

THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper is known in various church traditions by other names, such as 'Holy Communion', the 'Breaking of Bread' and the 'Eucharist' (from the Greek, meaning 'thanksgiving'). This act (often known as a 'sacrament'; see Unit 31, *Baptism*) takes place frequently in churches, in obedience to the command of Jesus to his disciples at his last supper before he was crucified.

Jesus, a Jew, shared in the religious life of the Jewish community which included the celebrating of the three pilgrim festivals (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles) in Jerusalem. The final meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his crucifixion is identified as a Passover meal (see Luke **22:15**; Mark **14:14**; Matthew **26:18**). The Passover was a time of celebration and re-dedication, primarily in a family setting. The Passover involved looking back, remembering God's great act of liberating his people from slavery in Egypt. (See Exodus **12:3–13**; Exodus **13:8**; Deuteronomy **16:1–8**; 2 Chronicles **30**; Ezekiel **45:21**).

The Passover meal and readings focus upon liberation and freedom. Jesus himself draws out the fuller meaning of these terms by speaking of the liberation his death and resurrection would bring. Jesus is the Passover lamb (1 Corinthians **5:7**) and by his sacrifice we have been (and are being) made holy (see Hebrews **10:10–14**; 1 Peter **1:17–22**). Jesus brings new meaning to eating the Passover bread and drinking the wine (John **6:53**; Luke **22:17–20**). It is a spiritual feeding, an act of sharing, celebrating and remembering.

To feed on the body of Jesus broken for us and his blood shed for us is to take to ourselves in faith and thankfulness the victory of his death and resurrection. It is an act of public discipleship in which we seek to enter into a closer unity with Jesus and with those who share with us in the life of the Church. The outward actions of eating the bread and drinking the wine are pictures (symbols) of the inward action of feeding on what the bread and wine represents. The outward act of eating has no spiritual significance apart from the inward act of feeding on Jesus (who is present with his people; see Matthew **18:20**) with the heart.

As with the teaching on baptism, churches have differing traditions as to the method, style and frequency of sharing the Lord's Supper. There is no direct teaching from the New Testament concerning who should preside, nor specifying the place or precise timing of the Lord's Supper, although today most churches have their own normative patterns. Some, for example, would suggest that the celebration of the Lord's Supper should take place at each major (weekly) Christian worship gathering (Acts **20:7**), while at the other extreme some would suggest it should take the form of an annual sharing (linked to Passover). For some the Lord's Supper should be an informal sharing; the Breaking of Bread often takes place in home groups. That has a particular resonance with early church practice before Christianity was adopted as the state religion of the Roman empire; and small group settings can also be helpful today (notably, for practical reasons, wherever there is persecution of believers). The term 'Breaking of Bread' (probably the earliest name for the Lord's Supper) suggests an informal custom at the close of a common fellowship meal. In some traditions the pattern becomes more elaborate and structured. Whatever the outward forms, the heart of the matter is to obey the command of Jesus (1 Corinthians **11:24**). By remembering Jesus in the way he ordained we honour him and we open our lives afresh to his power and grace. We celebrate his death (he has died), proclaim his resurrection and presence today (he is risen) and look joyfully to his future coming (he will come again).

It is worth noting that the custom of most churches has been to include some particular features in the service at which the actual breaking of bread takes place. From early times it was customary to include thanksgiving for all God's gifts in creation, as well as mention of the mighty acts of God in redemption through Jesus Christ; there is prayer and the reading of Scripture; usually the words Jesus used at the Last Supper with his disciples are spoken or mentioned. Most churches include an opportunity for repentance, which is significant, reminding us that the New Testament warns of dangers attending impenitent reception of the bread and wine, and the need for self-examination before eating and drinking at the Supper (see 1 Corinthians **11:27–31**). Many churches include in their prayers an invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Practical issues have arisen in the history of the church, especially in times of plague, concerning the use of a 'common cup' for communion, a practice which was revived in the Reformation period. Concerns about communicable diseases being passed by infected saliva on a shared cup have been expressed, and some churches have addressed this matter, allaying concerns, by using 'intinction', a method of putting a drop of wine on each piece of bread.

It is of interest that some churches use unleavened bread, reminding members of the Passover.