

### Biblical-Theological Framework of the Lord's Supper

#### Terminology – One Rite with Many Names

“There are a variety of terms used for this ordinance, most with some biblical support. It is called communion in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and the Lord's Table in 1 Corinthians 10:21. The phrase 'the breaking of bread' in Acts 2:42 and 20:7 probably refers to this rite as well. The term Eucharist is preferred by many, especially those in liturgical traditions. It is derived from the Greek word for thanksgiving, eucharistia, which is associated with this rite in 1 Corinthians 11:24 and in each of the Synoptic (Matthew, Mark & Luke) Gospel accounts (Matthew 26:26-27; Mark 14:22-23; Luke 22:17-19). Perhaps the most common term among Baptists is the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), reminding us that originally this rite involved an actual meal. One term not derived from Scripture is the older (Roman) Catholic term, 'the Mass.' It came from the Latin term 'missa,' which meant dismissal, and was originally used as the closing blessing of any time of worship. Eventually it was applied only to the Lord's Supper. It was the traditional term among Catholics for centuries, but many Catholics since Vatican II have been returning to the biblical term 'Eucharist.'” - John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, p. 278

#### Looking Back to the Passover

The contextual backdrop into which Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper was during the celebration of a Passover meal. Exodus 12 explains how God instructed the Israelite people enslaved in Egypt were to sacrifice a lamb and to prepare a special meal with unleavened bread. They were to spread blood from the sacrificed lamb over the door frames of their houses so that their firstborn children would be spared from death while those not under the sign of the blood would not be spared. This original Passover Meal took place in Egypt, during the time of Moses, over 1000 years before Jesus celebrated the meal with His disciples and introduced the Lord's Supper. You may find it helpful to read Exodus 12 to give a better mental image and understanding of the Passover's significance.

#### Institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus

We find the account of the first Lord's Supper and Jesus' instructions for its continued observance in Matthew 25:26-29 and Luke 22:7-20. Jesus is sharing a final Passover meal with His disciples just before He is to be captured and crucified. He took some of the unleavened bread and gave thanks for it. Then he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he took a cup of wine, and when he had given thanks he said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” In these few words, we find that Jesus pumps new meaning into His disciples previous understanding of the Passover meal. Rather than the body of a lamb associated with the previous covenant, it is Jesus' body that will serve as their sacrifice. Rather than the blood of a lamb associated with the previous covenant, it is now the blood of Jesus that ushers in a new covenant that will be poured out for them. Jesus is the True Passover Lamb that spares those who trust in Him from the penalty of their sin. Jesus also instructs His disciples to repeatedly eat the bread and drink the wine in remembrance of Him. Actually the Apostle Paul uses the phrase “Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

#### Looking Ahead to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb

There is yet another aspect to the Lord's Supper as instituted by Jesus. In the Matthew and Luke passages just referred to above, Jesus says: “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.” The Lord's Supper then reflects back on the Passover and the Old Covenant showing Jesus to be the Passover Lamb whose shed blood initiates a New Covenant. However, it also looks ahead to a future day when Jesus the bride groom will be united in heaven with the church His bride. We get a glimpse of that event in Revelation 19:6-9.

## Interpretation and Application

### Sacrament or Ordinance?

Historically, Baptists have had a different perspective on the Lord's Supper than the Roman Catholic and non-baptistic reformation understandings of the practice. The difference is noted even in the way Baptists refer to the Lord's Supper as a an "ordinance" rather than using the word "sacrament" as the other groups do. Baptist groups typically observe two ordinances – believer's baptism after a personal profession of faith and the Lord's Supper – both seen as being ordered by Jesus Christ. There are some who argue that washing one another's feet should be observed as a third ordinance because Jesus washed the disciples feet and said, "If I, your Lord and Master, wash your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."

In contrast, most non-baptistic groups refer to the Lord's Supper as a sacrament. Augustine defined sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible grace. However by the time of the protestant reformation the concept within the Roman Catholic Church was more mechanical in that if the sacrament was performed properly, God confers grace on the participants. In fact, it was stated in the 1547 Council of Trent that if someone thought that faith alone in God's promise is sufficient to obtain grace, apart from the sacraments, that person should be anathema or cursed.

The reformation groups moderated that stand significantly but continue to view a sacrament as a means of receiving grace. A baptistic understanding of salvation coming by grace through faith alone, rather than by way of any human works or activities (Ephesians 2:8-9) nudges Baptists away from the sacramental view; we are skittish of believing that any rite, that is anything that we is capable of imparting grace. For us, faith itself is made possible by God favoring us with His grace. Without that grace, we would not have faith.

### Body and Blood of Christ?

What does Jesus really mean when He says, "This is my body ... this is my blood"? What does he mean in John 6:53-58 when He says, "I assure you: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in yourselves. Anyone who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life ...."?

