



Whether we call it 'breaking bread', 'the Lord's supper', 'the Eucharist' or 'communion', we all would agree, I am sure, that the corporate action sharing of the bread and the cup should be part of our life and worship together as a community of faith. It is common to all of the major church traditions, as we track it back to Jesus himself at the last supper.

Recently the Salt & Light UK Theological Forum took 'the Eucharist' as its theme in order to tackle some of the issues of meaning and place of the practice for us. The subject was tackled from 3 angles: the Eucharist and the Gospels; the Eucharist in the Early Church and the Eucharist through church history. *(Incidentally we decided to refer to the practice as 'the Eucharist' as it was the term least familiar to us and therefore least 'loaded'. For the origins of each term see below)*

Across our churches the practice of the 'Eucharist' varies widely, and if we are honest for many of us it is a very haphazard affair, struggling for the right place. It is often rarely practiced and, when it is, it is often tacked onto 'normal' worship sessions out of a sense of obligation (we ought to do this because Jesus told us to). It seems that we may not be alone:

*'There would seem to be little doubt that **neglect** of the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist is one of the hallmarks of contemporary evangelicalism.'*
Carl Truman (Westminster Theological Seminary)

But why is this so? No doubt we all have our theories! Does it reflect a loss of meaning of what it is all about? We may be unsure of how we should engage with something that has a 'traditional' element to it? We may be unclear how a 'practice' affects our spirituality. One thing we must remember that the problem with tradition is not the repetition but the loss of meaning. If we recover the meaning that it held for Jesus, the early church and church through history, then we can engage with the practice with confidence and allow it to be life-giving for our communities.

This article is made up of summaries of three papers, one for each of the topic areas, and is designed to open up the issues for us to think about. The papers are available in full on our website, www.saltlight.org/theology

PAPER 01: The Eucharist and the Gospels

Our Eucharistic practice is rooted in Jesus' celebration of the last supper. Primarily this is recorded in the Gospels (though Paul later reflects on this institution) and together the Four Gospels present the Last Supper in a multifaceted and profound way, and bring out a number of themes.

Firstly it is clear that the Eucharist is set within a Passover framework. Passover was the Jewish festival that celebrated the Exodus from Egypt and freedom from slavery to the Egyptians. There is much imagery from Passover that Jesus and the early church drew upon. More than just picking out a couple of symbols; Jesus was redefining the feast around himself, and seeing as his actions as their ultimate fulfilment. Hence Jesus' death, represented powerfully in this meal, is the means of a new exodus from slavery to sin, to the kingdom of God in which we as the new covenant community enjoy fellowship with our God. Not least the meal shows that through Jesus as our Passover Lamb God's judgement has "passed over" us.

The gospels also demonstrate that, for the new community, this meal is about our fellowship with Jesus in all its dimensions. Wrapped up in the circumstances around the last supper we see Jesus dealing with issues of his freely given forgiveness, his love and servanthood. We are called into discipleship, as we are to follow his example, even as Jesus' forth-coming climactic actions are tied up in the bread and the cup. We find ourselves called to a meal table to enjoy his presence now as we await his future coming.

As part of our fellowship with Jesus, this meal is about His mission. This is true in two ways: first as a sign of the fact that those present at the same table are diverse, and second because it encourages us to go out as disciples in this new era made possible through the death of Jesus.

Looking forward, the Eucharist is also an eschatological meal, a meal that celebrates the effect of Christ's

The Lord's Supper

Origin: 1 Corinthians 11:19

Usage: This is the only reference to the practice in these terms. Here it is used as a corrective. The reference was not a name but a description. "Supper" was the normal term for an evening meal, hence the "Lord's Supper" was the meal where the Lord is the host, setting the tone and the behaviour for the meal. The "Lord's supper" was in direct contrast to "your own supper" [v21] which they were accused of eating.

Breaking Bread

Origin: Luke-Acts

Usage: Used repeatedly by Luke to describe the opening blessing of a meal, the corporate meal, and references the 'bread and the cup'. [see Eucharist in the Early church for further discussion].

Eucharist

Origin: Jesus action at last Supper

Usage: This is mainly the Catholic term, adopted because "Eucharist" is the Greek word for "Thanksgiving" and is taken from Jesus' actions at the last supper: "Jesus took bread and gave thanks".

Communion

Origin: 1 Corinthians 10:16

Usage. The term communion is from the Latin communion, meaning 'sharing in common'. The corresponding term in Greek is koinonia, often translated 'fellowship'. In the verse mentioned it refers to our 'participation' (NIV) in the body and blood of Christ.

past action in dying on the present (e.g. Luke 24:13-35), while awaiting the ultimate fulfilment (e.g. Luke 22:16). This meal points forward to the future banquet we will enjoy with Christ in His Kingdom

PAPER 02: Eucharist in the Early church

The early church had the common meal as a central part of their gatherings. Luke's references to the breaking of bread, even without explicit references to the bread and the cup, seem to correlate with Paul's references to 'the Lord's Supper' in Corinthians and the evidence of the celebration of 'love feasts' in Jude and later church fathers. The common meal, celebrated from house to house and 'on the first day of the week', served as a time of joyful thanksgiving to God for their new life in Christ.

