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The History of the Lord's Supper

DIFFERENT NAMES: This sacrament's multiple layers of meaning are conveyed in part by the different names for the celebration.

"Lord's Supper" conveys that Jesus himself is host of the supper and that we celebrate this feast in obedience to Christ.

"Eucharist" (based on the Greek word for "thanksgiving") names this feast as a meal of gratitude, just as the last supper was, for Jesus and his disciples, a meal of thanksgiving

"Holy Communion" highlights the intimate union we experience with both Christ and fellow believers.

The first of those names is from the New Testament (I Cor 11:20). The second ('giving thanks') is from the second century church. The third was favored by the Reformers, and looks back to the biblical word *koinonia* (meaning 'fellowship' or 'participation')

"A sacrament of the Lord's supper is a Christian rite: the use of outward symbols and actions to communicate to us the reality of the inward and spiritual grace of God toward us in Jesus Christ. Much of the Church's thinking about 'sacraments' - and the Christian use of the word itself - is considerably later than the New Testament. The medieval church (as with the present Roman Catholic church) recognized seven sacraments, but the sixteenth century (Protestant) Reformers noted that only baptism and communion were clearly supported by the scriptures, and directly instituted by Jesus. The Reformers rejected any misunderstanding that the sacraments could automatically and mechanically transfer grace to those who participate in them, without any regard to the presence of meaning, understanding, or faith. In its original Roman setting, the word 'sacrament' had the sense of a sacred bond, a pledge of obedience. A Christian sacrament, explains a Genevan catechism, is 'an outward attestation of the grace of God, which by a visible sign, represents spiritual things to imprint the promises of God more firmly in our hearts, and to make us sure of them.' Calvin spoke of the Lord's Supper as a 'spiritual feeding' on Christ, in which the Holy Spirit raises us up to a stronger sense of participation in the life of Christ. The sacraments, as with the written and preached word of God, witness to the grace of God toward us in Jesus Christ, the living Word. They invite us to respond to that grace, to participate in it, and to be nurtured in our faith. The Reformers spoke of a sacrament not only as a 'sign' (symbol), but as a 'seal', a pledge or promise from God. As a 'seal', the sacrament is made effective only through the Holy Spirit, who alone can communicate to believers the grace of assurance." (NZP)

Theology of the Lord's Supper

In our Book of Order, Part 1, of The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in W-3.0409, there is this succinct statement as to the meaning of the Lord's Supper:

"The Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) is the sign and seal of our communion with the crucified and risen Lord. Jesus shared meals with his followers throughout his earthly life and ministry—common suppers, miraculous feasts, and the covenant commemorations of the people of God. Jesus spoke of himself as the bread of life, and the true vine, in whom we are branches. On the night before his death, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples. He spoke of the bread and wine as his body and blood, signs of the new covenant and told the disciples to remember him by keeping this feast. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread. The disciples continued to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, prayers, and the common meal. As

Paul wrote, when we share the bread and cup in Jesus' name, 'we who are many are one body' (1 Cor. 10:17).

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper offers an abundant feast of theological meaning, including: thanksgiving to God the Father; remembrance of Jesus Christ; invocation of the Holy Spirit; communion in the body of Christ; and a meal of the realm of God. The Reformed tradition understands the Lord's Supper to be a sign of God's covenant. The bread of the Lord's Supper is linked with the gift of manna in the wilderness and the bread of Passover."

The NZP adds this helpful comment: "It is important to note that the Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus against the backdrop of another major covenantal 'remembrance': the Passover, in which God's covenant people thankfully remembered in the present God's saving acts which had called them into existence, and which gave them a sense of timeless solidarity with God's people in all generations. 'Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day' (Dt.5:3)"

W-3.0409 continues: "The Lord's Supper thus connects us with God's saving power and providential care from generation to generation. Like the offering of sacrifices, a sign of Israel's thanksgiving for God's faithfulness, the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of praise and a sign of our gratitude for God's steadfast love. The Lord's Supper represents God's gracious invitation to an everlasting covenant. The Lord's Supper also reflects our calling to feed others as we have been fed, and offers a foretaste of that heavenly banquet when God will wipe away every tear and swallow up death forever.