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine are supernaturally transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, every time a priest prays over the elements. The technical term for this is "transubstantiation" which carries the idea of a change of substance. This view developed gradually and did not become official Roman Catholic doctrine until 1215. The phrase "sacrificing the mass" with the "host" - sacrificial victim – is consistent with the physical presence of Christ in the elements. Each time the mass is observed, the body of Christ is sacrificed and His blood is shed. Roman Catholic Richard McBrien writes: "the celebration of the Mass involves a re-crucifixion of Christ (an unbloody sacrifice), and grants to those who partake forgiveness of venial sins, an increase of grace, strength for preservation from mortal sin, and hope of ultimate salvation." (McBrien, Catholicism, Harper, 1994, pp. 820ff.)

All of the reformers had a problem with the thought that a priest could turn the bread and wine into the physical body of Christ, that Jesus needed to be crucified again after His sacrifice on Good Friday, and that ingesting the meal could bring grace and forgiveness of sins.

Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic monk who reluctantly left the church to form what we know of as the Lutheran Church was open to the idea of Christ's physical presence but not that the priest had a role in the change from bread to flesh and wine to blood. The technical term for Lutherans is "consubstantiation" and carries the idea of "with substance." It was enough for Luther that Jesus said "This IS my body."

John Calvin, the one credited as the founder of the Presbyterians see Christ as being present in the Lord's Supper but not physically present. There is something mystical that takes place but it is spiritual rather than physical. He writes: "if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare."

Huldrych Zwingli was a baptistic reformer associated with the idea that the supper is a symbolic memorial. For Zwingli, the word "is" in "This IS my body" meant "signifies." Thus there is a remembrance as the bread and cup signify the body and blood of Christ without the bodily presence of Christ.

### What is the Purpose?

As Baptists we lean more toward the memorial view of the Lord's Supper. Though we do not believe the Lord's Supper is a means to receive grace, we do not deny that it should have a deep spiritual significance and a central place in our corporate worship. Because Christ has promised to be among us when we gather in His name, there is room for a bit of Calvin's thoughts on the non-physical presence of Christ – something too lofty for our minds to comprehend or for our words to express. Again, I want to defer to the words of Dr. John Hammett, professor of theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary:

The Lord's Supper proclaims the gospel message of Christ's death as the sustenance of the Christian life. The very elements of bread and wine speak of nourishment and refreshment. Thus, the Lord's Supper is the ordinance of ongoing sanctification, or the continual renewal and furthering of that initial commitment. By its very nature, baptism is a unique, singular occurrence, while the Lord's Supper must be regularly repeated. The first aspect of our renewal is to Christ. First Corinthians 11:24 gives the command to “do this in remembrance of me.” The word anamnesis, remembrance, is far richer than a mere recollection or commemoration. It is recalling an event with such vividness and power that it affects the present, bringing all the benefits of Christ's death to bear, remembering that his body was broken “for You.” As we genuinely and biblically remember, we cannot help but renew our love, thanks, and worship of Christ. On the divine side, the Holy Spirit uses this occasion to nourish us spiritually as we come in faith. Faithful, believing remembrance has as its goal the renewing of our relationship with Christ.

But just as baptism serves to symbolize our commitment to Christ and his church, so the Lord's Supper serves as a renewal of our commitment to Christ and His church. First Corinthians 10:16-17 links the Lord's Supper to the unity of the body. As we partake of the one loaf, we renew our commitment to the one body.

Though there is certainly an individual element to remembering the sacrifice that Christ made on “my” behalf, the communion of the Lord's Supper has much more to do with the sacrifice He made for “us” - reconciling us both to God and one another, uniting us together as His body and calling us into family.

The remembering is more than remembering what He did; it is also a remembering of our trust and commitment to Him as servant followers; it is in a very real sense, a covenant renewal service – both of our covenant with God and our covenant with one another.

### Who may partake?

Considering our understanding of the Lord's Supper with the following particulars: We see the observance not as a sacrament that causes God to give grace to us, but as an ordinance to help us remember

- what Christ did on the cross to reconcile us to God
- our need to be reconciled to one another and to live in unity
- our covenant commitments to both God and His Church

Therefore, to partake of the Lord's Supper in good conscience and with integrity, the participant

1. needs to have been reconciled to God through a saving born-again relationship with Jesus Christ. Since there is no meritorious effect of taking the Lord's Supper in the act itself; no grace is imparted, there is no advantage, but possibly a disadvantage of taking the Lord's Supper if not reconciled to God through faith in Christ.
2. needs to be in a covenant relationship with a local congregation as a member of that body. One cannot recall and renew a commitment that has not yet been made.
3. as far as it depends upon him/her, he/she needs to have made every effort to be at peace with other members of the body. Since the observance is more about “we and Jesus” than “me and Jesus” we need to take seriously the fact that part of Jesus' sacrifice was that we may be one even as He and the Father are one.