They met to break bread as a counter-cultural demonstration

The meal stood in a direct contrast to other banquets that were held in the surrounding culture, and provided additional framework for the theological significance of the meal. The church was to see the Lord as the host of the meal, as opposed to an idol, or any of the individuals amongst them. Hence the way that the meal was practiced should reflect what it means to be God's people. The meal had a didactic and enacting function – the way it was administered reflected the reality that it was celebrating. Hence abuses of people, mainly through self interest, at the meal were abuses against the Lord, as the host, and now also the body represented by the people there. Further, the Lord is the sacrifice that the participants are sharing in and sharing the benefits of, and forms the basis for the fellowship together and with Christ. The breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup were significant aspects of the meal, that caused this to be a reality.

What meaning did they associate with it?

In relating the meal to the meals of Jesus and his disciples both pre and post his resurrection, the meaning of the meal becomes clear. In the words of institution the meal retained a sense of the Jewish Passover, and functioned in a similar manner, as "remembrance through re-enactment". The meal had more meaning than a fellowship tea. In the participation of the meal in the presence of Jesus, they celebrated their formation as the new people of God, under a new covenant in their Lord, Jesus. This corporate identity is the primary focus, with individual self-interests perverting the very act that should reinforce their corporate identity, as it forms community identity and behaviour through remembering and responding to the new covenant.

What sort of occasion was it?

The joyful sharing of a full meal was not 'remembrance' in the sense of a thanksgiving service after a funeral. It was the celebration of sharing a meal with the risen Lord, as his body, benefiting from the action of his sacrificial death and anticipating the great end-time Banquet that will take place when He returns.

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Scale of Views	Denominational Links	Is Christ present?	How is Christ present?
Transubstantiation	Roman Catholic	'Real Presence' of Christ in the elements (though disagreement on how Christ is present)	The substance of the bread and wine changes into the substance of the body and blood of Christ by the Spirit's operation (though the accidents of bread and wine remain)
Pious Silence	Orthodox		The bread and wine really becomes the body and bread of Christ by the Spirit's work (with the Catholics) but we do not know the metaphysical mechanics of this and must retain a pious silence
Consubstantiation	Luther & Lutherans		The substance of bread and wine remains but the actual body and blood of Christ are also present by the Spirit.
Spiritual Presence	Calvin & co		The substance of bread and wine remains but the Spirit uses them so that we spiritually feed on Christ (who is in heaven)
Mere Symbolism	Zwingli (and many evangelicals as a default position)	Christ not actually present in the elements physically or spiritually	The elements are merely symbols of Christ's body and blood – a memorial service.
Non-Literal Celebration	Quakers & Salvation Army		We no longer need to celebrate communion as a ritual meal but simply live by the values it embodies

PAPER 03: Eucharist Through History

The celebration of the Eucharist has always been central to Christianity but for the leaders of the Reformation the key question asked had become 'What is the nature of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist?'

What is the nature of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist?

The table outlines the scale of views that exist on the question of Christ's presence.

It is important to affirm the presence of Christ in a special way when we break bread, however difficult to define. By and large, evangelicals have reacted against Catholic views which emphasise the "mystical" aspects of the Eucharist, and this has caused us to stress more what the Eucharist is not rather than what it is. The rise of Anglo-Catholicism within the Church of England in the 19th century led to a major Anglican Evangelical backlash against anything that looked remotely Romanish (Catholic). But our theological forum was divided between the "spiritual presence" theory and the "mere symbolism" theory.

Evangelical views following Zwingli?

Consequently the default, unthinking position for many evangelicals is Zwinglianism. It is a simple, non-supernatural, common sense view, that Christ is present at the celebration of communion, in the same way as he is present at other gatherings of Christians, but the re-enactment of the story of Christ's death

and resurrection, which are the foundations of our fellowship and future, binds us together in a special way as God's new covenant people.

Conclusion

For all its external simplicity the Eucharistic meal is invested with profound spiritual reality engaging us with the heart of God's redemptive mission. Its significance is informed by both the Passover meal in retrospect and the eschatological banquet in prospect – prophetic fulfilment and prophetic hope.

For the first 200 years or so the Eucharist was integral to the agape feast – a community meal akin to many others, perhaps (the Shabbat in Jewish groups and the celebratory meals of 'associations' in the gentile world), but with its own special roots and significance. The meal involved: a rehearsal of the redemption story focused on Jesus' death and resurrection; a celebration of the community of the redeemed, unique in its radical social diversity; a demonstration of the abiding presence of Christ; Christ as both host and meal!

It was a defining characteristic of the Christian community, and in Acts the reason that they met [Acts 20:7].

Suggestions

- Have some meetings that are primarily focussed on the Eucharist – the central feature of the gathering that everything references.
- Use our physical environment to stage it – particularly referencing Jesus as the host.
- Be clear on the emphasis each time you celebrate. Focus on a different aspect each time.
- Train small group leaders concerning the Eucharist and its celebration in homes.
- Think about what it means for a meal to be 'the Lord's Supper'.
- Whenever we do it should be the centre, in worship and preaching it should not be 'bear in mind we are doing this', but 'this is the strand we are focussing on today how can you build to it/on it'
- Reflect as leaders on how often and why the Eucharist is celebrated.
- Maybe have a separate meeting once per month focussing around the Eucharist. Think about experimental ways to reflect on the theology.
- Focus on a Passover for one gathering.
- Think about how the Eucharist is the focal point for church, discipleship & mission.