

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Through the ages the Church has referred to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as "Communion," as "Holy Communion," as "The Lord's Supper," as "The Sacrament of the Altar" and as "The Eucharist." In a future article we will discuss these various names. As the matter a fact, none of these names are found in the New Testament. Scripture consistently refers to the sacrament as "the breaking of bread." In Acts chapter 2 we are told that the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." This "breaking of bread" – the celebration of the Lord's Supper – was a regular part of their life together. Just a couple verses later we are told, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." Most of the early believers were Jews, so they met in the temple courts, probably to study the Scriptures – especially those Scriptures which spoke of the Messiah (who of course had come in the person of Jesus). They also "broke bread in their homes," that is, they celebrated the Lord's Supper in their homes, evidently in conjunction with a shared meal. We shouldn't be surprised at their celebrating Communion in conjunction with a shared meal; after all, it was in the context of a meal (the Passover meal) that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper.

In Acts chapter 20 we find Paul and Luke in the city of Troas. We are told, "On the first day of the week [Sunday!] we came together to break bread." While Paul used the occasion to speak at some length to the Christians who had gathered on that Sunday, the main purpose for gathering was "to break bread." After Paul's lengthy sermon (see Acts 20:7!), the congregation did in fact "break bread."

In light of the above and on the basis of Jesus' words "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24) and "Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25) the early Christians often gathered together for the express purpose of celebrating the Lord's Supper. Before special places of worship were built, this celebration took place in private homes. Oftentimes it was in conjunction with a shared meal. Eventually, as special facilities were built for worship, the celebration of the sacrament took place in those special facilities rather than in private homes. In addition, for the most part, celebrating the sacrament in conjunction with a shared meal ceased for a number of practical reasons.

Here we are, in 2018, gathering on the first day of every week in a special facility built for worship, devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship with other Christians, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. How did it come to be that we "break bread" only every other time that we gather?

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FOOD FOR THE SOUL

I suspect most of us are familiar with Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*. It was the basic text for most of us who were confirmed in the Lutheran Church around the 8th grade – whether 5 or 50 years ago. Did you ever think about why it was called the "Small" catechism? To distinguish from another catechism authored by Luther that was larger that is called Luther's *Large Catechism*. The two catechisms both contain Luther's teaching on the six chief parts of Christian doctrine as Luther called them. The six: The Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, The Lord's Prayer, The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and The Sacrament of the Altar.

Do you remember Luther's words concerning the Sacrament of the Altar in the Small Catechism? "The words „given for you“ and „shed for you for the forgiveness of sins“ show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation."

Listen to these words of Luther from the *Large Catechism* as he speaks of the power and benefit of the Sacrament. “We go to the Sacrament because there we receive a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because the words are there, and they impart it to us! For this reason he bids me eat and drink, that it may be mine and do me good as a sure pledge and sign – indeed, as the very gift he has provided for me against my sins, death, and all evils. Therefore, it is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood, as I have said, have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and attacks of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint and at times even stumble. Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger.”

Forgiveness. Life. Salvation. Wonderful gifts of God's grace. Won for us by Christ on the cross. It is as if God was so concerned that we receive these gifts that he not only gives us these gifts in his Word; he also gives them to us in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In fact, we call these three – Word, Baptism, Lord's Supper – the means of grace.

Luther calls the Lord's Supper “**food of the soul**” and “**daily food and sustenance.**” We would not think of going without food for our body weeks at a time; why would we want to go without food for our soul weeks at a time?

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Its Names

In the first of this series of articles we mentioned that through the ages the Church has referred to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper with various terms such as “Communion,” “Holy Communion,” “The Lord's Supper,” “The Sacrament of the Altar” and “The Eucharist.” We also promised to discuss these various names in a future article. With this article, that time has come.

“**The Breaking of Bread**” is the term the New Testament uses to refer to the Sacrament. The other names are in fact not in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the terms are helpful to our understanding of the Sacrament. Let's take them one by one.

“**Communion**” is a much used name. In the Sacrament we have communion first of all with the Lord himself. St. Paul wrote, “*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?*” (1 Corinthians 10:16) When we partake of the Sacrament we participate in Christ's blood and body. You cannot get any closer to Christ than that; you cannot be one with him any more than that; you cannot commune with him any closer than that. In the very next verse Paul writes, “*Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of one loaf.*” Not only are we in communion with Christ in the Sacrament; we are also in communion with one another. As we approach the altar, we do so with a common faith and a common understanding of the Sacrament.

“**Holy Communion**” is an often used term. Just as the Bible is often referred to as the “Holy Bible,” so Communion is often referred to as “Holy Communion.” Holy in the sense of “set apart” or “special.” It is set apart and special because it is of God. Christ instituted the Sacrament. It is his body and blood that we receive with the bread and the wine.

What makes Communion “holy” is because it is God's. Which leads us to a third term: “**The Lord's Supper.**” He is the host and provides the food. He is also the one who issues the supper invitations. We most often partake of the Sacrament in the morning, but Jesus instituted it in the evening, in conjunction with the Passover meal which was eaten after sundown. Please note that it is not “The Church's Supper;” it is “The Lord's Supper.” Because it is, those are welcome whom he invites.

“**The Sacrament of the Altar**” is another common term for this most uncommon Supper. The Lutheran Church talks about two Sacraments – Baptism and Communion. While we do not call Baptism “The Sacrament of the Font,” the term “Sacrament of the Altar” simply clarifies it as the Sacrament that is served on the table of the altar.

Finally, the term “**Eucharist**” is sometimes used. “Eucharist” is from a Greek word that has to do with gratitude or thanksgiving. We partake of the Sacrament with grateful hearts, thanking the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness and life he won for us through his suffering, death and resurrection.

Which term we use is not all that important. What is important is that we partake of the Sacrament frequently – both to receive its benefits and to offer thanksgiving to our Benefactor.

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This is the fourth of four articles concerning The Lord's Supper. In the first article we spoke about the regular "breaking of bread" that took place in the very early church as described in the New Testament. In the second article we talked about how Martin Luther referred to The Lord's Supper as "daily food and sustenance" and as "food for the soul." The third article discussed the various names used for the Sacrament (Holy Communion, the Eucharist, etc.).

With this fourth and final article we usher in the practice of offering the Lord's Supper every Sunday and not just on the 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month.

We live in a society of "fast food. Many of us may enjoy a cheeseburger or even a Big Mac now and then. But if cost and time were no factors, who of us would not prefer a leisurely meal at the Stoney River Steak House or at Charlie Giotto's new place?

Cost is certainly no factor as we move to "every Sunday Communion" in September. And time? Are any of us really that pressed for time on a Sunday morning? Each Sunday we will not only be able to hear the Word of God read and preached, pray, and sing God's praises; we will also be able to enjoy the benefits of this "food for our souls" (as Luther called it) that "gives forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation."

Please understand that I am not equating a worship service without Communion to "fast food." But why pass up the blessings this Sacrament offers?

While not speaking specifically of The Lord's Supper, hear these memorable words from the prophet Isaiah as he looked forward to the coming of the Messiah.

"On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines." (Isaiah 25:8)

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." (Isaiah 55:1)