As Baptists, we hold firmly that baptism by immersion is a part of the covenant relationship with the local congregation. Our principle statement of faith, the “Baptist Faith and Message” says baptism is a “prerequisite to the

privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper." Though baptism is not viewed as a sacramental means of obtaining grace, it is seen as a necessary act of obedience to Christ's command. We make every attempt to assure that a person is truly a born-again regenerate believer before we baptize them. Thus baptism is the principle outward manifestation of a person's profession of Christ and spiritual new birth, making membership covenant possible which brings the invitation to the Lord's Supper.

Having set that standard for our own church membership, we do not prohibit others who are visiting and meet the three criteria listed above from participating with us.

### How Often?

The frequency of the Lord's Supper varies among Baptist churches. Some observe it quarterly, some monthly, and fewer weekly. At Long Green, we normally celebrate the event on the first Sunday of every month. However, there may be times when we choose to partake of the Lord's Supper more often.

In the early church as described in Acts 2:42-47, the term "breaking of bread" referred to sharing meals, but it also was a phrase used to describe the Lord's Supper. It seems that the Lord's Supper was integrated into the context of a larger meal as it had been when Jesus instituted it at the Passover meal just before his crucifixion as the true Passover Lamb. At this meal, those who had more shared with those who had less. It may have been origin of the church potluck dinner. But a strong point is made that no one among them had need because they were generously sharing with one another.

It appears that this observance most likely occurred every day as they met together in houses and shared times of meals, prayer and dedicated themselves to the teaching of the apostles. This would align very well with Paul's quoting of Jesus saying "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, do it in remembrance of me." Bread and wine were daily staples of the culture so rather than being a religious ceremony, it was woven into the fabric of daily life. The remembrance of the sacrifice, the renewal of the covenant commitment, keeping a close watch on unity in the body would have been daily occurrences.

This sort of begs the question: "if the Lord's Supper was a daily reality in the early church and Baptists try to emulate early church practices, why is the observance only once a month or less frequent in most churches?" In attempting to answer this question, I am speaking as pastor of a local Baptist church, and am not representing Baptist thought at large, nor necessarily the consensus of Long Green Baptist Church. I'm not sure I can give a definitive answer, but I believe it is in part a reaction against a strongly sacramental view which asserts that grace is received from God, merely by the mechanical observance of the eucharist. Most Roman Catholic churches still hold a daily mass and some faithful Catholics partake of the Lord's Supper everyday as a sacrament, believing that God gives them special grace because they are partaking of the body and blood of Christ. In wanting to avoid associating with this belief, I believe we have also avoided associating with the daily or frequent practice of the Lord's Supper. I personally believe it would do us well to take a fresh look at the frequency with which we observe the Lord's Supper as well as our reasoning for the choice. Then we need to compare our findings with scripture rather than with other church practices and see how the supper can again become more a part of the fabric of our congregational life rather than a periodic religious rite.

### Correctives to Improper Observance of the Lord's Supper

During the less than 15 year period between what we see in Acts 2 and in 1 Corinthians 11, observance of the Lord's Supper seems to have degenerated to the point that correctives were needed. Let's note the grievances that the Apostle Paul mentions:

1. divisions and factions among members when they come together (verses 17-19)
2. each one eating his/her own meal while some are going hungry (verse 21)
3. some were drinking to excess to the point of drunkenness (verse 21)

Paul's response is harsh: "Don't you have houses to eat and drink in?" He accuses them of "despising the church" and "Humiliating those who have nothing." (verse 22) He says that these abuses and excesses have brought serious consequences: "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. ... For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (verses 28-30) Obviously this is not some trivial religious ritual to be taken lightly.

Paul's corrective is to make sure that everyone "examines themselves" and "judges themselves truly" before eating the bread and drinking the cup. That examination would have to deal with the items noted in the section above "Who may partake?"

### **Preparation and Self-Examination**

The following is adapted from the Book of Common Prayer and serves as a tool to help us prepare ourselves to receive the Lord's Supper.

Dearly beloved, next Sunday we purpose to observe the ordinance of the Lord's Supper together as a congregation. It is serve to remind us of the body and blood of Christ and his meritorious cross and suffering, whereby alone we obtain forgiveness of our sins and are made partakers of the Kingdom of heaven. Wherefore it is our duty to render most humble and hearth thanks to almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that He has given His Son our Savior Jesus Christ. It is a divine and comfortable thing to those who receive it worthily, and a dangerous thing to those who presume to receive it unworthily; my duty is to exhort you, in the meantime to consider the dignity of that holy mystery, and the great peril of the unworthy receiving thereof; and so to search and examine your own consciences, and that not lightly.