The Lord's Supper enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's sustaining grace offered to all people. The Lord's Supper is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ nourishes us in righteousness, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit renews the Church in its identity and sends the Church to mission in the world.

When we gather at the Lord's Supper the Spirit draws us into Christ's presence and unites with the Church in every time and place. We join with all the faithful in heaven and on earth in offering thanksgiving to the triune God. We reaffirm the promises of our baptism and recommit ourselves to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world.

The opportunity to eat and drink with Christ is not a right bestowed upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. All who come to the table are offered the bread and cup, regardless of their age or understanding. If some of those who come have not yet been baptized, an invitation to baptismal preparation and Baptism should be graciously extended.

Worshipers prepare themselves to celebrate the Lord's Supper by putting their trust in Christ, confessing their sin, and seeking reconciliation with God and one another. *Even those who doubt may come* to the table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper **shall** be celebrated as a regular part of the Service for the Lord's Day, preceded by the proclamation of the Word, in the gathering of the people of God. When local circumstances call for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated less frequently, the session may approve other schedules for celebration, in no case less than quarterly. If the Lord's Supper is celebrated less frequently than on each Lord's Day, public notice is to be given at least one week in advance so that all may prepare to receive the Sacrament."

In W-3.0409: there are a list of Scripture and Book of Confessions References, which remind us that our understanding of the Lord's Supper is built on our faith in Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, and our Confessions - the same order as reflected in the constitutional questions that each Presbyterian church elder, when ordained or installed answers. (W-4.0404): Exod. 12:1–28; 16:1–36; Ps. 107:1–3; Isa. 25:6–9; 43:5–7; 55:1–3; Matt. 5:23–24; 8:11; 14:13–21; 15:32–39; 22:1–14; 26:17–29; Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–10; 14:12–25; Luke 4:18–21; 5:27–32; 7:36–50; 9:10–17; 10:38–42; 14:15–24; 22:7–23; 24:13–43; John 2:1–13; 5:1; 6:1–13; 7:1–39; 10:22–42; 12:1–3; 13:1–35; 21:1–14; Acts 1:1–11; 2:42–47; Rom. 14:1–23; 1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:14–33; 11:17–34; 15:20–28; Gal. 3:27–29; Eph. 1:22–23; Phil. 2:5–11; Col. 3:1–4; 1 Thess. 4:16–17; Jas. 2:1–7, 14–17; 1 John 3:16–18; Rev. 19:9; Scots Conf. 3.21–3.23; Heid. Cat. 4.075–4.082; 2 Helv. Conf. 5.193–5.210; West. Conf. 6.161–6.168; S. Cat. 7.096–7.097; L. Cat. 7.278–7.285; Conf. 1967 9.52.") It is a good practice to examine some of these references to get a sense as to how the Lord's Supper is grounded.

"Offering Christian life is an offering of one's self to God. In the Lord's Supper we are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ for the life of the world. As those who have been claimed and set free by his grace, we respond with gratitude, offering him our lives, our spiritual gifts, and our material goods. Every service of worship **shall** include an opportunity to respond to Christ's call to discipleship through self-offering. The gifts we offer express our stewardship of creation, demonstrate our care for one another, support the ministries of the church, and provide for the needs of the poor." W-3.0411

The Preface of *The Book of Order* defines "SHALL and IS TO BE/ARE TO BE" signify practice that is mandated.

To ensure that these foundational claims of the Lord's Supper remain clear and not watered down, there are a number of **PASTORAL THEMES** that are to be kept in clear focus:

