

# UNIT FOUR

## THE LORD'S SUPPER

### CELEBRATING OUR REDEMPTION: THE LAST SUPPER

- **Passover meals in the time of Jesus**
  - **PRELIMINARY COURSE**
    - Word of dedication over first cup of wine
    - Preliminary dish is shared
    - Meal served, but not yet eaten
  - **PASSOVER LITURGY**
    - Passover story is told
    - First part of Passover Psalm is sung
    - Second cup of wine is drunk
  - **MAIN MEAL**
    - Grace is spoken over the unleavened bread
    - The meal is eaten
    - Grace said over third cup of wine
  - **CONCLUSION**
    - Second part of Passover Psalm is sung
    - Praise offered over fourth cup of wine
  
- **Reinterpreting the Passover**
  - When families and friends shared the Passover together, they were reminded in a very personal way of the whole basis of their relationship with God and their existence as a people.
  - As the leader of the group, Jesus' role was to say grace and remind the disciples of the significance of the meal.
  - At the Last Supper, he took the unusual step of accompanying the distribution of the bread and at least one cup of wine with his own words of interpretation.
  - When he did this, the significant elements of the Passover meal were presented to the disciples as a symbol of his approaching death and the salvation he would accomplish.
  - Their eating and drinking would symbolise the New Covenant, rather than the old.

- As the disciples received the bread and the wine, they were personally assured that they shared in the Kingdom of God, because they belonged to the ‘many’ for whom Jesus was about to die.
- **Remembering Jesus and his sacrifice**
  - The command to ‘do this in remembrance of me’ appears in Luke 22:19 and I Corinthians 11:24-25; Paul expresses it as a pattern which should be followed.
  - No guidance about the frequency of the celebration is given, Jesus only focuses on the significance of eating bread and drinking wine together.
  - The Lord’s Supper is not to be regarded as the fulfilment of the Passover, but could be said to function as a Christian substitute for the Passover.
  - The Last Supper was the last of a series of meals Jesus shared with his disciples and also with the outcasts of his day – in the face of protests from the Pharisees.
  - These meals were in anticipation of the Kingdom of God, hence Paul’s emphasis on doing this together ‘until he comes’.
  - There is no suggestion that the bread and wine are a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving – the Passover was a memorial for Israel’s benefit and the Lord’s Supper is likewise meant to be a memorial for our benefit.

## **FEEDING ON CHRIST: JESUS AS THE BREAD OF LIFE**

- John does not record Jesus’ words about the bread and wine at the Last Supper, instead including Jesus washing his disciples’ feet – pointing to Jesus humility and self-sacrificing service.
- Some argue that Jesus’ teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood in John 6:51-58 is a way of explaining the Lord’s Supper, but there are good reasons for challenging this.
- This passage focuses on Jesus himself, not a meal in remembrance of him – eating and drinking here are metaphors for coming to him and believing in him as the bread of life.
- Eating and drinking are fundamental activities for physical survival – with this metaphor Jesus is insisting that we express our complete dependence on him for eternal life.
- Those who want to be raised up at the last day must come to the crucified Messiah and trust in the effectiveness of his atoning death for our salvation.
- Eating his flesh and drinking his blood means taking advantage of the benefits of his incarnation and death by faith.
- It would be out of character with the rest of Jesus’ teaching to suggest that participation in the Lord’s Supper was essential for eternal salvation – John 6:53 could be interpreted in this way.

- It is the words of Jesus which must be ‘consumed’ so that the glorified Christ might live in us and we in him.
- However, eating and drinking the bread and wine may vividly represent the act of coming to Jesus and believing in him – it may be a constant reminder of what it means to be a Christian but it is not the way you become a Christian.

## EXPRESSING OUR FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST: THE LORD’S SUPPER AT CORINTH

- Paul’s first reference to what he later calls the ‘Lord’s Supper’ is in the context of encouraging the Corinthians not to attend pagan meals (1 Corinthians 10:20).
- **Sharing together in the benefits of Christ’s death**
  - The final cup at a Jewish meal was the ‘cup of blessing’, and this was the cup interpreted by Jesus as ‘the new covenant in my blood’ at the Last Supper.
  - Paul’s use of this expression implies that thanksgiving for the death of Jesus was associated with drinking together.
  - They did not consider their table to be an altar where a sacrifice was taking place, but ‘a fellowship meal where in the presence of the Spirit they were by faith looking back to the singular sacrifice that had been made and were thus realising again its benefits in their lives’.
  - Eating together, with a focus on Christ’s death, is a means of expressing a ‘common participation in the body of Christ’.
  - To eat the one loaf is to share with others in ‘that company which, through its union with Christ, has by anticipation entered upon the new age which lies beyond the resurrection’.
  - A Christian community is not an ordinary association like a club, it is a gathering that arises out of sharing together in Christ’s saving work.
- **The implications for our life together as Christians**
  - Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians to recognise their unity in the body of Christ as they ate from ‘one loaf’ prepares for a discussion of divisions in their meetings.
  - These divisions seem to have had both social and theological dimensions – not sharing their meal and not treating each other as fellow members of Christ.
  - Their behaviour indicated that they were not actually celebrating the Lord’s Supper, but rather were pre-occupied with consuming their own private meals.
  - Although sharing an ordinary meal together, their meals were to have a special character.

- Jewish traditions should have been transformed into expressions of new covenant theology as a result of Jesus' teaching.
- The people were not reflecting the true meaning of the Last Supper in their lives together.
- Eating the bread and drinking the cup is a means of proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes — by their disregard for one another they were negating the very point of that death.
- The Lord's Supper is meant to focus people on each other as well as on God — we express our common participation in Christ as our Saviour and Lord.