The way and means thereto is: First to examine your lives and conversations by the rule of God's commandments; and wherever you perceive yourselves to have offended, either by will, word or deed, there to bewail your own sinfulness, and to confess yourselves to Almighty God, with full purpose of amendment of life. And if you perceive your offenses to be such as are not only against God, but also against your neighbors, then you shall reconcile yourselves to them, being ready to make restitution and satisfaction, according to the utmost of your powers for any injuries and wrongs done by you to any other; and being likewise ready to forgive others who have offended you, as you would have forgiveness of your offenses at God's hand, for otherwise the receiving of the Lord's Supper dos nothing else but increase your condemnation. Therefore, if any of you is a blasphemer of God, a slanderer of His Word, an adulterer, or if you are harboring malice, envy or any other grievous crime, repent of your sins, or do not come to the Lord's table.

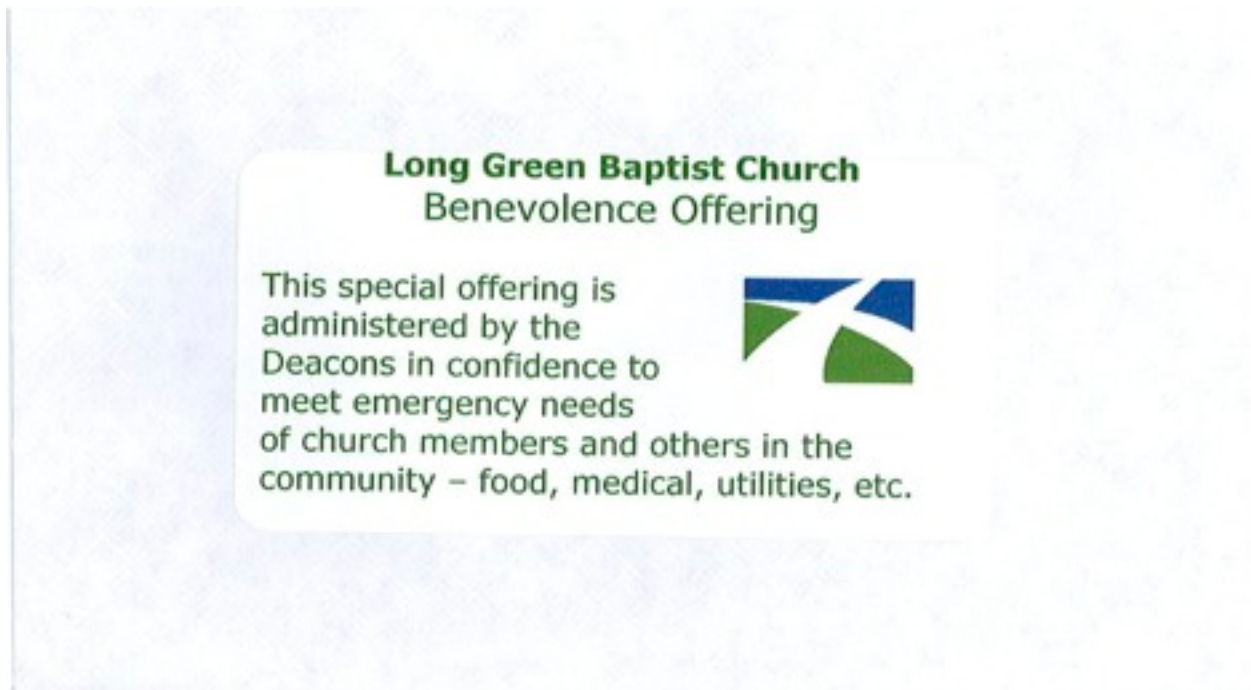
The point is to say like King David, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts; See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24).

### **The Rationale and Importance of the Benevolence Offering**

We have seen in our discussion above that the early church had a keen interest in taking care of those who had need. There was extreme generosity as people even sold property and gave the money to the leaders of the church to make sure their brothers and sisters were not going hungry. We see this in the meals where those who had more shared with those who had less. We also see the early church taking up a special offering to send to the church in Jerusalem which was going through an extremely difficult time.

At Long Green Baptist, it is our traditional practice to receive a special "Benevolence Offering" on the first Sunday of each month in conjunction with the Lord's Supper. We make a distinction between tithes and regular giving in

contrast to special offerings. This offering is understood to be in addition to the tithe or regular percentage giving. Though it is a special offering that may require a greater sacrifice, we have chosen to receive it at the same time as the regular giving when the ushers pass the offering plates. You should find a special designated envelope that looks something like this:



The Deacons administer this offering in confidence, focusing on those in the congregation with needs as well as some outside the church who are referred to the Deacons by members of the congregation. As you pray and prepare for the Lord's Supper ahead of time, please consider how God might have you contribute via the Benevolence Offering.