- "The Lord's Supper is a celebration of God's grace, not human achievement. It is a means of grace through which God acts to seal the promises of the gospel. The power of the celebration does not lie in our ability to think hard about Jesus' death and our sin, but in the way God's Spirit uses the celebration to nourish and sustain us. The Lord's Supper is a gift!
- The Lord's Supper is not an end in itself. It always points beyond itself to celebrate God's grace and covenant faithfulness. This does not mean the physical aspects of the celebration are incidental or unimportant. The Lord's Supper should be a celebration fitting to the abundant grace of God offered in Christ." (WS, p.312)
- The NZP material gives many pastoral insights into the pastoral implications of how Holy Communion is to be administered: "The Lord's Supper may be serious, but it should not be sad. It is an outpouring of gratitude to God, for the completed work of Jesus Christ. Instead of a funereal atmosphere, there should be a deep resonance of praise and thanksgiving. We find just such a note in the recorded eucharistic prayers of Hippolytus of Rome early in the third century. 'Therefore, making memory of his death and resurrection, ... we ...praise and glorify you through your child Jesus Christ, through whom glory and honor be to you with the Holy Spirit in your holy church now and forever ...' A note of caution: some of those who come to communion services will be feeling weary or jaded, others will be preoccupied with various problems, sufferings, and fears. Worship leaders need to begin where the people are, and to lead with integrity. The thanksgiving and joy of the Eucharist is not something frothy and superficial, induced by simply a cheery tone. It is the quiet work of God's Spirit, often in the midst of pain. 'Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' In the Lord's Supper we fellowship not only with the Lord, but with all who belong to him. We express our bonds of mutual love with the whole 'household of God', with everyone who professes faith in Christ. That includes our local fellow believers, with all their imperfections. It includes believers of other denominations, irrespective of whether we feel comfortable about different

expressions of the Christian faith. It includes believers worldwide, with their vast diversity of races, cultures, and forms, whose prayers mix with ours to form a universal, unending chorus of praise to the living God.

It is good to remind ourselves of this communal aspect of the Lord's Supper, to include prayer for the church around the globe, and to remember with thanksgiving that myriad of faithful believers who have gone before us. Selfish individualism sits very uneasily in the context of the Lord's Supper, as does any tendency in the congregation towards self-congratulation and exclusivism. All who belong to the Body are part of the 'one holy and apostolic church', and communion should help recall that.

Communion also challenges us afresh to mutual forgiveness (Eph. 4:31-5:2), and to reconciliation among fellow worshippers (Mt. 5:22-24). If Christ has forgiven others, who are we to withhold forgiveness? If Christ is to forgive us, we must be prepared to forgive others.

... if the focus in the Lord's Supper comes off the crucified and risen Jesus, and instead fixes on our own human commitment to love and unity, then we distort what our Lord instituted. The Lord's Supper is above all a remembrance of God's grace toward us, and if not that, we miss the point. Unity and service are a byproduct of divine grace, but never its substitute." (NZP)

- The Lord's Supper is a sign of a covenantal relationship. Our relationship with God in Christ is based on promises. That's why the celebration of the Lord's Supper fittingly begins with a clear statement of God's invitation and promises and continues with a robust prayer of thanksgiving and hope.

The Lord's Supper is deeply personal, but never private. It is a communal action of the gathered congregation, which represents the church in all times and places. Worshipers need to be taught these themes and how to incorporate them in celebrating the Lord's Supper. *WS, pp. 312-313

For reflection:

References to Scripture and the Book of Confessions are provided above. Sessions should engage in study of these as part of this study. A separate resource is provided on the Confessions including the sections of the confessions listed above.

How well does our own experience of the Lord's table correspond to the above? What aspects have needed strengthening? In what ways could that be achieved? Are there other dimensions to Communion which we feel are important?

Additional questions added by Ann Gibbs: How does the above inform your understanding of celebrating communion with a virtual congregation? How do you understand yourselves to be gathered as "one" body and how does God's Spirit bring you together from your respective "social distances"?

How will you understand the elements being shared? What provisions/exceptions will be acceptable if the typical "bread and grape juice/wine" are not available in individual homes?

Primary sources:

- ***Book of Order, 2017-2019, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II***
- ***Book of Common Worship, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993***
- ***The Worship Sourcebook, 2nd Edition, CD Included, 2013 (WS)***
- ***Celebrating Communion, 2001*** A handbook for elders authorized to lead communion services within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand . (NZP)
- **Other resources:** ***Leading from the Table (Vital Worship Healthy Congregations,*** by [Paul Galbreath](#) The communion table stands as an intersection between Word and Sacrament, between memory and hope, between pastor and congregation, between receiving and serving, and

between community and individual. Leading from the table, says Paul Galbreath, professor of preaching and worship, is a way of thinking, speaking, acting, and living that grows out of learning to recognize and embody these connections in our lives as a congregation and as individuals. Developing leadership skills that connect the congregation's eucharistic practice to the life and work of the church is essential to moving toward unity within congregations, denominations, and throughout the church