing its significance. There is also the need to include in our services other important elements, like baptisms, testimonies, and missions moments, which, due to time constraints, may not fit on weeks in which we celebrate communion. It is for these reasons, given that we believe we are given liberty here, that we are deciding not to move to a weekly celebration of communion.

WHY ARE WE OFFERING WINE?

Throughout the Bible, wine regularly has two distinct connotations. On one hand, over-indulgence in alcohol is associated with foolish behavior and the loss of self control; drunkenness is consistently condemned (Proverbs 20:1; Hosea 4:11; Ephesians 5:18). Yet, as with all other good things in God's creation that are open to abuse, the misuse of wine does not negate the fact that it is a gift of God, pleasing to him when used properly. Evidence for this comes in the manner in which wine also is associated with divine blessing (Psalm 4:7, Ecclesiastes 9:7, Isaiah 25:6), with Jesus himself miraculously providing fine wine for an entire wedding party (John 2).

Because it seems likely that the "cup" of the Lord's Supper is meant to carry this connotation of divinely bestowed joy, the Session has decided that wine will be served during communion at Trinity. However, recognizing that there are a variety of legitimate reasons why people might be uncomfortable with drinking alcohol, grape juice will always be provided as an alternative.